

Personal details leaked

David Killick

Personal information has been mistakenly released in up to 40 per cent of Right to Information responses by Tasmanian public authorities, an investigation by the Ombudsman has found.

The investigation also found almost half of agencies subject to the Right to Information Act have no written procedures for handling requests.

A targeted review by the Ombudsman found in one case, information released by the City of Hobart contained the personal information of 10 members of the public, and information redacted with a

RTI dishes out residents' private data: Ombudsman

black marker pen could still be read.

In another case, the Department for Education, Children and Young People released information, which included the names of children in care due to sexual abuse concerns and the names of their family members. Three attempts by the Ombudsman over two months to obtain a response from the Department were unsuccessful before a fourth yielded a brief reply. The Department took eight months to inform those affected.

"The results of the investiga-

tion showed that the release of personal information in error during RTI applications was not an isolated issue but an uncontrolled risk which was happening with some frequency," Ombudsman Grant Davies wrote in his report.

"While I did not find any evidence that the release of personal information was anything other than inadvertent, the failure to institute rigorous processes to reduce error rates is leading to poor outcomes in many public authorities."

The report noted that nearly

two decades after the Right to Information Act was passed, almost half of the agencies subject to it do not have written procedures in place.

"These responses showed that almost all public authorities rely on ad hoc processes to implement RTI decisions and undertake quality assurance," it noted.

"While this may be expected in relation to some small public authorities with low volumes of information requests and limited resources, even those public authorities which routinely deal with high volumes

of personal and sensitive information have not developed official RTI guidance for their staff.

"Without procedures which require staff implementing decisions under the RTI Act to undertake a quality assurance process, preventable errors are occurring."

Dr Davies recommended that agencies develop written guidance requiring additional checking of the information intended to be released under RTI and how to respond to the inadvertent release of personal information.

He also recommended that all public authorities audit their most recent decisions to determine the rate of inadvertent release of personal information.

Independent Member for Nelson Meg Webb called for a moratorium on any potential budget cuts to either the Ombudsman's Office or any departmental RTI staff resourcing in light of the report.

"The profoundly shocking revelations of the Ombudsman's own investigation ... demonstrates the urgent need for targeted training and stronger oversight of our Right to Information practices," she said.