

4 April 2008

Phorm advertising – ICO statement

A spokesperson for the Information Commissioner's Office said:

"The ICO has received a number of queries concerning the recent announcement by Phorm that 3 major UK Internet Service Providers have agreed to allow them to use technology, developed by Phorm, to present adverts to their customers based on the nature of the websites they visit.

"Understandably, this has provoked considerable public concern. We have had detailed discussions with Phorm. They assure us that their system does not allow the retention of individual profiles of sites visited and adverts presented, and that they hold no personally identifiable information on web users. Indeed, Phorm assert that their system has been designed specifically to allow the appropriate targeting of adverts whilst rigorously protecting the privacy of web users. They clearly recognise the need to address the concerns raised by a number of individuals and organisations including the Open Rights Group. We welcome the efforts they are making to engage with sceptical technical experts and believe that it is only by allowing their technology to be subject to detailed scrutiny by independent technical experts that they will be able to prove their assertions regarding privacy. The ICO strongly supports the use of technology in ways which enhance rather than intrude upon privacy, and plans to produce a report on "Privacy by Design" later this year.

"We understand that the technology is not yet in use and that BT intends to run a trial involving around 10,000 broadband users later this month. We have spoken to BT about this trial and they have made clear that unless customers positively opt in to the trial their web browsing will not be monitored in order to deliver adverts. BT has also stated that the system does not store personally identifiable information, URLs, IP addresses or retain browsing histories and that search information is deleted almost immediately, and is not retrievable.

"We will continue to maintain close contact with Phorm and BT throughout the trial. Clearly the trial should reveal whether this is a service that web users want, whether it is privacy friendly and that users are comfortable with the privacy safeguards put in place by Phorm."

For all media enquires, please contact the ICO press office on 0207 025 7580.

For all general enquires, please contact the ICO customer service team on 08456 306060.