

Annual Report  
of the Independent  
Complaints Reviewer  
for the Audit Commission

2008/2009

## About the Independent Complaints Reviewer

Jodi Berg is the Independent Complaints Reviewer (ICR) for the Audit Commission. Mrs Berg is a solicitor, a mediator and a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. She is a member of the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council and the Human Tissue Authority. She established the ICR office in 1998. The office now reviews complaints about seven public bodies.

**The ICR mission** Seeking a fair resolution

**The ICR purpose** To provide a free, effective and impartial complaints review and resolution service for complainants that settles complaints in a proportionate manner and makes a positive difference for the Audit Commission.

**People can expect from the ICR Team:**

- Courtesy
- Honesty
- Respect
- Objectivity
- Flexibility
- Plain language

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Foreword                                  | 1  |
| 1 The ICR services                        | 3  |
| 2 The ICR role                            | 4  |
| 3 Complaints statistics                   | 6  |
| 4 ICR casework                            | 8  |
| 5 ICR overview – learning from complaints | 11 |
| About the Audit Commission                | 15 |

## Foreword



I am pleased to present my second report as the Independent Complaints Reviewer for the Audit Commission. My role is to act as the last port of call for complainants dissatisfied with the Audit Commission's response to their complaints. As the ICR service has become better known both inside of the Audit Commission and externally, there has been a marked increase in the number of people who have approached us for advice and assistance, or to raise a complaint about the Commission. This does not appear to suggest a dip in the standard of complaint handling on the part of the Commission, rather it is the result of its effective signposting and improved public information about how to take complaints forward.

The internal complaint procedures are designed to respond effectively to concerns about the way that the Audit Commission has gone about its work. They do not encompass disagreement with the independent judgement of auditors, although all members of Commission staff and those contracted to undertake work on its behalf, are expected to live up to high standards of personal and professional behaviour and to adhere to established policies and procedures.

Given the complexity of the Audit Commission's role, it can be difficult for staff to respond to the variety of issues that can be raised by members of the public. I am particularly pleased to note that the Commission has taken steps to ensure that clear and robust explanations are given to people from the start, so that they know what action they can take to address their particular concerns. Where this means making a complaint, the internal procedure should offer a speedy and effective response that settles most complaints. I can report that the procedure is operating successfully and, as a result, few complainants find it necessary to turn to me for help.

Complaint referrals to me continue to suggest that people expect more from the Audit Commission than it is able to offer. Many complaints are rooted in dissatisfaction with the Audit Commission's refusal to take on a policing role to deal with perceived mismanagement by local authorities. Often the initial complaint reflects a difference of views between the taxpayer and a local authority about particular decisions taken or specific items of expenditure. For the most part, these are not matters with which the Audit Commission or I can become involved. Nevertheless, where people do not feel that an audit has been carried out satisfactorily, there are legal ways in which this can be challenged.

Again this year, I can commend the positive responses the Audit Commission has given to my investigation reports and to recommendations I have made. Acting on my comments about the need to share information and lessons arising from complaint review, the Audit Commission's senior management team now disseminates lessons taken from my reports to appropriate areas of the business, in order to promote service improvements.

During the year I visited the London and regional offices to meet with senior managers and a cross-section of staff. These visits are important because they provide invaluable insight into the Commission's work and, in turn, allow me to respond to complainants' concerns about what happened in their case, based on an understanding of how things work in practice.

This year I was also interested to learn first hand about the preparations for the introduction of the system of Comprehensive Area Assessment, launched on 1 April 2009. This is a major initiative, involving close

working with other inspectorates and service providers to assess the effectiveness of key public services in local communities. Any complex working arrangements between public bodies can present challenges in terms of complaint procedures and I am keen to work with the Audit Commission to ensure that these are met.

My thanks go to the Audit Commission's Chief Executive and his Head of Office for their ongoing commitment to effective complaint handling and to independent review. The ICR process could not work well without the co-operation of the Commission's complaints staff, who facilitate my investigations by providing initial information and responding to our enquiries. I record my thanks to them for their help. Finally, I would like to thank my Senior Investigations Officer, Amanda Crosbie, for her patient and painstaking efforts on behalf of complainants.

My annual report gives an insight into my work as the ICR and the complaints I receive. It gives an overview of the way the Audit Commission has responded to my reports and to the systemic improvements I have suggested. I hope that readers find this report interesting and I would welcome any comments.

**Jodi Berg** | Independent Complaints Reviewer

# 1 The ICR services

*“Thank you very much for your letter. I am delighted to note that you have answered all that I asked and indeed provided considerably more information. Thank you.”*

**Comment to ICR**

The ICR Service provides a complaints review and resolution service that is free for complainants. We aim to settle complaints in a proportionate manner, providing appropriate redress for complainants and making a positive difference for the Audit Commission. The ICR is supported by a highly trained and dedicated team, who are seconded to the office by organisations for which we provide an ICR service.

The office has a reputation for efficiency and fairness. We aspire to improving the quality of our service by taking account of views and suggestions made to us by complainants and stakeholders and by welcoming external scrutiny. Since 2001, the ICR office has achieved British Standards Institute accreditation for the quality of our complaint handling.

When contacting the ICR office, people can expect from us:

- Respect
- Courtesy
- Honesty
- Objectivity
- Flexibility
- Plain language

We ensure that people understand the purpose and limitations of our role and how we go about our work. We do this by publishing clear information on our website and in our publications, and we reinforce this with personal explanations. We recognise the differing needs of people who contact us and tailor our responses and communication to the individual.

## ICR service principles

The ICR is an associate corporate member of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association and adheres to its Principles of Good Complaint Handling, which are:

**Clarity of purpose** A clear statement of the ICR’s role, intent and scope

**Accessibility** A service that is free, open and available to all who need it

**Flexibility** Procedures, that respond to the needs of individuals

**Openness and transparency** Public information, which demystifies the service

**Proportionality** Process and resolution that is appropriate to the complaint

**Efficiency** Meeting challenging standards of good administration

**Quality outcomes** Complaint resolution leading to positive change

More information about BIOA and other complaint handling bodies can be found at: [www.bioa.org.uk](http://www.bioa.org.uk)

## 2 The ICR role

*“I would like to thank you and your team for the hard work and effort that went into this report – it is much appreciated.”*

**Comment to ICR**

If a complainant remains dissatisfied with the Audit Commission’s response to their complaint, they can ask the ICR to review the matter. The ICR can consider the way in which the Commission has responded to complaints about maladministration, such as a failure in standard of service or unfair treatment. This might include:

- Delay
- Discourtesy
- Failure to follow correct procedure
- Discrimination or injustice
- Not answering complaints fully and promptly

The ICR has no authority to investigate:

- Complaints about maladministration within organisations that fall within the Audit Commission’s regulatory remit. We offer advice to complainants about how they can take concerns forward. (These should generally be referred to the organisation itself, for example a local authority or health organisation, or to a relevant Ombudsman service.)
- Decisions made by the Audit Commission based upon the legislation under which it operates, although complaints about the way in which decisions were made may be investigated. The ICR cannot overturn decisions or order changes to reports.
- Decisions made by appointed auditors, whether employed directly by the Audit Commission or by a professional firm undertaking work for the Commission. The Audit Commission itself cannot challenge the professional judgement of auditors made in accordance with the Codes of Audit Practice for local government and health organisations, or under their legal powers. However, there are other legal avenues for challenging such judgements.
- Complaints about decisions taken in respect of the Audit Commission’s legal powers to inspect and assess the performance of local authorities or housing associations, which are subject to a formal review procedure.
- Complaints made by Audit Commission staff.

### Confidentiality

It is essential that complainants are confident that they can be honest and open when discussing their complaint and giving important background information that may be personal or sensitive. Whilst we do not divulge sensitive personal information, we explain to complainants that it is necessary to share some information with the Audit Commission in order to obtain relevant files or documents, or to find out important facts about the complaint.

When conducting a complaint review, the ICR has the right of access to all relevant Audit Commission data, however, she has no authority to release any information from the files, which are only held temporarily for the purpose of review. Requests for this information must be made directly to the Audit Commission. Both during and following review, we respect the privacy of the parties to the complaint and do not publish information about complainants or members of Audit Commission staff, nor discuss individual cases with the media or any third party. However, we may refer to the kind of issues that an investigation has brought to light, to encourage understanding of the causes of complaints and how they can be avoided.

### 3 Complaints statistics

*“...the Auditors / Audit Commission have not been complying with the Code of Audit Practice... as one example, the majority of the issues in the bullet points listed in my letter have been presented continuously ...and yet no action is taken whatsoever to have the matter properly examined and progressed as would be necessary under the Code of Audit practice.”*

**Comment to ICR**

The Audit Commission’s internal complaints process was introduced in November 2006, and involves two stages. The first stage is consideration by the business area or directorate about which the complaint was made, or the professional auditing firm acting as a sub-contractor to the Commission. This approach is aimed at resolving the complaint at the earliest opportunity and at assisting the staff concerned to recognise why it has arisen.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the initial response offered by the Commission, they can opt to have the complaint referred to the Complaint Unit Manager, who will organise a review to be undertaken either by the manager themselves, or by a member of Audit Commission staff who has had no previous involvement in the matter. Following review, the complainant will be sent a detailed response to their points of complaint providing details about how to contact the ICR office if they remain dissatisfied with the Commission’s answer, or with the way their complaint has been handled.

#### Complaints recorded by the Audit Commission

This reporting year the Audit Commission recorded 26 complaints across the organisation itself and contracted firms of accountants. Between them, these complaints included 36 separate allegations of maladministration. The types of complaints received are detailed in the following table:

| Category                         | Complaint elements |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Behaviour of staff               | 2                  |
| Communications                   | 14                 |
| Timeliness                       | 7                  |
| Quality of response              | 4                  |
| Failure to comply with standards | 9                  |

Of these 36 complaint issues, 16 were fully or partially upheld. As noted in last year’s report, customer perceptions of communication are not always positive, and this is an area where care and customer consideration can serve to reduce or eliminate problems that arise. Effective communication is key to managing contact with the Audit Commission and people’s expectations. Given this, it would be helpful to analyse carefully what specific aspects of communication are raised within complaints, so that staff guidance and training can be geared towards addressing any systemic local or general issues. For example, it may be that professional language and ways of expressing information are not always understood by members of the public unused to this.

The good news is that the number of recorded complaints remains extremely low in relation to the level of engagement that takes place between the Audit Commission, organisations within its remit and members of the public. This contrasts positively with the position prior to the introduction of the ICR service, when complaints received were rising year on year. In 2007, 57 complaints were recorded, whereas this year there has been a marked reduction of over 50%.

The reduction in recorded complaints may be due to a number of factors. There is always a concern that some complaints may not be acknowledged or recorded appropriately, however, the reduction may also suggest increased customer satisfaction with the way in which the Commission responds to concerns. Given the increased focus on good complaints handling, the latter is more likely, coupled with the introduction of an initial filtering system to separate out issues that do not fall within the complaint procedures. People raising these kinds of concerns are then given a clear explanation of why this is the case and advised about how they can take their concerns forward, whether to other appropriate organisations or through legal means. At present the Commission only records these issues in numerical terms (as non complaints) and no information is retained relating to what concerns were raised or to whom people were referred.

Of the complaints that were recorded by the Commission – 26 at stage 1, only one went on to stage 2 of the process. This is an excellent achievement on the part of the complaint handling staff and demonstrates increased satisfaction with the quality of investigations and responses at stage 1.

## Audit Commission developments in complaint handling

The achievements noted above were made against a backdrop of change within the Commission's Complaints Unit, with two new members of staff taking up post under the leadership of the Chief Executive's Head of Office. They were fortunate to inherit a revised complaint procedure, which continues to serve the Commission and its customers well. Nevertheless, the Commission continues to look for improvements that can assist customers and staff.

In December 2008, a Public Enquiry Line was set up on a pilot basis. The successful pilot has now been established as a permanent feature of Commission service and is aimed at making the Commission more accessible to members of the public. There have already been several hundred enquiries, about a third of which related to other organisations within regulatory remit, or other regulators or inspectorates. This demonstrates how confusing it can be for members of the public to know who to turn to with problems. The Public Enquiry Line is a useful and welcome addition to assist people to find the right way to address their concerns.

## 4 ICR casework

*“Thank you for the quick response to my complaint that I made against the Audit Commission Chief Executive concerning the conduct of the District Auditor.”*

**Comment to ICR Senior Investigations Officer**

### Complaint referrals and reviews

This year the ICR conducted two formal complaint investigations on cases opened in the previous year. These incorporated seven allegations of maladministration, three of which were fully or partially upheld. We received a further four complaint referrals, that did not proceed to a full review, but nevertheless required detailed consideration of the issues before a final response was issued. All complainants had been appropriately informed of the ICR’s role and contact details within the Audit Commission’s final complaint responses.

The ICR office regularly receives complaint referrals that are based on a misunderstanding, or on misplaced expectation of what is required of a regulator. It is important for the Audit Commission to manage this kind of situation by giving an early explanation of what issues it can or cannot deal with. It is also evident from referrals that some concerns raised with the Audit Commission should be taken up with other organisations instead, particularly in cases where the Commission is unable to take the sort of action the complainant hopes for. If a referral is received by the ICR that suggests this, we will explain what, if any, complaints about the Audit Commission the ICR can take forward, and what matters might be referred to another organisation. The ICR will signpost to appropriate organisations wherever possible.

The following case studies are anonymised to protect the confidentiality of complainants.

### ICR case studies

#### Case 1

Mr A complained about the opinions expressed by the Auditor for his local Council in relation to the way that the Council charged for social care. He also disputed the legal advice given to the Auditor before he had provided a response to Mr A. The ICR advised Mr A that she had no authority to question the legal opinion given to the Auditor, nor the views he formed and expressed whilst exercising his statutory duty. Since these matters were outside her remit, she was unable to take the complaint forward in the way that Mr A hoped.

#### Case 2

Mr B made a verbal request for personal information held about him in the Audit Commission’s files, which he asserted was made under the provisions of the Data Protection Act. In line with other public bodies, the Audit Commission is obliged to comply with its statutory duty in responding to and processing such requests, including acting within specified timeframes and manner to a properly constituted request for information.

At the time this request was made, Mr B had already raised objections to the Council's accounts with the District Auditor. Before responding to his request for information, the District Auditor contacted the Council by email to make enquiries about any similar requests made by Mr B. Later on, in response to an information request from Mr B, the Council released to him the exchange of emails with the District Auditor. Mr B then complained about what he considered to be an inappropriate request by the District Auditor to the Council and his use of information obtained about him in this way. Mr B suggested that it represented a conflict of interest on the part of the District Auditor to request information from the Council about him at a time when he was also dealing with his objections to the accounts.

During her investigation, the ICR noted that the request made by Mr B was not submitted in the appropriate format, as it was not made in writing, in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act. The Audit Commission's Legal Department had advised the District Auditor of this and suggested action to be taken. This advice was not followed and Mr B was not asked to put his request in writing. Noting the failure to follow legal advice, the ICR concluded that there had been a failure in administrative process in this case. This was exacerbated by the informal nature of the request made to the Council, which also did not comply with due process. She accepted that this action gave an impression of conflict of interest. In light of that she recommended that an apology be given to Mr B in respect of the inconvenience suffered.

The ICR's investigation revealed that there was no specific guidance within the Audit Commission at the time the request was made to indicate how information requests of this kind should be taken forward. The shortcomings found in the way this matter was handled could have been avoided had guidance and training been provided for Commission staff about the requirements of the Data Protection Act. The ICR recommended that the Audit Commission develop appropriate guidance for staff, including Auditors, about the steps to be taken when a request for information was received under the Data Protection or Freedom of Information Acts. The Audit Commission accepted the ICR's recommendations.

### Case 3

Mr C complained to the Audit Commission about the lack of appropriate action on the part of the Auditor in response to concerns he had raised about his local Council. In this case, the Auditor responsible for auditing the Council's accounts was employed by an external firm of accountants. The complaint was referred to that firm to investigate, in line with agreed arrangements between auditing firms and the Audit Commission. Mr C then complained about an excessive delay in responding to his complaints, and a failure to follow correct procedures by not addressing some points of complaint. In addition, he complained about discourtesy and a patronising attitude on the part of those responsible for investigating his complaint.

Following an investigation, the ICR found that the overall time taken to consider the complaints was in line with the established complaints process and reasonable timescales. Taking account of the number and complexity of issues raised by Mr C, the ICR did not consider that there was undue delay. In response to Mr C's complaint that the Commission failed to address some of his concerns, the ICR noted that the complaints procedure was not the appropriate mechanism for dealing with a number of the issues raised by Mr C, which related to an auditor's professional judgement on matters raised about particular public bodies. The outcome that Mr C sought was more assertive action on the part of the Auditor to put right what he believed to be deficiencies in the way that various public bodies acted, and these were not issues that could be addressed through the complaints procedure.

The ICR noted from the files that action was taken by the Auditor 'behind the scenes' to look into Mr C's concerns, but he was not aware of this and the delay in response made it appear that his concerns were not being treated seriously. To this extent, his expectations were not managed and, added to the fact

that communication with him was not always as clear as it might have been, this led Mr C to raise further complaints. This aside, overall the ICR was satisfied that Mr C's complaints were dealt with in a timely way and that he received satisfactory responses to both his formal complaints and to other concerns he raised. In relation to Mr C's concerns about discourtesy, the ICR found no evidence to support these allegations. She was satisfied that the way in which the complaint was handled was professional and courteous.

## Case 4

Mr D complained to the ICR about the lack of explanation provided by the District Auditor, as to why he found no cause to take action regarding Mr D's concerns about a planning matter in his local area. He also complained about the response given by the Commission's Chief Executive.

Although Mr D asserted that no explanation was given to him, in fact the ICR noted that the crux of his complaint was the failure to investigate his concerns in the way he had hoped. The ICR did not find that the responses given to Mr D were unsatisfactory. In particular, she explained that the Chief Executive had no authority to question the decision taken by the Auditor in carrying out his statutory duties.

The ICR noted that another of Mr D's concerns related to malpractice on the part of individuals within the Council. She advised that complaints about this matter should be referred to the Council itself and, if dissatisfied with its response, to the Local Government Ombudsman. Contact details were given for the Ombudsman.

## 5 ICR overview – learning from complaints

### The Audit Commission response to ICR Annual Report 2007/2008

My role as Independent Complaints Reviewer encompasses the investigation of individual complaints and an overview of Audit Commission procedures in relation to complaints to ensure that they meet recognised best practice. With this objective in mind, I am able to make recommendations both in complaint reports and to comment on wider systemic issues in my annual reports.

In last year's annual report I pointed to improvements that the Commission might wish to make to capture information arising from complaints more effectively, which could be used to improve future practice. This year I am pleased to note the progress that has been made.

- Last year I recognised the efforts made by senior members of the Audit Commission's staff to settle customer complaints and concerns, so that people did not need to take matters further into the formal complaints procedure. I welcomed this approach, which served to bring about a quicker resolution of problems, and gave a deserved sense of achievement to the staff members involved. However, I noted that these issues and outcomes were not recorded by the Commission and, in my view, this meant that opportunities to learn from them were being missed. I recommended that the Commission should introduce a mechanism for recording this information for wider dissemination.

One way of achieving this could be by appointing "customer champions" within teams or business areas, responsible for recording successes in complaint settlement and customer service initiatives within their area. Regular liaison with counterparts from across the Commission would then help to ensure that good practice was shared across the organisation. It is, of course, for the Audit Commission to decide how to take this issue forward, and I look forward to learning about further developments this year.

- I also highlighted that it was important for Audit Commission staff not to view complaints merely as negative comment pointing to actual or perceived shortcomings or failings in the service, but as valuable customer feedback which could be used to benefit customers and the staff themselves. Often, this requires a change in organisational culture and my visits to the Commission's offices do suggest that this shift in attitude is well under way.

I welcome the fact that the Commission is taking active steps to promote this approach. For example, I note that members of the Complaints Team have attended meetings right across the Commission, to explain their role and convey the positive messages that complaints can bring about. In addition, the Complaints Team produced an e-mail bulletin to highlight some lessons learned from the complaints it had investigated. This was a particularly useful way of disseminating key messages, and more regular communication of this kind would be a valuable addition to staff information.

- All customer feedback is important and one of the ways in which an organisation can demonstrate this to staff is to capture and share information about compliments received. Although the Commission has no formal procedure for recording plaudits, they are passed on to individual staff members concerned, as well as to their Manager and Managing Director, so that credit is given for the efforts made by staff to assist customers. However, it remains the case that only information about recorded complaints is published and, inevitably, this does give an unbalanced view.
- A fundamental issue I raised last year was the lack of clear and easy to understand published information to help people understand the Audit Commission's complex role and the way that it goes

about fulfilling its statutory responsibilities. Often, people cannot solve their personal concerns by turning to the Commission, particularly where they relate to the public bodies within its remit, and it is appropriate to make this explicit in publications to help people take their concerns forward. I am pleased to note this year that the Commission is developing an information leaflet to describe its role, the type of issues it can deal with and how it will do so. Once published, I believe that this will provide a step forward in customer service.

## The Audit Commission response to complaint reports 2008/2009

During 2008–09, despite the low number of complaint referrals, there has been a marked increase in the number of people who contacted the ICR office looking for help and advice. Often, they sought assistance with problems they were experiencing with their local authorities. On other occasions they were dissatisfied with decisions taken by District Auditors or their team members and wanted the ICR to take this up with the Commission. This customer contact is a reflection of the kinds of issues raised with Audit Commission staff on a daily basis.

However, it is not always possible or reasonable for Commission staff to take any substantive action and there are also times when to do so would mean straying outside of their role or remit. Whilst the Commission properly expects its staff to courteously deal with all enquiries, there is a point at which further engagement becomes counter productive for all concerned and is disproportionate to the issues being raised. Extended contact in these circumstances may have the effect of encouraging people to think that there is more Commission staff can do to help them when this may not be the case, or may lead to staff offering opinions about matters that fall outside of their area of expertise or responsibility. There is, therefore, a balance to be struck between good customer service and unwarranted extended communication. At times it can be difficult to get this balance right.

This was highlighted by a complaint referral to the ICR office, where on looking into what had occurred, I found that a member of the Commission's complaints staff had been drawn into taking action on issues that were outside of her particular role and related to the statutory authority of the Auditor. Although it was clear that she had intended to be helpful, in the event this action led to further complaints. In response to my comments on this issue, the Commission advised staff about how they might avoid this situation arising in the future.

## Keeping to promises

During the year I have sought to encourage effective complaints handling, stressing in particular the importance of timely communication, both to manage customer contact and to keep people properly informed about what action is being taken and how long it will take to complete.

Within the best processes, unexpected problems and delays occur along the way, and in these circumstances it is important to let people know about what has happened. In one case I reviewed this year, due to an unexpected problem, the Commission was unable to keep to the timescale originally promised for its response. Unfortunately, the complainant was not told about the likely delay until after the original deadline for the response had passed, resulting in further complaints. On receipt of my report, the Commission identified a number of learning points to be taken forward by the Management Team, including the importance of keeping promises and updating people if this proved not to be possible. This was then disseminated to Commission staff to prevent similar problems occurring in the future.

## Retaining records

The introduction of human rights legislation and increased awareness about people's rights mean that public bodies are held accountable for the way in which they go about their work. It has never been more important to retain accurate and contemporaneous contact records and, in particular, to record the reasons behind decisions. People have the right to know what factors weighed in the minds of decision-makers, and the courts, tribunals and ombudsmen are critical of organisations that do not keep such records.

In terms of independent complaint review process, it is essential to obtain a complete picture of what has led to a complaint, and this is not possible without accurate record-keeping on the part of Commission staff. It is fair to say that, in common with many other public bodies, record-keeping in the past was not always up to scratch and this has meant that I had to draw conclusions from incomplete records or was prevented from doing so because of the limited evidence available. I am pleased to record that the Commission's Management Team has been keen to reinforce the commitment to retaining appropriate records and has taken steps to reinforce this message to staff.

## Looking forward

### Comprehensive Area Assessment

Last year the Audit Commission was preparing for the introduction of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) on 1 April 2009, which followed the Government White Paper issued in October 2006, entitled 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'. This identified the need to develop a new performance assessment mechanism to incorporate the work of various inspectorate bodies within a holistic assessment of the quality of local services. This represents a significant shift in approach for the Audit Commission and the other inspectorates. The new assessments will focus on the impact of local services on the individuals using them, in order to identify areas for improvement.

The development of close partnering arrangements between six different inspectorates will undoubtedly present them all with challenges, as they seek to streamline their individual practices and procedures, and introduce protocols and systems for capturing, sharing and utilising information. Moreover, it will be important to communicate with the public about their new role, its purpose and expected outcomes.

Where problems occur, people are entitled to expect a 'joined-up' approach and response on the part of all of the organisations involved. This makes it particularly important for appropriate protocols and procedures to be established to deal with complaints. Over the coming months, I will be working with the Audit Commission to ensure that the established independent review procedure continues to meet the changing needs of complainants, in particular, in relation to potential cross-organisational complaints.

### Service standards

I am pleased to note that the Audit Commission has recognised the importance of communication in terms of people's satisfaction and has now established clear service standards for dealing with general correspondence that mirror those for dealing with complaints. This is a helpful step towards improved quality of service that should serve to reduce the likelihood of complaints.

## About the Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent public corporation responsible for promoting economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public money. The Commission's work covers 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £200 billion of public money each year. Its remit includes local government, health, housing, community safety, police authorities and fire and rescue services.

Created in 1983, the Commission employs around 2,000 staff working in more than 250 locations throughout England. The Audit Commission website [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk) gives more detailed information on what the Commission does, and how.

## Contact the ICR team

New Premier House  
150 Southampton Row  
London WC1B 5AL

e-mail: [enquiries@icr.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@icr.gsi.gov.uk)

telephone: 020 7278 6251

fax: 020 7278 9675