

**Book review**

Kelvin Smith (2004) Freedom of Information – A practical guide to implementing the Act. London. Facet. ISBN 1-85604-517-X.

**Volume 1 issue 2**

**Review** by Andrea Simmons, *Socitm consulting*

This book was a godsend when it was issued last summer. I read it in almost one sitting and promptly recommended it time and again when delivering training courses – during the last quarter of 2004 - to the extent that, at one stage, it was out of print. For anyone who has had little or no exposure to the UK Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, this is a great starter-for-10. It takes the reader through all the necessary steps required to ensure a public sector organisation is in a strong position to maintain compliance with the requirements of this new piece of information legislation.

Chapter One outlines the background to the Act itself. Chapter Two goes on to describe the high level requirements at a more detailed level. Chapter Three deals with the potentially thorny issue of the "Exemptions". There are great examples of likely usage as well as an easy to follow layout that clearly denotes how long each exemption may be likely to last – not something I've come across anywhere else with as much clarity.

Chapter Four tackles the "Publication Scheme" – an inherent requirement of the Act, including useful examples of existing schemes. Chapter Five deals with "Enforcement and appeal" – an area well worth knowing about as only time will tell how the Information Commissioner will seek to enforce the legislation with the various powers

invested in him. Chapter Six tackles "Records management" – another fundamental tenet of the Act. This is tour-de-force where the author takes the reader systematically through the steps required to structure records management effectively within an organisation – including policy and procedure guidance.

Chapter Seven - "Data protection, human rights and other legislation" - puts FOI in the context of other relevant information management legislation. Chapter Eight deals with "Staffing and training" – containing useful suggested competencies against which to measure your organisation, at all levels (core, managerial and functional). The author has also been allowed to reproduce a couple of National Archives presentations, which usefully encapsulates all the relevant points. Chapter Nine pulls it all together with an action plan in "Getting read for Freedom of Information" – including details appropriate for a Project Brief.

The relevant Codes of Practice are reproduced in Appendix 1 – which is extremely useful as they are an important part of the compliance programme. The Information Commissioner puts great store by adhering to the requirements of Codes of Practice as there are a fundamental part of their delivery.

The writing style is very much supportive of the intentions of its' title – it is, indeed, a practical guide. The examples are extremely useful and the procedure flows set out easy actions that can be followed immediately. Each chapter is prefaced with an explanatory paragraph and so you are stepped through the intentions and requirements systematically. As the author has utilised a variety of layout styles – i.e. italics, bold, and bullet lists, as well as tables and flows – the book is easy to pick

up at any point and flick through a few pages, picking up a lot of helpful hints along the way.

My only concern for the writer in all this has been about the timescales and details that have subsequently changed. Publication Schemes were all supposed to have been submitted in 2003, so this whole paragraph is, in many ways redundant to the informed reader. Equally, the Department of Constitutional Affairs didn't help by the ongoing delay in confirming the fees regulations (we were only fully aware of these from 17<sup>th</sup> December onwards). This leaves a lot of Chapter Two in need of revision already and a reprint would be advisable as the examples of how to calculate costing were extremely valuable and useful at the time but have been superseded by regulation change. Actually, there would be benefit in issuing this book as a compendium that could be loose leaf so that changes could be inserted and redundant sections removed with ease. The Project Brief in Chapter Nine has an equally limited shelf life as the Act is finally here for real and everyone needs to be on a slightly different page now.

All in all though, the book does provide some helpful resources and it's a lot easier to handle than carrying the Act and a load of other A4 documents and folders.

### **Book Reviewer**

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