

FOR DISCUSSION

Paper number SFOI (2003) 5

Freedom of Information Implementation Group

Raising Awareness of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002

Purpose

1. This paper reviews existing arrangements for raising awareness of FOI issues throughout the Scottish public sector to provide a basis for discussion by Group members.

Background

2. A range of methods has been employed to date to promote awareness of the Act across the Scottish public sector, including:

- Highlighting the FOI material available on the Executive's web pages. This includes information about the Act; related codes of practice; papers related to the work of this Group and FAQs.
- Distributing an overview of the Act and the Implementation Group's Annual Report widely across the public sector.
- Writing to Chief Executives to update them on the progress of procuring the training package and developing the codes of practice; issuing them with copies of the Ministerial annual report and drawing attention to the implementation timetable contained in that. A related ministerial Press Release has also been issued.
- Providing contact details of officers in the Freedom of Information Unit and links to the website. We continue to work towards developing a comprehensive list of FOI contacts in public authorities with whom we can engage as implementation progresses.
- Providing speakers to participate in FOI related seminars and conferences upon request.

Discussion

3. With the recent announcement of an implementation timetable, this is an appropriate point at which to consider the effectiveness of these existing arrangements. Following the request made at the last (February) meeting some members have provided comments on awareness raising which have helped inform this paper. Consideration might also be given to the contribution that the Group should make to promote greater awareness of FOI throughout the Scottish public sector.

4. The core training pack currently in development will play an important part in general awareness raising and staff training within public authorities throughout 2004. Improvements to the Executive's FOI web pages over the summer will improve access to related materials. Awareness of FOI issues will also increase with the establishment of the office of the Scottish Information Commissioner whose website has already been launched. While it will be for individual authorities to put in place appropriate detailed arrangements (to cover handling requests, reviews, and records management etc) it will be of assistance to them in doing so if they have access to sufficient explanatory material about the Act and the responsibilities associated with it.

5. It is helpful that many public authorities have provided specific FOI contact details since this will enable more effective dissemination of information and targeting for seminars on FOI and related issues. However, more work is needed to complete that database and reminders will be issued to those authorities yet to respond.

6. The majority of public authorities covered by the Act are practitioners within the NHS and it will be necessary to work with Health colleagues to ensure that appropriate supporting materials are available to practitioners be this via Health Boards or professional organisations.

7. It is particularly important that senior managers in public authorities are aware of the duties introduced under FOI. While the Unit addresses FOI correspondence to Chief Executives if there are opportunities to engage more effectively with them, either through professional associations or management boards/seminars, these should be considered. It is unlikely that any free-standing programme of seminars could be arranged before Autumn 2003. However, It would be helpful if members would consider the issue of improved engagement and the role this Group have in that.

8. It may also be worthwhile for the future consideration of these issues if feedback can be obtained from public authorities on the progress currently being made with arrangements for implementation of the Act.

Conclusion

9. It is recommended that members consider the effectiveness of the activity described above and the extent to which the Group can facilitate effective awareness raising throughout the public sector. It is also recommended that members support a programme that incorporates:

- **the continuation of a mix of techniques to disseminate information about FOI,**
- **further development and promotion of the Executives FOI webpages,**
- **contacting authorities' Chief Executives and FOI officials to gauge interest in a series of FOI related seminars and to confirm progress being made towards implementation,**
- **the development of a programme for awareness raising throughout the NHS with officials in the Health Department, and**
- **further consideration of the role professional organisations within the public sector may have in facilitating awareness raising of FOI issues.**

Secretariat
Scottish Freedom of Information Implementation Group
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