



EU 'should appoint transparency officers'

by Daniel Mason

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European Union institutions and offices are too "reactive" and "defensive" in their approach to public access to documents and information officers should be appointed to uphold citizens' rights.

That is according to the European Ombudsman Paraskevas Nikiforos Diamandouros, whose job it is to investigate public grievances about maladministration in the EU. At an event in Brussels to mark International Right to Know day, he said he was "concerned" at the number of transparency-related complaints he received.

More than a third of all inquiries to the ombudsman are linked to access to documents, the composition of expert groups, and details of the policy-making process. "Many EU institutions are still too reactive in their approach to public access and some even seem to be defensive in their thinking," said Diamandouros,

He proposed the appointment of information officers in EU institutions and offices. "Their role should be to secure the citizens' right of access to EU documents by encouraging the institutions to adopt a proactive approach, as well as ensuring that they react correctly to requests for access."

Adding that it would be "good administration" for EU documents to be drafted so that they are accessible as widely as possible to the public, businesses and other organisations, he said as many as possible should be

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made available online without the need for a request to be made – and a public register should inform people of what information is obtainable.

Diamandouros cited a website in development in the United States, giving access to all rulemaking proposals from nearly 300 federal agencies, as an example of best practice.

Meanwhile Access Info Europe, a group which works for greater transparency, has used International Right to Know day to launch a new website. AsktheEU.org gives anyone the opportunity to make requests to EU institutions, offices and agencies. Users can rate responses and appeal decisions, while statistics such as the time taken to deal with requests will be monitored.

Executive director Helen Darbishire said: "The AsktheEU.org portal will redress the democratic deficit in Europe whereby decisions are made far from citizens and yet only a small clique of lobbyists, academics and NGOs can master the current decentralised and complex system for filing requests."

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