

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 28 FEBRUARY 2024

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS ANNUAL REPORT

Executive Summary

Following the launch of a new Freedom of Information (FOI) system in September 2023, the Council's FOI management system was deemed necessary to comply with the new Microsoft 365 software that was implemented by the organisation. The system is monitored and managed by Democratic Services.

This report sets out functionality of the management system in more detail.

The system was successfully audited last year and continues to be developed by the Council's IT department in response to feedback received from Officers. Any Members wishing to see the system in more detail are encouraged to contact the Democratic Services Team for a demonstration.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That the report be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.

Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Frank Jeffrey, Head of Democratic Services
Email: frank.jeffrey@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3012

Contact Person: Natalie Khan, Democratic Services Officer
Email: Natalie.khan@woking.gov.uk , Extn: 3083

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Freedom of Information Requests Annual Report

1.0 Yearly Report

- 1.1 The total FOIs received from January – December 2021, 2022 and 2023 are detailed below for comparison as follows:

Reporting From	Total Received	Total Breached	Total Refused
Jan – Dec 2021	632	23	12
Jan – Dec 2022	739	1	16
Jan – Dec 2023	740	0	10

- 1.2 The total includes figures for FOI referrals, which are requests received intended for other services, including those for Surrey County Council. These requests were mostly for Children Services and Surrey County Highways respective departments.
- 1.3 It was thought that since the announcement of Woking Borough Council's (WBC) Section 114 Notice, FOI requests were expected to hike. However, this was not the issue and we had only received several requests regarding (WBC's debt), with the remainder being general requests.
- 1.4 The progress of individual FOI requests is monitored frequently to ensure no requests breach. The responsible Officers are contacted by the Democratic Services Team in the event that the request is not completed within 20 working days. Furthermore, the system will send automatic reminders to the responsible Officers on a daily basis if the request is not completed a week before the breach date. In addition, the Democratic Services Team send further reminders to Officers ensuring they complete the request on time.

Freedom of Information Requests Annual Report

2.0 Monthly Breakdown

- 2.1 Please note that the figures for the breached/refused FOIs are reported in the month they breach/are refused rather than the month they are submitted in.
- 2.2 An FOI request can be refused on the basis of exemptions applied, for example a Section 40(1) *“Any information to which a request for information relates is exempt information if it constitutes personal data of which the applicant is the data subject”*.

Month	Total received	Completed	Refused	Breached
2023				
January	70	68	2	0
February	65	64	1	0
March	61	61	0	0
April	63	62	1	0
May	59	58	1	0
June	70	70	0	0
July	61	60	1	0
August	59	58	1	0
September	60	59	1	0
October	65	65	0	0
November	67	65	2	0
December	40	40	0	0
Total	740	730	10	0

3.0 Breakdown by Department

3.1 Please see the table below that details the FOIs received, broken down by department.

Department	Total FOIs Received
Democratic Services*	111
Benefits, Revenue and Customer Services	97
Housing	84
Environmental Health	59
HR	48
IT	48
Planning	45
Green Infrastructure	33
Building Services	24
Parking	23
Finance	20
Legal	20
Neighbourhood Services	16
Family Services/Refugees	12
Elections	11
Licencing	10
Corporate Support	10
Equalities	9
Asset Management	8
Health & Wellbeing	8
Sports and Leisure	8
Planning Policy	6
Marketing	6
Procurement	6
Arts & Culture	5
Town Engineering Team	4
Business Liaison	4
Translation Services	3
Health & Safety	2

*The high figure for Democratic Services reflects the fact that the Team oversees the system and, where able to, will respond directly to a request regardless of the subject.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 The Council received a negligible increase to FOI requests during 2023 compared to the previous year 2022 (739 against 740). FOI requests can significantly impact an individual's workload, particularly for those Officers in Revenue and Benefits and Housing. However, majority of requests are completed promptly by providing the information requested in a timely manner. There were no FOI's that were breached during the year.

REPORT ENDS