

NEWS ANALYSIS

Equinox report puts the squeeze on Lambeth dp

Union rivalry, low morale, recruitment problems: Michael Dempsey looks at Lambeth dp department

On the face of it, computer operations in the London Borough of Lambeth are in a mess.

An independent report, commissioned by the council and carried out by local consultants Equinox, lists a catalogue of management failings at the computer centre and paints a grim picture of low morale in Lambeth's department.

The report took four months to compile, and during that time Lambeth's computer operations manager Brian Stenhouse and his

deputy Paul King were suspended on full pay.

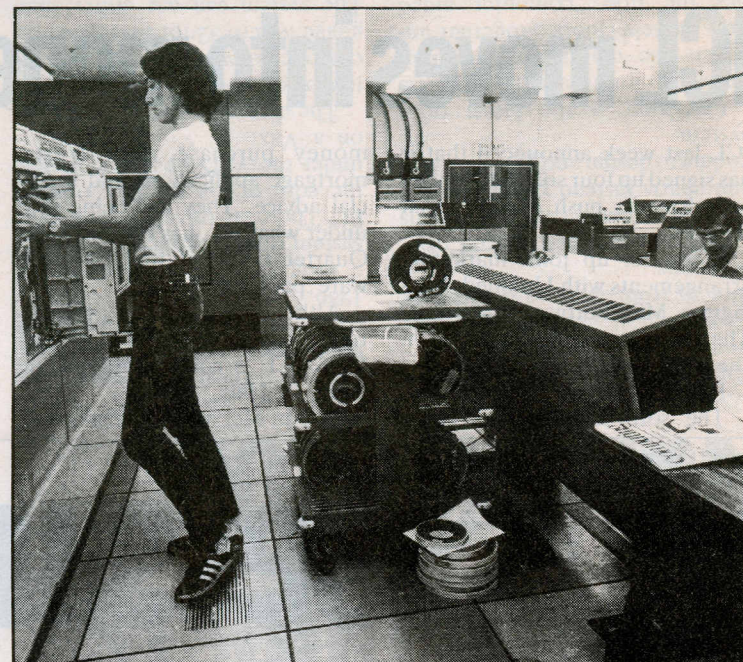
During the course of the inquiry Lambeth refused to elaborate on why Stenhouse and King were taken off their posts, and with the report's publication it becomes clear that both they and the council they work for suffered at the hands of inter-union rivalry.

Stenhouse and King are members of the Federated Union of Managerial and Professional Officers. Fumpo claims around 10,000 members in the senior levels of

local government, but Lambeth only recognises its right to represent staff above senior officer level.

The report castigates the suspended ops managers for failing to implement unattended running. But Fumpo official Barry Coker claims that Stenhouse recommended unattended running, only to have it rejected by members of rival local government union Nalگو.

According to the inquiry both Stenhouse and King "failed to



Lambeth: how will it react to the Equinox report?

turn up at four different appointments set for them." This is true, but the reasons are rooted in the nature of Lambeth council's agreements with its local government unions.

Under Lambeth procedure Stenhouse and King had the right to be accompanied by a friend when called before the inquiry.

But their nominated representative, Barry Coker, was also branch secretary of Fumpo. Lambeth would not recognise his right to appear before the inquiry in his union capacity.

Hence the deadlock that kept the two ops managers away from the inquiry and prevented the Equinox consultants from interviewing Stenhouse and King.

The inquiry did reach some

promotion of women.

Adeymi Sawyerr, an Equinox partner and one of the authors of the report, states that Lambeth's shortcomings in the equal opportunities department were often dramatic. He cites the case of a female computer operator allegedly stuck in the same job for years.

Whaley admits that Lambeth needs to take heed of the report's recommendations in this sphere. He also points out that Equinox was commissioned to produce an independent report, not to provide the council with excuses for problems in computing operations.

On the vexed subject of overtime payments, which the report estimates cost the council £120,000 a year, more than on

The inquiry did reach some pretty strong conclusions about the running of the computer centre. Overtime payments "escalated out of all proportion", morale plummeted with staff becoming "demotivated with no hope of career progression due to the non-implementation of training opportunities under the council's equal opportunities policy."

Recruitment, long a problem for local authorities in London competing with salaries in the City, comes in for some harsh scrutiny. It took Lambeth up to 44 weeks to fill some vacancies, according to the report.

Steve Whaley, the councillor in charge of management services at Lambeth, accepts that the council has fallen down in filling vacancies, but claims that the situation has improved drastically in recent months.

"There are still substantial vacancies in some areas," he says, but Lambeth is catching up. Some twenty senior programmers and analysts are still required, and with assorted benefits Lambeth can offer salaries of between £12,000 and £20,000.

On the thorny question of equal opportunities Whaley is frank. "There are still a lot of problems in areas that are traditionally dominated by white men . . . we are trying quite hard to implement equal opportunities."

Lambeth's embarrassment here is two-fold. It has made a great deal of its Equal Opportunities programme, attempting to promote the borough as a model employer in this regard.

Now an independent report indicates that equal opportunities "remained a dead letter" at the centre, particularly in regard to the

£150,000 a year more than an alternative third shift system would have done. Lambeth is again caught in a cleft stick.

Lambeth would have failed miserably in its duty to the borough ratepayers if it hadn't initiated a thorough investigation into wastage at the computer centre. Whaley points out that it would be unthinkable for councillors to take the attitude that huge overtime payments could be ignored.

"The intention of the whole exercise was to get the place running efficiently. . . . My sole interest is the efficient running of services." Disregarding the growing problems of the computer centre would have laid Lambeth open to justified criticism, but allowing an independent audit in the interests of efficiency has had the same effect.

Lambeth still faces an enormous backlog of housing benefit claims. A £2 million McDonnell-Douglas computer system was installed earlier this year to deal with some 60,000 outstanding claims. No one involved underestimates the task, and neither Whaley nor his acting computer manager Doug Frost will say how quickly the backlog will be sorted out.

How Lambeth will act on the report remains to be seen. The possibility of disciplinary action is open, but Whaley says that this isn't his primary interest. Whaley claims that Lambeth just wants to get the computer centre up and running efficiently.

That means sorting out morale, redressing justified grievances about discrimination, and making sure that enough programmers are available to get the job done without recourse to ridiculous amounts of overtime.