



Public
Prosecution
Service

Policy and Information Unit
Public Prosecution Service
Belfast Chambers
93 Chichester Street
Belfast BT1 3JR

FOI 2072 -21/22

27 April 2022

I refer to your email dated 29th March 2022 in which you asked for information in relation to the Impact of Covid – 19 on FOI responsiveness. Your request has been dealt with under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Freedom of Information Act 2000

The Freedom of Information Act creates rights of access for any person making a request for information to a public authority. The rights of access are twofold. First, to be informed by the public authority if it holds information of the description specified in the request, and if that is the case, secondly, to be provided with that information. These rights are subject to important limitations, which are designed to achieve a proper balance between the right to know and considerations of law and policy in the broader public interest.

You had asked the following:

1. For the period 16th March – 17th July 2020 (i.e., when ICO had indicated a sympathetic approach to delay), provide precise data if available e.g., 15 out of 30 requests, and if not, provide an estimate e.g., 10%, for these questions:

- a) How many responses to FOI requests were issued within 20 working days of receipt by your organisation?*
- b) How many responses to FOI review requests were issued within 20 working days of receipt of the request for an internal review?*
- c) How many responses to FOI requests were issued within 21 and 60 working days of receipt by your organisation?*
- d) How many responses to FOI review requests were issued within 21 and 60 working days of receipt of the request for an internal review?*

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2. For the period 18th July – 8th October 2020 (i.e., during the ‘preparing for recovery’ phase), provide precise data if available e.g., 15 out of 30 requests, and if not, provide an estimate e.g., 10%, for these questions:

- a) How many responses to FOI requests were issued within 20 working days of receipt by your organisation?
- b) How many responses to FOI review requests were issued within 20 working days of receipt of the request for an internal review?
- c) How many responses to FOI requests were issued within 21 and 60 working days of receipt by your organisation?
- d) How many responses to FOI review requests were issued within 21 and 60 working days of receipt of the request for an internal review?

3. During the period 1st March to 30th October 2020, provide precise data if available e.g., 15 out of 30 requests, and if not, provide an estimate e.g., 10%, for these questions:

- a) How many responses to FOI requests were issued more than 60 working days after receipt of the request?
- b) How many responses to FOI review requests were issued more than 60 working days after receipt of a request for an internal review?

4. When FOI request or review responses were issued more than 21 working days after receipt during the period 1st March and 30th October 2020, what were the main reasons for the delay? e.g., closure of premises due to Covid-19, reallocation of resources due to Covid-19, staff shortages due to Covid-19, absence of key staff due to Covid-19, limited access to necessary systems due to Covid-19, other issue related/unrelated to Covid19.

5. In relation to the FOI requests received by your organisation between 1st March and 30th October 2020, what proportion related directly to Covid-19, your organisation's Covid-19 response or impact of the pandemic on your organisation? (Provide precise data if available e.g., 15 out of 30 requests, and if not, provide an estimate e.g., 10%).

6. On 17th July 2020 the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) launched a self-assessment Freedom of Information toolkit (FOI self-assessment toolkit | ICO) to help public authorities respond to FOI requests as they prepared to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

- I. Does, or has your organisation ever, use/d the toolkit? If so, please explain whether it has had any positive outcomes.
- II. If your organisation has not/does not make use of the toolkit, please explain why not.

7. In response to Covid19, has the volume of information your organisation publishes:

- I. *not changed*
- II. *significantly increased*
- III. *significantly decreased*
- IV. *don't know*

8. *Has your organisation taken steps to proactively publish information relating to Covid-19, your organisation's Covid-19 response or the impact of the pandemic on your organisation? If it includes a dedicated webpage, please provide a link to the webpage.*

In response to questions 1(a) and 1(b) we can advise that 73% of FOI responses were issued within 20 working days during this period and there were no internal reviews.

In response to questions 1(c) and 1(d) we can advise that 27 % of FOI responses were issued within 20 and 60 working days during this period and there were no internal reviews.

In response to questions 2(a) and 2(b) we can advise that 76% of FOI responses were issued within 20 working days during this period. There was one internal review which was responded to outside the 20 days due to the complexity and volume of material involved i.e. (0%).

In response to questions 2(c) and 2(d) we can advise that 24% of FOI responses were issued within 20 and 60 working days during this period. One internal review was responded to within 21 and 60 working days of receipt. (100%).

In response to question 3(a) and 3(b), there were no responses issued more than 60 days after receipt and we had no requests for internal review.

In relation to question 4 the main reasons for any responses issued more than 21 working days was due to, either limited access to necessary systems/material because of COVID restrictions in the office and also the complexity and volume of material to be considered.

In response to question 5 we can advise that only one FOI received during this period out of 30 related directly to COVID 19 and the impact of the pandemic to the PPS i.e., 3 %.

In response to question 6 the PPS can confirm that it was aware of the toolkit as a resource and accessed it for guidance.

In response to question 7 we can advise that the volume of information that the PPS publishes has not changed.

In response to question 8, we can advise that a dedicated webpage [Your Case and Covid-19](#) was created, which included information for victims and witnesses. The page has been regularly reviewed and amended since March 2020.

In terms of Internal Communication, updates were issued to staff by email. These typically outlined how we were responding to the pandemic, new working

arrangements, links to the [NICS Covid Hub](#) for staff and health and wellbeing resources.

If you are dissatisfied in any way with the handling of your request, you have the right to request a review in accordance with our review procedure. You should do this as soon as possible or in any case within two months of the date of this response and you can do so by writing to the Head of Policy and Information, Public Prosecution Service, Belfast Chambers, 93 Chichester Street, BELFAST, BT1 3JR or alternatively by sending an e-mail to info@ppsni.gov.uk. You should state clearly the grounds on which you are requesting the review.

Alternatively, you may wish to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely,

Information Management Team
Public Prosecution Service