

RTI report kept secret

Tips to fix transparency redacted

David Killick

Suggestions for improving the transparency of Tasmania's Right to Information laws have been redacted from a government discussion paper released under Right to Information laws.

The Right to Information Uplift Project discussion paper was part of a \$500,000 government push to improve transparency in the 2022-23 budget.

It is part of the response to the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry.

The paper was completed in August last year but wasn't released to the public until a lengthy and dogged fight by the state's leading RTI expert, who described the process as "a farce". "Proactive disclosure is not being used as the primary method for releasing information, as required by law," the report notes. Large sections of the report eventually released have been blacked out.

"The successful performance of RTI is impacted by some officers who maintain an attitude against disclosing information," it says in one of the unredacted sections.

Five complete pages and sections of others were withheld under section 35 of the RTI Act, which relates to "internal deliberative information".

"Some information sources promote negative publicity about the performance of the Tasmanian State Service's right to information service,"



Independent MLC Meg Webb.

the report says, adding that this negatively affected the morale of RTI officers. University of Tasmania Associate Professor Rick Snell is the state's leading expert on RTI laws.

He said he had to put in an RTI request just to find out who was on the committee and waited weeks for a response.

Eventually he discovered a reference to the report, which also took an RTI request and another long wait to obtain.

"There's a reason I don't have much hair - this is it," he said. "Every step of the way they had the opportunity to show best practice, do the right thing, do it quickly and simply. Just withholding the information is stupid," he said.

"They just had every opportunity to deliver, and they failed every single opportunity.

"It's simply a farce. It's like a script out of Utopia."

Member for Nelson Meg Webb asked questions of the government about the issue in parliament last week.

"It's impossible to escape the irony of having to resort to RTIs and multiple questions in parliament just to obtain a clear status update on the RTI Uplift Project, which was intended to improve government

transparency and boost public confidence in our RTI laws," she said.

"Each time I ask a question in parliament, the response raises further questions.

"Why hasn't the Project Steering Committee met since the 3rd of August last year, and when will it meet again?

"Will the apparently unspent \$400,000 of the project's allocation still go into improving the RTI system, or will it be clawed back into the government coffers, and why isn't the community receiving frank and regular updates?"

A response from the government acknowledged that the Commission of Inquiry had called for greater transparency and the government has responded in the budget.

"This funding recognised the government's existing commitment to improving access to information through its transparency agenda," the response said.

"Departments and public authorities remain committed to improving RTI processes, including recruiting additional staff, streamlining processes, waiving fees for victim-survivor applicants and their representatives, and ensuring applicants receive appropriate clinical support if the information released may be traumatising," it said.

The RTI Uplift Project is expected to meet again in the coming weeks.

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