



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

Press Release

For immediate release

Date: 23 April 2007

Company convicted of obtaining DWP customer information unlawfully

A private investigation firm, Infofind Ltd, has today pleaded guilty to obtaining and selling personal information after illegally 'blagging' the personal details of over 250 individuals from the Department for Work and Pensions. The firm and its Managing Director, Nick Munroe, were both convicted of 44 counts of unlawfully obtaining and selling personal information at Kingston Magistrates' Court and fined £3,200, following a successful prosecution by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

When passing sentence the magistrate highlighted the "very serious" nature of the offences. The firm was fined £100 per offence on four counts and its Managing Director was fined £700 per offence on four counts. No separate penalty was imposed on the remaining matters. In addition the defendants were ordered to pay a total of £5,000 towards prosecution costs.

The firm contacted the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on a number of occasions to 'blag' the personal information of hundreds of DWP customers in an attempt to trace outstanding debtors on behalf of a finance organisation, On:Line Finance. Infofind deliberately breached the Data Protection Act despite having a written agreement with On:Line Finance to comply with the Act.

On each occasion the 'blaggers' purported to be employees of the Department for Work and Pensions and deceived members of staff into disclosing personal information about individuals. It is an offence under

Section 55 of the Data Protection Act to unlawfully obtain, disclose or sell personal information without the consent of the data controller.

Philip Taylor, solicitor at the ICO, said: "Obtaining and selling personal information is a serious offence which can be highly damaging to the individuals concerned. This prosecution is the result of a thorough investigation by the Information Commissioner's Office and is part of our ongoing work to stop the illegal trade in personal information.

"Individuals must be confident that their personal information is stored securely by those organisations which hold and process it. The ICO is working with the Department for Work and Pensions to provide training for employees on how to deal with these bogus callers."

Last year the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, presented a report to Parliament calling for prison sentences of up to two years for the illegal buying and selling of personal information. The report, *What Price Privacy?*, sets out the widespread and pernicious trade in the illegal buying and selling of people's personal information and the subsequent distress that can be caused to individuals.

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. For more information about the Information Commissioner's Office subscribe to our e-newsletter at http://www.ico.gov.uk/tools_and_resources/enewsletter_and_alerts.aspx
3. The reports 'What price privacy?' and 'What Price Privacy Now?' are available on the ICO website at http://www.ico.gov.uk/about_us/news_and_views/current_topics/what_price_privacy_now.aspx

4. Earlier this year the Department for Constitutional Affairs announced its intention to introduce a custodial sentence for those convicted of offences under Section 55
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