

Public Access Agency Reference Group - Terms of Reference

Overview

The *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (**the FOI Act**) outlines various obligations and responsibilities conferred on Victorian government agencies with respect to providing access to information that they hold. The FOI regime in Victoria has seen a number of changes since the FOI Act was introduced in the 1980s, including most notably in September 2017 which led to the creation of the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner (**OVIC**).

The Information Commissioner and the Public Access Deputy Commissioner's functions include promoting understanding and acceptance by agencies (and the public) of the FOI Act and its object.

More generally, OVIC's role is also to support a positive culture of information management and access across government.

To assist agencies, OVIC currently offers:

- FOI training courses and information access series webinars for agency staff;
- a designated agency FOI information service to provide free tailored advice;
- guidance materials published on OVIC's website, including the comprehensive FOI Guidelines and Professionals Standards, practice notes, customisation templates, de-identified copies of OVIC review decisions, e-learning modules and recordings of past webinars; and
- regular newsletters sent to subscribed agency officers.

Purpose

The purpose of the Public Access Agency Reference Group is to facilitate discussions between OVIC and key agencies about access to government-held information in Victoria. The ultimate goal is to inform and promote good FOI practice by providing a platform for:

- agencies to share their challenges and successes in administering the FOI Act with each other and OVIC;
- OVIC to share information on its projects, events, ongoing initiatives and its identified trends relating to FOI;
- OVIC to consult agencies about proposed publications and projects; and

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- OVIC and agency representatives to explore ways access to information processes in Victoria could be improved.

Outcomes

Through the Public Access Agency Reference Group, OVIC aims to gain information and insights to assist it to:

- provide the relevant tools to help address the challenges identified by agencies;
- increase the public's understanding and knowledge of the FOI Act and other avenues for accessing information;
- improve the administration of the FOI Act by agencies and improve the way OVIC discharges its functions;
- raise the profile and support the role of FOI practitioners in Victoria; and
- identify ways to address systemic issues affecting access to public sector information in Victoria including through legislative changes or reform.

Membership

Members of the Public Access Agency Reference Group are agency officers, invited by the Information Commissioner or Public Access Deputy Commissioner, who have experience in managing FOI processes in agencies.

The tasks of the members are to:

- identify challenges they face in administering the FOI Act;
- contribute to sharing information between agencies and OVIC;
- participate in raising the standard of FOI knowledge and practice in the public sector; and
- provide advice, based on members' operational experience, regarding suggested legislative changes or administrative practices that could be made to help achieve the objects of the FOI Act.

Approach

The Public Access Agency Reference Group will meet at least three times a year, on dates set by OVIC.

Meetings will be informal in style, aiming to create a collaborative space for honest and frank discussions in keeping with OVIC's aim to undertake its FOI functions with as little technicality and formality as possible.

Meeting will be chaired primarily by the Public Access Deputy Commissioner.

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OVIC will circulate an agenda prior to meetings, with all members invited to identify topics for discussion.

Meeting minutes will not attribute comments to an individual member and draft minutes will be provided to members for review/comment. Minutes will then be published on OVIC's website to allow others to benefit from the discussion.

All members are further encouraged to share information received at meetings with their colleagues.