

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 21
AUGUST 2012

REPORT BY HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

5. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All.

Purpose/Summary of Report:

- To provide a summary of the Freedom of Information requests received by the Council.
- To provide an indication of the costs of managing Freedom of Information Requests.

<u>RECOMMENDATION FOR DECISION:</u> That:	
(A)	The report summarising Freedom of Information requests be received.

1.0 Background

1.1 The Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, which came into effect on the 1st January 2005, gives a statutory right of access to all information held by public authorities, subject to some exceptions.

1.2 The Act is designed to make public bodies more open, accessible and accountable and impacts the way that this and every Council responds to requests for information. The Act provides the public with two rights:

- a right to know what information public authorities hold.
- a right of access to that information.

1.3 Under FOI, anyone, anywhere, can request information about the Council and its business. The only stipulation is that a FOI request should be received in writing. This could be a fax, email or letter.

- 1.4 All formal FOI requests coming into East Herts Council are managed by our Information Manager. Any request for information by any source is covered by the Act, if the information is readily available and provided a formal request does not have to be logged.
- 1.5 The FOI legislation requires East Herts Council to provide a response within 20 working days to a request. The Information Commissioners' Office (ICO) has a working target of 85% of requests returned within 20 days. If an organisation covered by the FOI Act falls below this level of response the ICO has powers to investigate, record decision notices that require action to be taken under law.

2.0 Report

2.1 Process

- 2.1.1 Over 98% of all incoming requests are made by e-mail into a dedicated e-mail address – foi@eastherts.gov.uk
- 2.1.2 Once a request has been received, the request is logged as a case within an electronic system called 'Infreemation'. If the Information Manager agrees that this is a valid FOI request, the request is acknowledged and then sent onto the relevant service. The service sends the response back to the Information Manager who will then respond to the requestor with a response to their FOI request.

2.2 Volume

- 2.2.1 FOI requests from residents, organisations, MP's and the media are increasing as shown below:

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
122	115	126	198	298	423	478

- 2.2.2 The number of FOI requests is expected to increase with the trend shown on the graph in **Essential Reference Paper 'B'**.

2.3 Performance

2.3.1 The Council's performance in completing FOI requests is shown in **Essential Reference Paper 'C'**.

2.3.2 As the volume has continued to increase the Council has increased the staffing resources available to support the information management role from the Council's web team as well as changing the IT system used to improve efficiency. This can be seen by the improvement in performance in 2011 to exceed the 85% threshold.

2.4 Type/Category

2.4.1 The main categories of request are shown in ERP D. Key areas of request being Human Resources (pay grade information), Revenues and Benefits (void properties), Accounts (items of expenditure) and Contract Services (Environmental Services).

2.4.2. Individual requests tend not to follow a pattern, each being different specific requests, rarely is the same information repeatedly requested. However, the requests and responses are published on our website so that previous requests and responses may be reviewed and easily provided again in future.

2.5 Requestor

2.5.1 The chart in ERP E shows the FOI requests made by different types of requestor. Over half of all requests are made by individuals (52%).

2.6 Cost

2.6.1 The FOI process in place until the middle of June this year was very time consuming for the Information Manager. A simpler and quicker method has now been implemented to meet current and anticipated increases in FOI requests.

2.6.2 The cost per FOI request can vary, based on the amount of time spent putting the response together by the Information manager, and ranges from £13.66 to £61.47 (based on time

spent by the Information Manager on each FOI request). This cost does not include time spent by services researching and responding to requests.

2.6.3 A detailed breakdown of the pre June process and associated costs are as follows:

Pre-June Process	Responsible Officer	Average Time Spent on Process	Average Cost
Validating and responding to incoming request, including forwarding request to relevant service, including opening the case on EDM.	Information Manager	15 minutes	£6.83
Research and Reply by Service	Officer within specific service area	70 minutes	£29.16
Chasing Service for response and checking response from service to get information ready for sending onto requestor	Information Manager	15 minutes Note – some cases can take up to 2 hours if data needs to be redacted before sending on.	£6.83 Individual cases up to 2 hours costs £54.64
Sending response to requestor, and closing the case on EDM	Information Manager	15 minutes	£6.83
Total			£49.65

NOTE: The hourly rate for the Information Manager, including costs, has been calculated at £27.32. The hourly rate for

Officers within a service is based on £25 per hour as this is the cost stipulated by the ICO – Information Commissioner’s Office.

2.6.4 The Information Manager is part time (0.61FTE). On non-working days FOI requests are managed by the Web Team.

2.6.5 The cost of responding to FOI requests in 2011 was approximately £24,000.

2.6.6 The cost to purchase a dedicated FOI system was £1,350. There was a set up cost of £850 and an on-going annual cost of £500. A dedicated system was chosen as it would:

- Reduce the amount of time spent by the Information Manager in validating, responding and forwarding requests to a service from 15 minutes to less than 3 minutes (12 minute saving is equal to £5.46 per FOI request).
- The system is web based (on a secured server) so can be accessed by all staff (with permission to the system) from any location.
- Continuity of service when the Information Manager is not in the office, and FOI requests are processed by other officers.
- The responses can be published onto a dedicated East Herts Council web page to allow individuals, organisations and the media to see questions raised and the responses we gave. This should provide a simpler and quicker answer to some FOI requests. This will also save time within the web team in publishing FOI information.
- Heads of Services will be able to see what requests they have, and the time they have left to provide a response.

- Reduce the amount of time spent by the Information Manager in sending responses after the service have sent their response back.
- Reduce the time spent by services in replying to FOI requests by improving the process workflow.
- Accurate Management Information reports available on the number of requests received, requests responded to within the 20 working day target, group requests from individuals, organisations, politicians and the media.
- A searchable index on the FOI web page will allow 'customers' to self serve, thereby saving a FOI request from being made in the first place.
- Services are sent emails automatically if responses are coming close to a deadline, thereby saving more of the Information Managers time chasing up responses from services.

2.6.7 Based on improvements to the process, with a dedicated software solution in place, the new costs are:

Revised Process	Responsible Officer	Average Time Spent on Process	Average Cost
Validating the incoming request, forwarding the request to relevant service and opening the case on a dedicated system	Information Manager	3 minutes	£1.37
Research and Reply by service	Officer within specific service area	55 minutes – the easier way of replying to FOI's will reduce the amount of time officers will need	£22.91

		to spend by an average of 15 minutes.	
Chasing Service for response and checking response from service to get information ready for sending onto requestor	Information Manager	Chasing is now done automatically by the system to alert users.	£0
Sending response to requestor, and closing the case on dedicated system	Information Manager	5 minutes	£2.28
Total			£26.56

2.6.8 This is an efficiency saving in time of £23.09 per FOI request. Based on 2011's total of FOI requests this equates to approximately £11000 of efficiency savings in handling FOI requests.

3.0 Implications/Consultations

3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

Background Papers:

None.

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