

DEFENCE DEPARTMENT GETS PAT ON BACK

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The Department of Defence has received the highest score of all 28 National Government Departments at the inaugural annual Golden Key Awards which were announced at a ceremony in Johannesburg today.

Close behind was the Department of Land Affairs, which received the second highest score.

The awards test for best practice in areas relating to the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA).

Alison Tilley, the COO of the Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC) said "the rationale behind the awards was to recognise best practice in using and complying with PAIA, which is the mechanism that allows anyone to access state-held information.

Best practice criteria set the framework and procedures necessary to process requests and release records where no justifiable grounds for refusal can be employed to withhold information.

"We sought to establish which national government departments were accessible and responsive to people seeking information in terms of PAIA. It was heartening to see how well some departments are doing in this regard.

Departments who scored the lowest

"But a major disappointment has been the departments who scored the lowest, like Health, Home Affairs and Labour — who service the largest number of South Africans", she added.

The Golden Key Awards are an initiative of (ODAC) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to recognise National Government Departments, Deputy Information Officers and private institutions, journalists and members of the public who have done exemplary work in promoting openness, transparency and accountability in the public and private sectors through PAIA.

Positions three, four and five were awarded to the Departments of Trade & Industry, Provincial & Local Government, and the South African Police Service respectively.

"Those departments which scored better have invested both human and financial resources for recording requests in detail, communicating with requestors and processing requests within the 30 days PAIA timeframe.

"Even frontline staff in these departments who deal with general enquiries know where to refer members of the public who wish to submit PAIA requests."

The ten lowest scoring National Departments in descending order were: Education, Social Development, Arts & Culture, Communications, Environmental Affairs & Tourism, Health, Home Affairs, Labour and Sport & Recreation.

Lagging

A notable laggard was the Department of Communications, which is charged with assisting the SAHRC in distributing the Section 10 Guide to all Post Offices.

The CEO of the SAHRC noted that the Commission has been struggling to develop a structured relationship with the DOC and its agencies to monitor and promote the implementation of the Act.

Tilley says: "Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any correlation between the number of people a department services and the proficiency of the access to information systems those departments have in place.

Home Affairs, Labour, Social Development, Education and Health need to be both accessible and responsive to the public they serve, but they are amongst the ten lowest scoring departments overall".

She added that given that a number of these laggards can be considered to be 'delivery' Departments, this is disappointing to say the least"

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