



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 5, 2010

GOVERNMENT RESPONDING FASTER TO FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS

VICTORIA — The B.C. government has substantially reduced its average response time to access to information requests to 24 business days from 35 business days last year. This figure was contained in the Information and Privacy Commissioner's second report monitoring government's compliance with the rule under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act requiring such requests be responded to within 30 business days.

The report, entitled "It's About Time", examined response times of all 21 ministries to 7,750 freedom of information requests responded to from April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2010. Overall results indicate that the government increased its on-time response rate from 71 per cent last year to 90 per cent this year. This improvement follows a failing report issued last year, which found that almost one-third of government responses to access requests were in breach of the law.

Information and Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham said, "This year government made extraordinary efforts to meet its timeliness obligations. It achieved significant improvements through its strategy of executive level support, centralization, effective use of technology, better delegation, training and staff commitment."

Despite the improvements, the commissioner noted several areas of continued concern, most notably with respect to requests from the media and political parties, which took longer to process than other types of requests. On average, it took between 35 and 40 business days for government to respond to media and political parties compared to only 24 business days for all other types of requests. "This is troubling," the commissioner said. "British Columbians depend on the media to report current events and on political parties to challenge the current administration. The quality of public discussion and debate is diminished when access is delayed to those who use and report that information in the public interest." The commissioner stated this problem must be immediately addressed, and indicated her intention to monitor the situation throughout the year.

Noting that the challenge for government will be to sustain this effort and commitment to meet timelines, the commissioner made several recommendations, including a government-wide commitment to routine proactive disclosure. She stated that next year she intended to add another benchmark, that being "evidence of proactive disclosure of such records as audits, studies, reports, impact assessments and records previously released in response to access requests."

The full text of the report can be found at www.oipc.bc.ca.

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