

MINUTES OF THE INFORMATION RIGHTS USER GROUP, MONDAY 17 DECEMBER 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)
Maurice Frankel (Campaign for Freedom of Information)
Rosemary Jay (Pinsent Masons)
Anthony Kenny (Intellect UK)
Lord Lester of Herne Hill
Janet Monkman, Workforce Director, NHS East Midlands
Clive Porro (DEFRA)
Ian Readhead (Deputy Chief Constable)
Bob Satchwell (Society of Editors)

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

Apologies: Steve Bailey, Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)
Peter Bottomley MP
Professor Robert Hazell, University College London, Constitution Unit
John Hipwood, Chair of Press Lobby
Austin Mitchell MP

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 User Group expressed support for the announcements made by the Prime Minister on 25th October: that the Government would not proceed with amendments to the FOI fees regulations, it would consult on extending the coverage of the Act and conduct a review of the '30 year rule' governing the transfer of historical records to the National Archives.

2. It was noted that the UK is involved in negotiations on the Council of Europe's draft European Convention on Access to Official Documents. The Ministry of Justice undertook to provide a progress report to the User Group.

3. Some members of the User Group raised concerns about delays caused by the use of public interest extensions by public authorities to extend the time available for responding to requests. The Ministry of Justice will be collecting statistical information for its next annual report on the use of the public interest extension by monitored bodies. This will be used along with specific examples that the group agreed to supply to assist officials in assessing whether there is a problem with improper use of the extension provision, the extent of the problem and how to address it.

4. The Ministry of Justice noted points made about the adequacy of funding to maintain current performance levels in the Information Commissioner's Office and undertook to respond to the Commissioner on the issue by Christmas.

5. The views of the User Group were invited on ways to evaluate the benefits of FOI. It was noted that a team led by Professor Robert Hazell (UCL) was currently undertaking research on this. Suggestions were also made about looking at the impact of FOI in Northern Ireland, and including questions about public authorities' responses to requests for information in questionnaires about their services. It was agreed that this discussion should continue at the next User Group meeting.