



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

Press Release

For immediate release

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ICO calls time on unnecessary secrecy

Speaking at the 2008 FOI Live conference, Richard Thomas, the Information Commissioner, will call on public authorities to disclose more information proactively and eradicate unnecessary secrecy.

Richard Thomas will say: 'Since FOI was introduced in January 2005 it has made a huge impact on public life. Freedom of Information means a presumption of openness, where secrecy must be reserved for situations when it really is necessary. Secrecy should not be the default position, whether in Whitehall or elsewhere. I am pleased that more and more government departments, local authorities, police bodies, NHS organisations and other public authorities are seeing the benefits of greater transparency and disclosing official material as a matter of routine. I encourage all public authorities to see that transparency as the norm should result in improved administration and fewer requests.'

The Information Commissioner has written to all public authority chief executives to urge them to release more official information. All public bodies have an obligation under the Freedom of Information Act to adopt a publication scheme which commits them to routinely publishing certain sorts of information. Present schemes expire on 31st December 2008. A new model publication scheme which must be adopted by all public authorities has been developed and approved by the Information Commissioner. The new schemes should be adopted on 1 January 2009.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) also publishes new figures today outlining progress in handling complaints under the Freedom of Information Act in the three years since the Act came into force. Since 2005 the ICO has received

around 8,300 complaints about public authorities that have refused to release information and has closed just over 82% of these cases.

The ICO has informally resolved almost half of FOI complaints and – in line with expectations - almost a thousand formal decision notices have been issued. Over a third of complaints are ineligible, for example because the complaint has not gone through a public authority's internal review or the complainant has made a complaint before receiving a response from the public authority.

After a cut in funding in 2007/08, the ICO's FOI funding has increased to £5.5million - the same level that was set in 2006/07. This funding will enable the ICO to continue to close more FOI cases than it receives each month and move forward with enforcement action against public authorities that systematically fail to comply with the Act. However, the funding is not sufficient to enable the ICO to make significant inroads to the overall caseload, which currently stands at 1363, especially as the number of new cases continues to rise.

Figures released in the ICO's corporate plan show that the ICO is upholding as many public authorities' decisions to withhold information from the public as it is backing complainants' demands for disclosure. The corporate plan also explains the steps the ICO will take over the next three years to further improve responses to FOI complaints.

Graham Smith, Deputy Information Commissioner, said: "In the so-called Century of Information the role of the ICO has never been so important. After three years freedom of information has become part of the fabric of public life. We are working with limited resources and therefore some cases still take longer than we would like to resolve. We will continue to work hard to speed up our response to freedom of information cases and this year we aim to close 50% of complaints within 30 days. Over the next few months we intend to recruit secondee caseworkers which will enable us to reduce our overall caseload and shorten the length of time it takes to close a case."

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 www.ico.gov.uk