

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION — AN UPDATE

Librarians as a group, and in representation from the Association, have been amongst the most constant supporters of effective freedom of information legislation in Australia.

Following the March 1984 General Council meeting, the Association again stressed the potential role of libraries, and in particular public libraries, in the operation of this particular legislation. The Attorney-General's Department received other correspondence expressing a similar view, and a recent meeting with an officer of the Federal Attorney-General's Department gave encouraging evidence that libraries could become an active part of this country's developing freedom of information access network.

During discussions with the Executive Director and us, Mr John Broome, Senior Assistant Secretary of the Freedom of Information Branch of the Attorney-General's Department, said that both the Attorney-General and his department were interested in using public libraries to disseminate information about FOI — specifically individuals' rights of access and ways of exercising these rights. The Attorney-General, Senator Evans, is very committed to the effective working of the legislation, and is undertaking as extensive a publicity campaign as can be mounted within the constraints of a relatively modest budget. The Department recognises the value of some 1300 library systems in the country as an existing information network, characterised by a rather more neutral or friendly public image than many government departments, and offering hours of opening and a geographical range that cannot be matched by formal government information offices. Many public libraries, if not offering community information services themselves, are in close liaison with local information services.

Use of the legislation

To date most use of the legislation has been with 'client-oriented' government departments — Social Security, Veterans Affairs, Taxation. Initially at least the Attorney-General's Department proposes to concentrate on developing greater public awareness of FOI legislation in this area. The Department of Social Security has been very positive in its approach to FOI, and has in fact derived benefits from making more information available

to users. Clients, knowing the 'rules', submit applications based on accepted criteria and the Department receives requests to assess which contain much less irrelevant information, to the mutual benefit of the Department and its client. This Department has also prepared a video to demonstrate how people may use the legislation effectively in the social welfare area.

Where do libraries come in?

* **Basic information.** The Attorney-General's Department has prepared or has in preparation, three pamphlets that are to be distributed as widely as possible and which are available to libraries as pick-up material.

FOI-unlocking government information:

1) a basic overview of FOI in non-legalistic language, setting out individual rights under FOI legislation.

This will also be available in translation in 8 languages.

2) rights of appeal

3) correction of personal records.

It is also preparing an FOI manual which should be useful as a beginner's guide.

* **Back-up information.** However what any seeker after information really needs is a guide to where to start searching. This information appears in the Section 8 Statements which outline the functions, structure and categories of documents held by each department. The Association had proposed that public libraries be nominated for deposit for department manuals, indexes and guidelines. This is where the crunch of the Attorney-General's restricted budget comes, since to supply 1300 libraries with full sets of manuals and indexes would involve costs of the order of \$½ million p.a. The cost of manuals in hard copy, which need updating annually, is extremely high.

Possible resolutions of such a difficulty were discussed. This included the provision of microfiche copies, which could be a solution for some libraries, but may be difficult for some smaller services. Also some Departments, such as Social Security, may be prepared to distribute copies of manuals, etc., relevant to their Department in their local regions. The Executive Director is taking up this suggestion with Social Security and Veterans' Affairs, as a starter.

Some public library services may wish to liaise with their local Regional Directors of

Social Security office and explore the possibility of a library display on FOI, the citizen and the Department. Maybe a topic for a local community group talk, together with a showing of the Department's video? (This is a 20 minute programme, and, we were assured, very well presented.) Available in both Beta and Umatic formats.

* **Videotext.** The Attorney-General's Department is considering including material on Telecom's new service when this begins. The types of information they are likely to put into the service are legal aid information, family law matters, and the texts of three FOI pamphlets already mentioned. This information will, therefore, be on hand in those libraries which install a Videotext system as part of their services.

* **On-line services.** In the longer term the Attorney-General's Department hopes to develop a computer-accessible service enabling people to plug into recent government information. This could be based in the Commonwealth Archives office. This is, we understand, very much at the discussion stage, with Administrative Services and the Archives Administration. But for those libraries already moving into on-line information searching the prospect of a Federal Information Data Base on-line is attractive.

* **Library staff training.** If staff in libraries are to give appropriate information to members of the public enquiring about FOI, some training will be appropriate. This of course is a difficulty given the geographical scatter of libraries throughout Australia. One suggestion discussed was the making of a video, or a set of videos, possibly from a briefing session in one centre. This could be a mixture of information giving and of demonstration, e.g. of an enquiry in a library, and the response to be made. The videos, together with supporting information, could then be made available to libraries as a training package.

The matters covered will be referred for comment to divisions, groups of chief librarians, etc. However, from this meeting we believe that the Attorney-General's Department is being very positive about this legislation. We hope libraries everywhere will be equally positive in their support of what is really an exciting legislative development.

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