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## **Info Commissioners Meet in Manchester**

4th International Conference Separates Officials, NGOs

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Delegates from more than 40 countries participated this month in the 4th International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC), which took place in Manchester, United Kingdom, on May 22nd and May 23rd, hosted by the U.K. Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas.

The conference followed a different format than its predecessor, held in Cancun, Mexico last year, where members of the international freedom of information community both within and outside of government were invited to participate in all sessions of the event. In Manchester, members of civil society were invited to attend only the second and last day of the conference.

The first day of the event was attended only by information commissioners or their nearest equivalent and was closed to members of civil society. Government delegates participated in workshops and attended sessions related to their work as FOI commissioners in their respective countries. Among the speakers were Natasa Pirc Musar, information commissioner from Slovenia, and Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the U.K. Lord Chancellor, who delivered the keynote address.

The second day was open for members of the international FOI community to attend and to participate as speakers. Richard Thomas welcomed the participants and discussed the first year of FOIA in the U.K., where 36,100 requests were made to the central government, with members of the public being the largest category of submittals. Requests ranged from information related to restaurant inspections to expenses of parliamentary members.

The European Ombudsman, Nikiforos Diamandourous, presented a European perspective on FOIA focusing on the specifics of the European Union's Regulation 1049/2001, which regulates access to documents from the European Parliament, Council and Commission.



From civil society, Helen Darbshire, founder and executive director of Access Info Europe offered a global overview of FOI, focusing on the main challenges faced by advocates. She highlighted the need for securing FOI as a fundamental human right and praised the role of information commissions worldwide as an effective oversight mechanism guaranteeing the right to know.

Other speakers included U.K. Air Vice Marshal Andrew Vallance (who described the British system of media-government consultation through the "Defense Advisory Notice System" to prevent inadvertent damage to national security from media coverage), Daniel J. Metcalfe from the United States Department of Justice, Peter Hustnix, the European Data Protection Ombudsman, and Tony Bunyan, the editor of Statewatch.

Following the ICIC meeting on May 24th, the Open Society Justice Initiative in cooperation with Access Info Europe and the FOI Advocates Network convened a civil society meeting to review and discuss the issues presented at the commissioners' meeting. Members of more than two dozen civil society organizations from Europe, Asia and Latin America participated in this session. Following this meeting the group drafted the Manchester Declaration on Access to Information, to follow up the similar declaration issued by civil society groups after the Cancun ICIC in 2005.

The date and location of the next ICIC meeting has not yet been established. The office of the Ombudsman in New Zealand is evaluating the possibility of holding the next meeting in Wellington in late October or early November 2007.