

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to make some opening remarks.

The OAIC's purpose is to promote and uphold privacy and information access rights.

I'm appearing here today at a time when there is a great focus on the community's right to access government information and on the individual's right to have their personal information protected.

No one could miss the national right to know campaign across major media outlets this week.

The campaign shares its name with the international movement in support of access to government information, which holds Right to Know Day around the world on 28 September each year.

That includes Australia, where it's supported by the OAIC and our state and territory counterparts.

Just last week the United Nations General Assembly recognised the importance of this global movement and proclaimed 28 September as the International Day for Universal Access to Information.

The OAIC's recent FOI survey of community attitudes also highlights the value Australians place on their right to access government information:

- 84 per cent of people surveyed said their right to access information held by the government was important.

- 37 per cent had tried to do so, using a range of methods, including agency websites and freedom of information requests.
- Most respondents who tried to access information were successful in doing so on at least one occasion.
- 15 per cent said they did not get all the information they wanted.

The community is exercising their right to access information from Australian Government agencies and ministers – and seeking review of their decisions under the Freedom of Information Act – in increasing numbers.

As our annual report shows, the number of FOI requests made to Australian Government agencies and ministers grew by 13 per cent last financial year [to 38,879]:

- The percentage of FOI requests granted in full was 52%
- Partial access was granted for 35% of requests
- 13% of requests were refused

In 2017-18 there was a significant improvement in the proportion of FOI requests processed within the statutory timeframe, up from 58% to 85%.

However, this slipped slightly to 83% in 2018-19, showing that continued focus is required on the part of agencies and ministers to comply with statutory processing times.

An important object of the Freedom of Information Act is to facilitate and promote public access to information promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

We continue to work with key agencies to improve these processing times.

We are also encouraging agencies to make the system work more efficiently for the community by publishing more information proactively, particularly information that is frequently requested; and by making personal information available through administrative access schemes. This will also reduce agencies' administrative FOI processing load.

Turning to applications to the OAIC, the number of applications to the OAIC for Information Commissioner review of FOI decisions grew last year, by 16 per cent. [to 928]

Over the past four years the number of IC review applications to my Office has risen by more than 80 per cent.

Through our early intervention procedures and other measures, we have improved our finalisation rates in response to these pressures.

In 2018-19 we finalised 659 IC reviews — 8 per cent more than the previous year.

Over the past four years we have increased our finalisation rate by 45 percent.

Where possible we are dealing with applications covering similar issues as a cohort, to provide additional guidance to agencies in handling FOI requests and to influence better practice.

Since I've been in the role, we've extensively reviewed our IC review processing and implemented further workflow management and process efficiency measures.

But the substantial and sustained increase in IC review applications over recent years has widened the gap between incoming work and finalisations, resulting in increased delays and backlogs.

In order to meet the timeliness objective of the FOI Act, and provide faster outcomes for the community, additional resources are required.

The OAIC continues to work with the Government in relation to our resourcing needs.

In the privacy sphere, we are also finding efficiencies to manage the increasing volume of work, particularly in helping people resolve complaints about the handling of their personal information.

We received 12 per cent more privacy complaints last financial year [3,306].

The majority of complaints were driven by privacy practices in six sectors: finance, government, health, telecommunications, retail, and online services.

The most common issues raised with us are about use and disclosure, security, access, collection and the quality of personal information.

Our early resolution procedures are continuing to have a positive impact and we finalised six per cent more privacy complaints than the previous year [2,920].

We are in the process of implementing additional changes to the way we handle privacy complaints to further improve our finalisation rates.

Supported by the additional funding provided in the last budget for timely responses to privacy complaints, we are addressing delays and backlogs.

This additional privacy funding will also support a new privacy regime for social media and online platforms that trade in Australians' personal information.

We are also increasing our proactive enforcement capability.

I welcome the Government's commitment to strengthen the Privacy Act to protect personal information through measures including increased enforcement mechanisms.

There is also a need for broader review of the Privacy Act, to ensure it remains fit for purpose in our current environment.

The past year's focus on digital platforms both here and overseas has demonstrated the scale of the challenges we confront in safeguarding personal data.

Taken alongside the Consumer Data Right – a major change to our regulatory framework, which we are preparing to implement with the ACCC early next year – and other recent developments in technology and artificial intelligence, it is timely to consider the scope and settings of the Privacy Act overall.

There is a global dimension to the OAIC's work, and so our cooperation with other regulatory authorities around the world is critical to mitigating privacy risks.

We are actively engaged with our international counterparts on regulatory action, and making progress towards globally interoperable privacy frameworks, so that our citizens' data is protected wherever it flows, and the economic benefits of data innovation can be safely realised.

Thank you, that concludes my opening remarks.