At the launch of his Annual Report today, Richard Thomas, Information Commissioner, will confirm that the Freedom of Information Act is working well and that he is encouraged by the range and significant number of disclosures.

Speaking ahead of the launch of his annual report, Richard Thomas said: “I have been impressed to see a spirit of greater openness starting to change the culture of government at all levels. Secrecy without good reason is no longer an option. The Freedom of Information Act is clearly making an impact and I am encouraged that it is being taken very seriously by most public authorities.”

In a further effort to help public authorities meet their obligations under the Act, the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) is issuing ten top tips today. Around half of the complaints handled by the ICO so far involve procedural issues, suggesting that some public authorities are still not sufficiently clear about their obligations under the Act.

The top tips encourage authorities to disclose information wherever possible and use publication schemes proactively. They remind public bodies that they must meet the 20 day deadline and to be extremely clear when issuing refusal notices. Above all, the Act should be seen positively: members of the public have a right to know what is done in their name and how their money is spent. Greater transparency is good for the public and for democracy.

Richard Thomas continued: “Many significant disclosures, on a very wide range of issues, have been achieved and the majority of refusals appear to be unchallenged. As we tackle the complaints referred to us, our approach is to be independent,
robust, responsible, and – where appropriate – to balance competing public interest considerations.”

This Annual Report is the ICO’s first to be issued since the Freedom of Information Act came fully into force and looks at the impact of the new legislation on the office and across the public sector. The ICO has recruited additional staff and substantially reorganised the office in the past 12 months to prepare for the new Act.

Speaking of the report, Richard Thomas said: “It has been a year of substantial upheaval. Freedom of Information has increased our size significantly and enlarged our role and our profile. We have engaged in controversial debates about risks to privacy and personal information and the business transformation programme is radically re-shaping our structure and procedures. Electronic case-handling has arrived, our regional offices are becoming more firmly established, and we are improving leadership and management skills across the office.”

ENDS

See Notes to Editors below
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1. The ICO is the UK’s independent public body set up to promote access to official information and protect personal information. The ICO does this by providing guidance to individuals and organisations, solving problems where it can, and taking appropriate action when the law is broken.

2. The Annual Report is being launched at 1100 on Wednesday 13 July, at The Design Council in Bow Street. Journalists are invited to make interview bids under embargo from 0900 on Monday 11 July.

3. Richard Thomas will be available for face-to-face interviews from 0900 on Wednesday 13 July, or by telephone on Monday or Tuesday. If you would like to make a bid, please contact the ICO Press Office.

4. Since the Act came into force on 1 January 2005, the ICO has received 1157 complaints. So far 224 cases have been closed, mainly informally, but 19 Decision Notices have been issued, which are available on the ICO website.

5. The ICO has created and staffed a new structure to cater for the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act. In addition, it has introduced a new structure to allow for greater specialism and clearer roles in data protection work. The three new divisions focus on complaints, regulatory action and good practice.

6. In the past year, the ICO has acquired larger office accommodation in Wilmslow and recruited 38 new staff, with 40 members changing their post through transfer or internal promotion.

7. The ICO has three regional offices based in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, which have become more clearly established in the past 12 months. The offices now respond to differing local issues, and connection to a central computer system means that regional offices are now able to handle casework, and therefore become more engaged at a regional level.

8. If you need more information, please contact Katharine Courts, James Ford or Janet Rafferty in the ICO Press Office on 020 7282 2960. Or visit the website at: www.ico.gov.uk