

# Let us examine confidential records, ombudsmen demand

Confidential records of local authorities should be made available to the local government ombudsmen, as they are to the Parliamentary Commissioner, says the annual report of the Commission for Local Administration in England, published this week. The change would require an amendment to the Local Government Act. It would prevent a repetition of the Liverpool MDC case in which the council successfully applied to the High Court to deny access to records about a couple removed from a list of foster-parents.

*Your local ombudsman: report for the year ended 21 March 1977* (50p from the commission, 21 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9BU) reinforces the findings of the

Scottish and Welsh Commissioners (*MJ*, 26 August, page 810) that more complaints are now being made direct (64 per cent, compared with 40 per cent last year).

The English commissioners have gone a step further — sending out questionnaires to direct-complainants to see why they did (or did not) re-submit their cases through councillors. After analysis the results will be discussed with the representative body (local authority associations, the GLC and the National Water Council). The two bodies will also discuss a model complaints procedure.

Four councils have still failed to notify the commission of satisfactory action in response to findings of maladministration more than a year ago. In a

further six cases from the year under review the commission says it seems likely that satisfactory action will not be taken.

In two cases remedial action has been prevented through failure by the DoE to grant the necessary sanction. The report records 'concern' and 'disappointment' about this.

## Council accused of acting 'like speculators'

Camden LBC is accused of 'behaving like speculative property developers' and of 'breaking faith with the electorate' because of its decision to seek outline planning permission to build 300,000 square feet of offices on the controversial Tolmers Square site. The allegations came in a 1,000-word formal objection by the Tolmers Village Action Group.

The site was acquired by the council four years ago from property developer Joe Levy's Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, after a campaign in the borough and in the national press that persuaded the council to reject a deal allowing the developers to build 250,000 square feet of offices.

The council's application also provides for not less than 55,000 square feet of housing accommodation, as well as shopping, workshop, parking and other uses. Other parts of Tolmer Village (included in the original Levy plan, but not in the new Camden scheme) are being rehabilitated by the council.

## In brief

**WIND-UP:** East Kilbride Development Corporation (back to its old name) has begun negotiations with former owners of land bought for the now-abolished Stonehouse new town, following the coming into operation last week of the New Town (Stonehouse) Revocation of Designation and Winding Up Order 1977. The 96 houses built at Stonehouse village are to be offered to Hamilton DC.

**NUCLEAR PLEDGE:** The Department of the Environment has reiterated Peter Shore's promise of a public inquiry if an application is made to build a commercial fast-breeder reactor. A letter to Mr Justice Parker, who is conducting the Windscale inquiry, said that an inquiry, besides considering planning matters, would enable wider relevant issues to be considered.

**SCOTTISH TIPS:** Powers to license waste-disposal sites, under the provisions of the Control of Pollution Act 1974, are to be given to local authorities in Scotland with effect from 1 January. Glasgow DC has disclosed that contractors were bringing poisonous wastes to the city from England, where the provisions are already in force.

**STRUCTURE PLANS:** The examination in public of the Humberside structure plan opened this week at Kingston upon Hull. An informal preliminary meeting on Buckinghamshire's structure plan will be held next Thursday (15 September) at Aylesbury Vale DC council chambers, Aylesbury. The examination in public is due to open on 27 September.

**BOUNDARY CALL:** The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is asking Bruce Millan, Secretary of State for Scotland, to decide urgently which boundary changes will be put into operation for next year's regional elections, so that local authorities and political parties can make preparations. The Local Government Boundary Commission has completed its initial reviews of electoral arrangements for the Dumfries and Galloway and Fife regions.

## North backs call for EEC aid to be added

Support for proposals to amend the rules of the EEC's regional fund to ensure that its aid is used as an addition to member states' normal spending comes this week from the North of England Development Council, writes Antonia Simkins. In a letter to Industry Secretary Eric Varley the chairman of NEDC, Lord Glenamara, has urged support for proposed amendments to articles 11 and 18.

These proposals attempt to ensure that central government cannot indulge in 'claw back' (the retention by the Treasury of regional fund aid equal to the nation's contribution to the fund) or sidestep the principle of 'additionality' (fund aid to the regions should be additional to that of the national government).

The NEDC's suspicions are reinforced by analysis of the regional fund grants received for the area (Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and Cleveland) in 1975. A large proportion was for projects on which money had already been spent, and which could be regarded as likely to have been achieved without EEC aid.

The proposed amendment to article 11 would stipulate that only payments made after the date of submission of the application for assistance, and only investments not yet completed on that date, would qualify.

The article 18 amendment proposes that, where fund aid is added globally to a member state's expenditure (rather than to individual projects), the amounts received should be shown separately in national and public agency budgets and that the Commission should have access to information to establish that fund aid is being used in a complementary way.

## PM's hint of spring relief

Prime Minister Jim Callaghan is confident of an improvement in the economy by next spring that will lead to an easing of the brakes on local government spending. That's what he told a private lunch in Edinburgh organised by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last week — and succeeded in boosting the sagging morale of Scottish local government.

'The best breath of fresh air local authorities have had for some time', said COSLA vice-president Tom Clarke. But he added that Mr Callaghan had stressed that much depended on what happened to wages policy.