



Highest levels of awareness ever recorded in the UK

General awareness of data protection is higher than ever, announced the UK's Data Protection Registrar, Elizabeth France, in her Thirteenth Annual Report, published in July.

The Registrar ran a TV and national press campaign earlier this year. Annual tracking research performed after the campaign showed that general awareness of the Data Protection Act has risen from 60% to 72% nationally, with awareness levels being even higher in Scotland and the north of England where the TV advertisement was screened. The aim of the campaign, apart from raising the profile of the Data Protection Act, was to inform the general public of their rights under the Act. An information hot-line number given at the end of the commercial attracted 17,000 callers, who requested additional information. The Registrar continued the campaign in Central England in September, and hopes to advertise in the rest of the UK before the change in the law in autumn 1998.

New primary legislation awaited

The Registrar welcomed proposals for a new Data Protection Act. She emphasised that data users will not be faced with a totally new data protection regime; there are number of common elements in the EU Data Protection Directive and the current Data Protection Act.

Work on the Directive has continued in the UK and internationally. In the UK, discussion now incorporates different components of privacy; data protection, freedom of information and the European Convention on Human Rights, which the Government has now agreed to incorporate into UK law. This is an important step because the Convention contains a right to privacy whereas English common law does not.

New developments in registration

Last year saw some fundamental changes to the registration system to simplify it. A series of standard registration templates were introduced for 60 different types of business or organisation. Nearly all new registration applications last year were made using a template (PL&B Apr '96 p.2).

As a first move into delivering services electronically, the Register has been made available on the Internet (<http://www.dpr.gov.uk>) enabling anyone to check their registration details. The electronic register has been well received. The Registrar's Home Page, which receives approximately three thousand "hits" (visitors) a month, has also proved to be a cost-effective way to make documents and reports available.

Complaints increase by 30%

There was a sharp increase in the number of complaints compared to last year. Consumer credit remained the main source of complaint. On the other hand, complaints relating to the Child Support Agency, formerly another main area of complaints, had reduced significantly.

Much attention was paid to the use of supply databases by utility companies for non-supply purposes. The Registrar published guidance dealing with the privatised utilities, and issued preliminary notices against two of the utility companies, British Gas and Southern Electric.

Advising policy-makers and sectors

The Registrar's Office produced a number of responses to recent Government initiatives, for example, on the licensing of Trusted Third Parties for the Provision of Encryption Services, Identity Cards and Government Direct, a proposal to start delivering government services electronically.

The annual report also covers the Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act, to be followed by a voluntary Code of Practice, and other issues on data matching and information sharing. The Registrar published with her annual report, *Private Lives and Public Powers: A Guide to the Law on the Use and Disclosure of Information About Living Individuals by Public Bodies*.

The Registrar has also been working with a number of organisations producing codes of practice. Her wish to be granted power in certain circumstances to initiate and develop Codes of Practice has already been taken into account in the Government's proposals for new legislation.

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