



## NGO aims to make records easier to access in Cyprus

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IN MOST E.U. countries, access to government records involves a relatively simple process of filling out an application form and waiting a couple of days.

In the Republic of Cyprus, however, the legal framework does not even properly exist to allow for such an approach to government and administration.

Of the 47 countries in the Council of Europe, Cyprus is one of just seven that does not have any freedom of information laws. The remaining six are: Malta, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino and Spain.

All that may be about to change, if a new project launched by the Open Cyprus Coalition (OCC) manages to succeed in its primary goal.

“[Access to government records] is a right which is very important for defending other human rights,” said Helen Darbishire, executive director of Access Info.

The OCC launched its “access to information project” on Monday night. The scheme is an EU-funded initiative that aims to carry out an in-depth survey of the rules and laws relating to freedom of information and make recommendations on bringing the legislation into the modern era.

Highlighting some of the potential problems which such legislation might create in Cyprus, Orestis Tringides from IKME asked: “Do you know who gets most of the public [construction] tenders in Cyprus? Miltiades Nephytou. But why does this company get most of the public tenders?”

As the OCC underlines, “The right of access to information is a fundamental human right recognised by the European Court of Human Rights,” yet, in Cyprus, “you currently cannot benefit from a right many others across Europe enjoy”.

“Governments fear a couple of things – the first being sensitive information,” said Darbishire.

She noted, however, that these areas are generally covered by specific agreements relating to national security, personal privacy and ongoing legal or criminal investigations.

“Nobody is claiming this is an absolute right,” said David Goldberg, a board member of Access Info.

According to Darbshire the common fears of government personnel is that they will be inundated with requests for information and that opening themselves up to such easy access will lead to a reduced trust in the government.

The project also intends to ‘map’ the information network currently available to citizens of both the Republic and in the north.

They plan to identify what information is readily available to members of the public, what information is not so readily available, and to clearly demarcate where there are gaps in the information available for public access.

In pursuance of this aim, and to verify the extent to which it actually holds in practice, the OCC intends to test and monitor the extent to which information is actually obtainable by citizens when they file requests with governmental authorities.

As regards the situation in the north, which is to be subjected to the same scrutiny and recommendations, the administration does currently have a general freedom of information law but does not, in practice, apply it.

The OCC is a joint venture between the Cyprus-EU Association (KAB, a Turkish Cypriot NGO), the Socio-Political Studies Institute (IKME, a Greek Cypriot NGO) and Access-Info Europe, an NGO based in Spain.

- *For more information, visit [www.accessinfocyprus.eu](http://www.accessinfocyprus.eu)*