

<b>24 September 2015</b>		<b>ITEM: 9</b>
<b>Standards and Audit Committee</b>		
<b>2014/15 Access to Records Report</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non key	
<b>Report of:</b> Lee Henley – Information Manager		
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Jackie Hinchliffe – Head of HR, OD & Transformation		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Lyn Carpenter – Chief Executive		
<b>This report is:</b> Public		

### **Executive Summary**

- During 2014/15, the council processed 98% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the legal timeframe. This is based on 548 FOI requests that were processed.
- There has been a decrease in the number of FOI requests logged during the reporting period. This is due to the council implementing processes in order to reduce the volume of requests that are logged and processed as FOI requests. 430 requests were diverted away and processed as routine enquiries by services areas and the Information Governance Team.
- Based on data captured within the FOI database, it has been estimated that the average FOI request takes 3 hours 20 minutes to process.
- The council challenge and/or refuse requests when it is believed that the requestor has used a false name, where we have reasonable grounds to believe the applicant is acting as part of a campaign or in consort with others, or where their questions do not meet the other validity requirements for FOI.
- The council refuse requests where it is estimated that the time taken to process the request exceeds 18 hours. During 2014/15, 26 requests were refused due to the 18 hour threshold.
- During 2014/15 the council received 21 Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection legislation. 71% of these requests were processed within timeframe.
- The Information Governance Team is continuing to ensure an increased amount of data is identified for routine publication online. This work forms part of the Transparency Agenda and aims to increase openness and accountability; whilst reducing unnecessary processing of FOI requests.

## 1. Recommendation(s)

### 1.1 To note the performance and statistics for 2014/15 for both FOI and Data Protection.

## 2. Introduction and Background

### 2.1 Freedom of Information

2.1.1 FOI affects up to 100,000 public sector bodies and organisations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, including central and local government, the police, NHS, schools, dentists, opticians and pharmacists. Anyone, from anywhere in the world, may make a request for information that is held by the council (they can be a person, business, or organisation). FOI requestors do not have to give reasons for seeking the information, and the council cannot make enquiries as to why information is being sought.

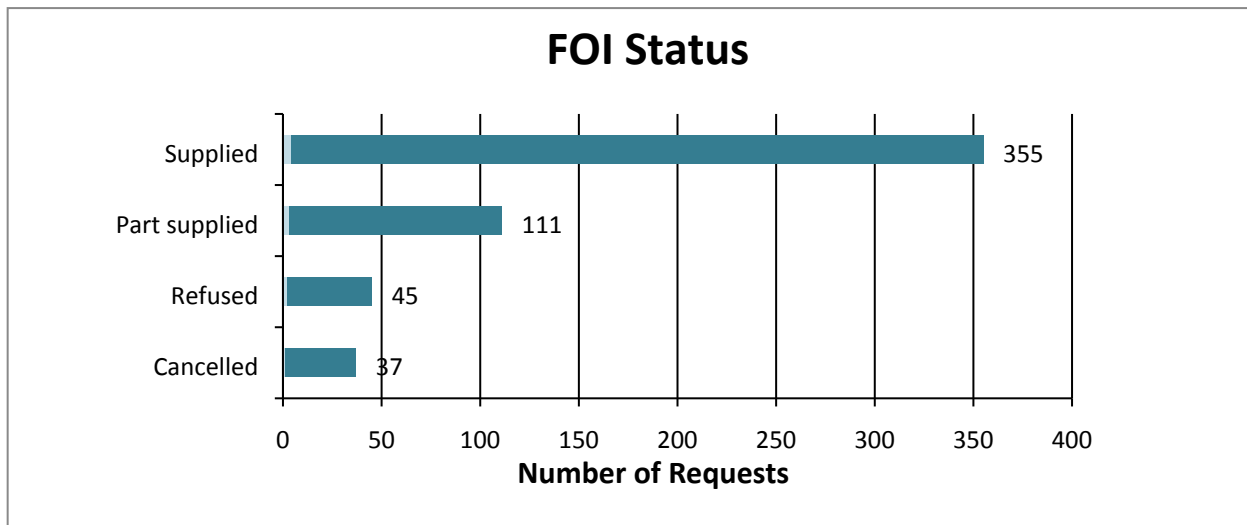
2.1.2 From 1 January 2005 the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 was fully implemented. This resulted in access to recorded information held by the council being made available, allowing anyone to submit a written request to see information about almost anything that is recorded.

2.1.3 On receipt of an FOI Request the council have 20 working days to process the request.

2.1.4 During 2014/15, 548 FOI requests were recorded on the council's FOI tracking system. The table below details year-on-year volume and performance data since the introduction of the FOI legislation:

Year	Number of Requests	% responded to in time
2004/2005	53	98%
2005/2006	275	99%
2006/2007	252	98%
2007/2008	225	97%
2008/2009	366	96%
2009/2010	512	99%
2010/2011	547	99%
2011/2012	599	97%
2012/2013	495	93% (would have been 98% if we exclude mailbox error)
2013/2014	662	98%
2014/2015	548	98%

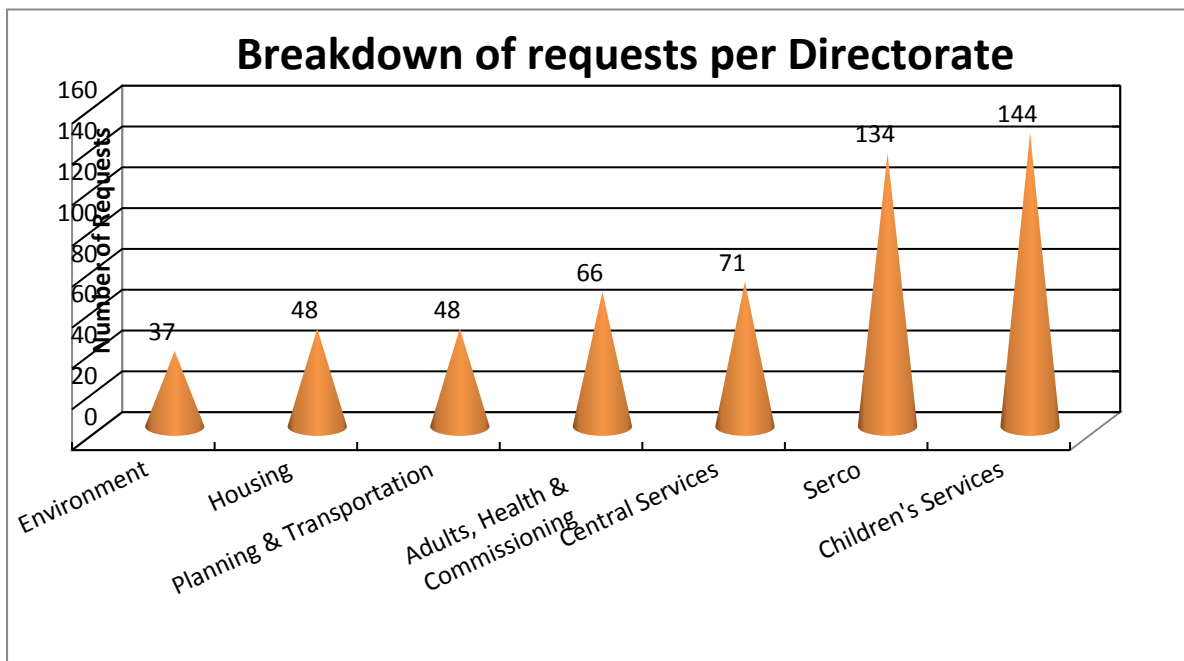
2.1.5 Of the 548 received, 11 were not answered within 20 working days. The chart below shows that of the 548 FOI requests received in 2014/15, 355 (65%) were supplied with all information requested, 45 (8%) were refused, 111 (20%) were part supplied, 37 (7%) were cancelled.



2.1.6 The average number of days taken to answer a Freedom of Information request for 2014/2015 was 14.5 working days. During 2013/14 the average time taken was 14 working days.

2.1.7 Based on 548 requests processed within 2014/15, it has been estimated that the average FOI request takes 3 hours 20 minutes to process.

2.1.8 The chart below shows requests received per Directorate:



2.1.9 The top 5 FOI themes received during 2014/15 were:

- Looked after Children
- School Placements
- Procurement/Contracts
- HR/Employment
- Business Rates

2.1.10 The chart below shows the type of exemptions and refusals that were relied upon (based on a total of 156 requests that were part supplied or refused). Some of the exemptions allow the council to withhold information where disclosure would cause significant prejudice to the council's business at a particular time, and which is therefore not in the public interest to release. Please note the chart below does equate to 156, as more than one exemption can be relied upon per request.

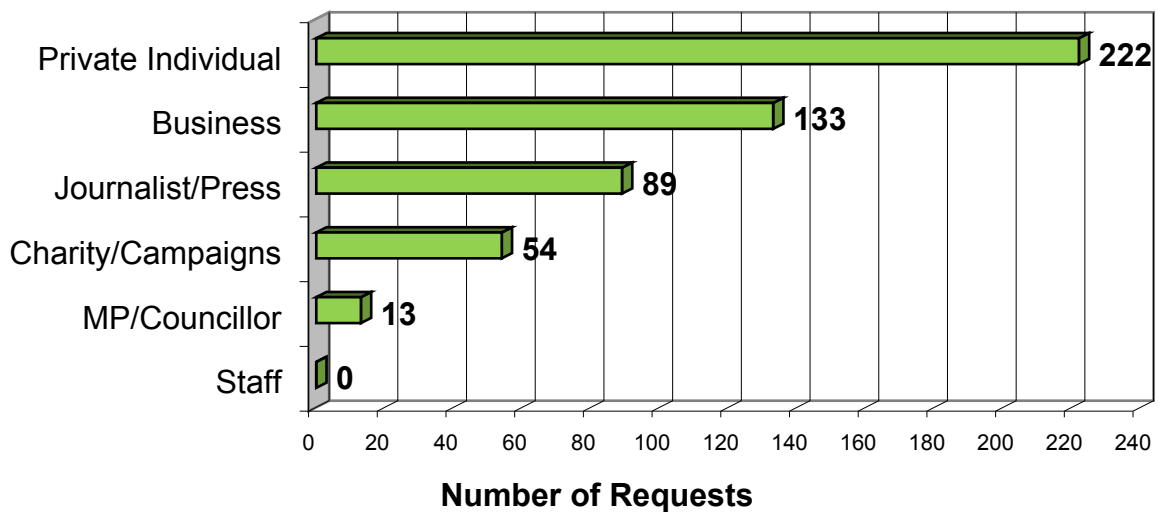
2.1.11 The Information Governance Team maintains responsibility for making decisions on the application of Exemptions (to withhold information) under the Act. These are recorded and evidenced to support the approach taken, and to demonstrate how the Public Interest Test has been applied for Qualified Exemptions. This part of the process is vital to prevent and respond to complaints about FOI responses where data has been withheld, either partially or in full.

2.1.12 The Information Governance Team respond to complaints received regarding FOI and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests. During 2014/15 there were 2 FOI/EIR complaints that were escalated to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). A summary of these complaints is detailed below:

- Case 1 - The council originally withheld information in relation to an EIR request, however following a complaint to the ICO and an Internal Review by the council, the requested information was released. This request related to Land Charges data.
- Case 2 - The council originally withheld information in relation to an FOI request. Following an Internal Review, the council then supplied all information held as part of the request. The ICO are of the view that the council has supplied all information available (although criticised the council for not meeting the original FOI deadline and not advising the requestor of our reasons for refusing to supply part of the response in the first instance). The requester has escalated their concerns to an Information Tribunal. This is ongoing and the request relates to costs to run our council tax department.

2.1.13 The chart below identifies where FOI requests to the council originated from (this excludes the 37 cancelled requests).

### Who FOI requests were made by



2.1.14 The council refuse requests where it is estimated that the time taken to process the request exceeds 18 hours. The first task our FOI co-ordinators undertake when requests are formally logged is to work with service areas to assess how long a request is likely to take. Any requests estimated to take in excess of 18 hours will be refused. Estimates must be justified and records kept supporting our decisions. During 2014/15, 26 requests were refused (in full) due to the 18 hour threshold.

2.1.15 If the council receives two or more related requests within a period of 60 consecutive working days (on the same/similar topic), from a person or different persons who appear to be acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign, the costs of complying with the individual requests will be aggregated (for the purpose of refusing).

2.1.16 The Information Governance Team routinely populate completed FOI requests onto the council's website with the aim of reducing FOI requests received by the council.

2.1.17 The Information Governance Team continues to implement processes to reduce the volume of FOI requests that are recorded and processed. This includes processing (where possible) requests as routine enquiries and/or diverting requestors to our website where information may be generally available or available as part of a previous FOI response. During 2014/15, 430 requests were diverted away from FOI.

2.1.18 A benchmarking exercise has been undertaken to compare performance and data on FOI with other Councils. The results of this are shown in Appendix 1 and a summary is provided below:

- Replies were received from 12 councils' (the request was sent to approximately 90 Councils/organisations in scope for FOI).
- Performance is strong for the majority of Councils who responded.

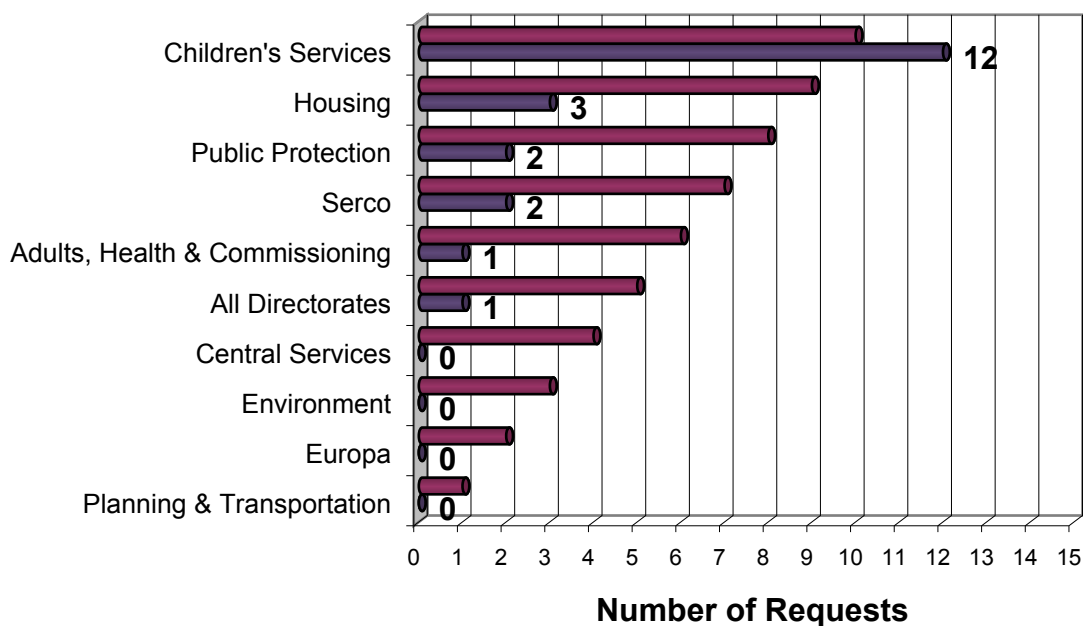
## 2.2 Data Protection

- 2.2.1 Principle 6 of the Data Protection Act states that personal information must be processed in accordance with the rights of data subjects. This can result in anybody making a request to the council about any information we hold on them and these are referred as Subject Access Requests (SAR). Requests range from very specific records (such as Council Tax, Benefits claim history or complex social care records) to a wide range of records (such as all information held by the Council).
- 2.2.2 When the SAR process is utilised, the council have 40 calendar days in which to complete the request. The timeframe is met at the point at which we have prepared all files for disclosure and have invited the applicant to collect their records from the council.
- 2.2.3 During 2014/15, the council received 21 requests where the fee was paid and the full SAR process implemented. Of the 21 requests, 71% of requests were processed within the statutory timeframe.
- 2.2.4 During 2014/15 the council did not receive any Data Protection complaints from the ICO.
- 2.2.5 The table below shows volumes of requests and performance over a 5 year period. The ICO have also confirmed that in the future they are going to be implementing formal monitoring of council's response rates on data protection in terms of timeframes (at the moment this is only checked if complaints are made). The dip in performance during 2014/15, was in the main due to files/records not being returned to the Information Governance Team in a timely manner. Measures have been put in place to help improve this going forward.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Requests</b>	<b>% responded to in time</b>
2010/2011	32	97%
2011/2012	51	55%
2012/2013	25	80%
2013/2014	29	90%
2014/2015	21	71%

- 2.2.6 The chart below shows where the data was owned (i.e. those departments holding data on the applicant) for the 21 requests. This shows that Children's Services received the most requests for 2014/15.

### **Subject Access Requests – Data Owners**



### 3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 There are no options associated with this paper.

### 4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 This report is for noting purposes. There are no recommendations requiring approval.

### 5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 This report was discussed/agreed at Performance Board and was sent to Directors Board.

### 6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1.1 The council has an effective system and process in place for managing both FOI and Data Protection requests. Procedures are regularly reviewed in order to improve performance.

6.1.2 The council's ability to comply and process FOI and Data Protection requests within the requirements of the respective legislation demonstrates our commitment to openness and accountability. This will allow residents and customers to have a confidence in what we do and will help build trusting relationships.

6.1.3 Access to information can also be closely linked to our Customer Services and ICT Strategies.

6.1.4 Processing of FOI and Data Protection requests can identify where service improvements can be made, such as improving records management processes.

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**  
**Management Accountant**

- The council can charge £10 to process a SAR under the Data Protection Act.
- Financial penalties for Data Protection breaches have increased to up to £500K and the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) have been given more powers to check for compliance.

### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**  
**Deputy Head of Legal & Deputy Monitoring Officer**

- FOI failure could result in regulatory intervention as the ICO are now starting to target poor performing councils for FOI which will lead to reputational damage.
- There are various avenues available to the Information Commissioner's Office to address an organisation's shortcomings in relation to the collection, use and storage of personal information. These avenues can include criminal prosecution, non-criminal enforcement and audit. The Information Commissioner also has the power to serve a monetary penalty notice on a data controller.
- The council must also comply with the Code of Practice issued under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The Information Commissioner may issue practice recommendations to an authority considered to be non-compliant with the Code specifying the steps that should be taken to ensure conformity. Failure to comply with such a recommendation could lead to an adverse report to Parliament in relation to the authority, by the Information Commissioner.
- The council must also be mindful of its duties under the Public Records Acts 1958 and 1967, the Local Government (Records) Act 1962, the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 and any other record-keeping or archives legislation.



### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**

**Community Development and Equalities  
Manager**

- There are significant diversity issues for the whole community regarding FOI and Data Protection. The successful implementation of FOI and Data Protection allows our customers, stakeholders, partners and the public to access and receive information.

### 7.4 **Other implications**

None

## 8. **Background papers used in preparing the report**

- None – Information has been obtained from the FOI and Data Protection databases/systems.

## 9. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 - Benchmarking

### **Report Author:**

Lee Henley

Information Manager