

Ombudsman criticises handling of school closure information requests

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Ombudsman Dr David McGee has found the Ministry of Education acted wrongly in its handling of requests for official information about Christchurch school closures.

He is now planning an investigation into whether the Ministry's processes for disclosure of information are adequate to ensure effective and sufficient public consultation around school closures generally. In addition, Chief Ombudsman Dame Beverley Wakem will investigate concerns that the broader public sector is not managing requests for information under the Official Information Act (OIA) as well as it should.

In a report released today, the Ombudsman found the Ministry of Education wrongly advised the Christchurch City Council on how to reply to requests for information.

When the Council challenged the advice, the Ministry's response failed to correct or address the fact that their initial response was inappropriate and wrong, Dr McGee says.

The report raises the question of what is effective consultation in respect of proposed school closures, and the Ombudsmen's concerns have prompted them to conduct an investigation into this issue in the New Year.

Information about school closures and mergers, which have a major impact on communities, should be presented in "a comprehensive and comprehensible form", Dr McGee says.

"Schools and parents should not have to ferret out information by making official information requests."

Dr McGee also found the Ministry was wrong to advise two principals to withdraw their official information requests in order to receive a better response.

"Any suggestion that a government agency must bypass the OIA in order to allow a more efficient provision of information is unacceptable," he says.

In response to the Ombudsman's investigation, the Ministry of Education has already started reviewing its OIA processes, and staff training around the Act, Dr McGee says.

However, he and the Chief Ombudsman are concerned that there seems to be a broader perception within the public sector that “some requests for information can only be processed efficiently by somehow removing them from the OIA context”.

As a result the Chief Ombudsman would be conducting an investigation of OIA processes in selected government agencies in early 2013, he says.

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The full report can be found on www.ombudsman.parliament.nz