

Communiqué of the Association of Information Access Commissioners of Australia and New Zealand (AIAC) meeting 7 – 8 December 2022, Wellington, New Zealand

The Association of Information Access Commissioners (**the AIAC**) met in Wellington, New Zealand, on 7-8 December, for its second bi-annual meeting of 2022, hosted by New Zealand's Chief Ombudsman, Peter Boshier.

The AIAC is comprised of independent Information Commissioners and Ombudsmen of Australia and New Zealand who have oversight responsibilities, under their respective state and national jurisdictions, for access to government information laws.

Members noted the event marked 40 years since both Australia and New Zealand introduced what was then considered revolutionary legislation to promote our democratic principles of a participatory system of government that enables public access to government information.

The introduction of these first information access laws in 1982 was game-changing for both countries. It overturned the long-held presumption and default position of government secrecy that operated throughout much of the 20th century to one of availability.

In the 21st century the importance of government accountability has increased as we face unprecedented climatic and global health situations, increasingly interact with government through digital platforms and respond to myriad challenges to democratic systems of government.

The right to access information has now further developed in some states and territories where information access laws have evolved to mandate the disclosure of some government-held information.

As a result, these laws are considered one of the cornerstones of our respective democracies by ensuring a transparent and accountable government and enabling participation by the public in the actions and decisions that might affect them. This legislation makes sure our governments provide information about their plans, activities and decisions in a timely manner. The laws also enable individuals and body corporates to seek access to their personal information held by government.

This more transparent regime has helped heighten, rather than diminish, public trust in government.

Members noted that for information access to properly support and encourage trust, confidence and integrity in the actions and decisions of government in the 21st century, agencies need to continue to build strong cultures, systems and practices around both information management and record-keeping. This includes:

- ensuring a decision on a request is made and information is provided as soon as practicably possible;
- being increasingly proactive in providing information so that requesters do not need to go through lengthy formal legislative processes to obtain access to information
- embracing or re-affirming 'open by design' systems that will better support access to information (particularly digital information) and reduce the overall compliance transaction costs for agencies.

Finally, members observed that in the interests of strengthening our own and other democracies, there were opportunities for engagement with and learning from our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific

region on information access issues. Members welcome these opportunities and will work towards effective international engagement in 2023.