



Freedom of Information

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- MP forced to reveal £40,000 travel expenses, p.15

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FOI fees — no change after public outcry

The UK Government’s recent proposal to restructure FOI fees will no longer go ahead. Currently, FOI requests are mostly free; those that are charged for may be refused if the request will cost more than the £450/£600 ceiling cost, which is in place to prevent FOI bills soaring.

The Government planned to change this structure and introduce a system where requests are charged on a billed-for basis.

Such changes would have allowed authorities to refuse more FOI requests, as more requests would

reach the ceiling and thus become refusable.

More controversially, the proposal suggested that multiple requests from one organisation would be measured under a single ceiling, giving large media organisations a severe disadvantage over other requestors.

The changes were opposed strongly by campaigners, and Ministry of Justice statistics reveal that of the 324 individuals/organisations who responded to the Government’s consultation, 73% objected to it. Respondents feared that the

change to fees would restrict transparency in decision-making by public authorities and would reduce the democratic effects that the Act has created since it came into force.

The Ministry of Justice said that it would not proceed with the proposed changes. “Taking account of the range of responses received, the Government has decided to make no changes to the existing fees regulations,” a spokesman said.

The spokesman added that the Ministry of Justice intends “to deliver a
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Prime Minister commits to more open government and wider access

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has announced his commitment to open government, and has proposed a review of FOI which will look at whether the existing application of the Freedom of Information Act should include a range of organisations that perform public functions.

The PM pledged to make government more open and to widen access to information “because government belongs to the people, not the

politicians.”

Mr Brown said, “I believe we require a new and imaginative approach to accountability and to winning people’s trust in the ways in which information is held and used.”

Critics have complained that access to information relating to public bodies has been hampered by the increasing use of private sector companies to deliver public services. Mr Brown has also commissioned a second

review into the current legislative parameters protecting public personal information in the public and private sector, led by the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas. This consultation is discussed in more detail on page 13 of this issue.

Amongst Mr Brown’s proposals is a call for more bodies that carry out public functions to fall within the FOI regime, e.g. private prisons.
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