

Freedom of Information

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Headlines

- ‘Keyword search’ FOI requests are valid, says ICO, p.18
- New definition documents for higher education and government department sectors, p.20

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Government to reduce cost ‘burden’ on authorities

The Justice Minister, Helen Grant, has outlined plans to reduce the amount of money spent answering Freedom of Information requests by public authorities.

The development follows the government’s response to the Justice Committee report on Post Legislative Review of the Freedom of Information Act (see page 1 of the previous edition of this journal).

At a recent debate on the Act, Helen Grant said the “burdens” placed on authorities who have to respond to requests need to be reduced. “This is

especially important in the current challenging and very difficult financial climate and at a time when more Freedom of Information requests than ever before are being received,” she said.

One option the government is considering is blocking ‘industrial requests’ that are made by a person or group of people to the same authority. The suggestion has raised fears with campaigners that this may limit a local newspaper’s ability to hold an authority to account.

“A single request about school exam results might

be enough to reach the cost limit. Thereafter the whole newspaper — not just the individual journalist — might be barred from making any further FOI requests to the authority for the next quarter, even on different issues such as child abuse, road safety or library closures” said Maurice Frankel, the Director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

The government said that the changes will only have an impact on a small number of requests made, but Sir Alan Beith, the

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FOIA will not be extended to private contractors

The government has ruled out extending the Freedom of Information Act to private companies and contractors who work under public contracts.

Justice Minister, Helen Grant, said that instead of bringing such organisations under FOI law, contracts between authorities and private sector organisations would include “transparency clauses” which would be enforced to ensure that freedom of

information obligations are met.

The government will issue guidance to encourage public authorities and contractors to go further than the minimum requirement to provide information. She said the Act would not be extended to contractors unless the agreements in their contracts “yields insufficient dividends.”

MP Sir Alan Beith recently

said that the issue of private organisations who were spending public money and not being freely scrutinised by the public was a “significant problem.” Also, 87 MPs that have signed a motion to Parliament which calls for FOIA to be extended to private contractors who are using public money to complete work for the National Health Service.

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