

House Committee to review Access to Information Act

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A Joint Select Committee of Parliament is to start reviewing the Access to Information Act in January next year, Minister of information Burchell Whiteman told the Senate last Friday.

This is a mandatory requirement of the Act, which came into effect in January 2004 to reinforce constitutional democracy by allowing access to official documents being held by the state.

Senator Whiteman said that the committee will be expected to take into account the views and experiences of members of the public who are the end-users of the Act, as well as those of public officials whose responsibility it is to provide the service in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

He said that up to September, 646 applications had been made to 16 ministries and 21 government agencies for information, covering a wide range of subjects, under the Act.

"In sampling those, it was found that 36 per cent of them had come from members of the public, 38 per cent from organisations, 19 per cent from the media, six per cent from public officers and one per cent from academia," the minister pointed out. However, he did not say whether all 646 applications had already been disposed of.

Two sets of appeals have been heard by the tribunal and decisions handed down.

"I want to urge that as we embark on this review, all stakeholders seek to inform themselves as to what is required of each party involved in the implementation and that, rather than adopt adversarial positions based on misrepresentation and mistrust, we work together to ensure that we obtain the intended benefits from the legislation," Whiteman said.

In response to a question from Opposition member Senator Christopher Tufton, Whiteman said that while every ministry and agency should be able to respond to requests, he could not say how ready they were to deal with them expeditiously.

The minister, in response to a similar question from Opposition spokesman on information Senator Dwight Nelson, in July, had stated that fewer than 50 per cent of the departments and agencies were ready to facilitate the

demands, and that some might never be fully ready and would have to be guided and supported by their parent ministry or a related agency.