



Information Commissioner's Office
Promoting public access to official information
and protecting your personal information

Press Release

For immediate release

Date: 13 November 2007

Foreign Office in breach of the Data Protection Act

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has found the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in breach of the Data Protection Act following an investigation into the online application facility for UK visas.

The ICO was alerted in May to a security breach on the VFS online visa application facility. VFS was contracted by UKvisas, the joint Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office Directorate responsible for visa processing, to operate this facility. The ICO immediately launched an investigation into the site. The security breach meant that the personal data of people applying for visas to enter the UK was visible to others visiting the website. The FCO cooperated fully with the ICO during the course of the investigation and provided the ICO with an independent report into the breach.

The ICO has now required the FCO to sign a formal undertaking to comply with the principles of the Data Protection Act. Failure to meet the terms of the undertaking is likely to lead to further enforcement action by the ICO.

Mick Gorrill, Assistant Commissioner at the ICO, said: "Organisations have a duty under the Data Protection Act to keep our personal information secure. If organisations fail to take this responsibility seriously, they not only leave individuals vulnerable to identity theft but risk losing individuals' confidence and trust. We investigate any organisation in breach of the Act and will not hesitate to take appropriate action."

A copy of the signed undertaking is available on the ICO website at www.ico.gov.uk

ENDS

If you need more information, please contact the Information Commissioner's press office on 020 7025 7580 or visit the website at: www.ico.gov.uk

Notes to Editors

1. The Information Commissioner promotes public access to official information and protects personal information. The ICO is an independent body with specific responsibilities set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.
2. The ICO was alerted to a potential security breach on the VFS online visa application facility by Channel 4 News.
3. The FCO's independent report into the breach was carried out by Linda Costelloe Baker.
4. For more information about the Information Commissioner's Office subscribe to our e-newsletter at www.ico.gov.uk
5. Anyone who processes personal information must comply with eight principles, which make sure that personal information is:
 - Fairly and lawfully processed
 - Processed for limited purposes
 - Adequate, relevant and not excessive
 - Accurate and up to date
 - Not kept for longer than is necessary
 - Processed in line with your rights
 - Secure
 - Not transferred to other countries without adequate protection