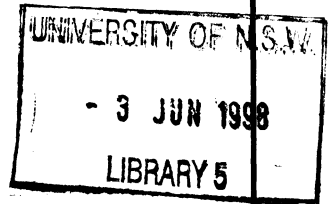


# Freedom of Information

# 23

# Review



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## Contents

### Article

- Recent developments in public access to documents held by European Community institutions  
by Ulf Öberg 22
- Victorian AAT decisions** 28  
*Corrs Chambers Westgarth* 28,  
*Milthorpe* 30, *Clifford* 30,  
*Signorini* 31
- Federal Fol decisions** 32  
*McIntosh* 32, *Cook* 33  
*Gardiner* 35

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## Comment

A series of encouraging pro-active initiatives have been taking place around Australia in relation to Freedom of Information administration. The most important of these are occurring in New South Wales and Western Australia. The next issue of the *Fol Review* will contain more detail but for now I will give a summary of these activities.

In New South Wales the Ombudsman is undertaking a program of Fol-related audits of agencies. In 1997 these audits focused on annual reporting by a series of sample agencies and council summaries of affairs published in the Government Gazette. At the February 1998 meeting of the NSW Fol Practitioners Network meeting, the NSW Health Department was used as a case study to demonstrate the improvements made in response to such an auditing practice. The improvement included reductions in delays in processing and a minimising of Fol determinations that were short and curt in their wording.

In Western Australia the Information Commissioner and WA Fol Coordinators have developed a remarkable set of standards, strategies and performance measures which can be used to achieve best practice in the administration of Fol (See Issue 20, April 1998 of the Fol Bulletin from the WA Information Commissioner). A small number of agencies have volunteered to pilot these standards to verify accuracy and suitability of the standards. The Western Australian Information Commissioner and the Fol Coordinators are to be congratulated for their initiative. The Western Australian approach is based on four key activities;

- Key Activity 1: Manage the Fol process
- Key Activity 2: Assist and advise parties
- Key Activity 3: Agency policy and education
- Key Activity 4: Evaluate performance

The key activities have several standards for good Fol practice, several strategies to achieve the standards and several performance measures. This blueprint for best practice will assist Fol administration by ensuring internal agency commitment to 'agreed' on best practice. In addition it will force academic critics of Fol administrators to focus on more precise evaluation of Fol performance. Currently the academic mantra rarely graduates beyond a cataloguing of deficiencies involving annual report deficiencies, time delays, curtness in Agency reason statements and legalistic analysis of Agency defences in external review hearings.

Meanwhile the ALRC/ARC Review into the Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act still gathers dust.

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