

MINUTES OF THE INFORMATION RIGHTS USER GROUP, WEDNESDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2007 AT THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, SELBORNE HOUSE, LONDON SW1

Chair: Michael Wills MP, Minister with responsibility for Information Rights

Attendees: Paul Bettison (Leader of Bracknell Forest Borough Council)
Peter Bottomley MP
Judith Cullen (Head of Environmental Information Unit, DEFRA)
Maurice Frankel (Campaign for Freedom of Information)
James Fulton (Head of ACPO FOI Central Referral Unit)
Anthony Kenny (Intellect UK)
Lord Lester of Herne Hill
Bob Satchwell (Society of Editors)
Matthew Stephenson
(HE/FE Information Governance & Records Management Group)

Observers: Richard Thomas (Information Commissioner)
Graham Smith (Deputy Information Commissioner)

Apologies: Professor Robert Hazell, University College London, Constitution Unit
John Hipwood, Chair of Press Lobby
Rosemary Jay, Pinsent Masons
Austin Mitchell MP
Janet Monkman, Workforce Director, NHS East Midlands

Secretariat: Belinda Crowe (Head of Information Rights Division, MOJ)
Janet Hawkes (Policy Team, Information Rights Division, MOJ)
Stuart Watts (Policy Team, Information Rights Division, MOJ)

1. The Government would announce its plans to take forward freedom of information, in the wake of the consultations on the Fees Regulations, in the autumn. There is enthusiasm for an iterative, non-adversarial and holistic approach to Information Rights generally, taking account of all aspects of publicly held information.
2. There was agreement that freedom of information was a success and should be celebrated, although demands on the Government, public authorities, the Information Commissioner's Office and the Information Tribunal remained high, with associated pressure on resources.
3. The views of the User Group were invited on issues to do with the FOI legislation, its delivery, the guidance and the Government's general approach. There was a wide ranging discussion of areas meriting review, including public interest extensions and best practice in cases where information could be released if advice and assistance were given to requesters to adjust the terms of the request were adjusted.
4. It was noted that a review of the Government guidance was ongoing and that this should take account of its relationship with the guidance issued by the Information Commissioner's Office and of the interplay between the FOI Act and the Environmental Information Regulations. The Australian Attorney General's practice of publishing an annual report on the scope and implications of decisions made by Australia's FOI Tribunal was also discussed.

5. The MoJ would consider the points raised and return to the meeting with proposals as to how to address the points raised in discussion and the Group looked forward to further discussion of the Government's strategy at its next meeting in the light of a future announcement on the Fees Regulations consultations.