

WIRRAL COUNCIL

COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 MARCH 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) REQUESTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. This report presents details of the number of Freedom of Information requests received by the Council since 2005.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Members received a report regarding Freedom of Information at the meeting on 8 April 2009. That report stated that The Freedom of Information Act 2000 was introduced on 1 January 2005 and it gives a general right of access to all types of recorded information held by public authorities. Requests must be in a written format, which includes email and the Council has 20 working days to supply or deny the information to the requestor.
- 2.2. The Information Manager acts as the link between the requestor asking for information and the Council officers supplying that information.
- 2.3. Local Government is reporting an increase year on year in general terms, whilst Central Government has seen a stabilisation of requests over the last two years. Wirral has benchmarked against a number of other local authorities to compare the level of requests; the volume of requests since 2005 is shown below:

Year	Number of Requests				
	Wirral	Knowsley	Sefton	Bolton	Preston
2005	135	117	106	Not available	215
2006	180	180	203	191	154
2007	241	280	164	272	147
2008	538	420	360	387	243
2009	903	621	386	590	311

- 2.4. Requests continue to reflect local topical issues such as the Strategic Asset Review, Expenses Claims, Gritting of Roads and Allotment Provision; they also reflect more global and national issues such as the use of Biometrics in Schools, amounts of Housing Benefits paid and Adoption statistics.

- 2.5. The Council is allowed to refuse to disclose information to requestors if there is a legal exemption to do so. The Council refuses only a small percentage of requests and the requestor is always given an explanation for a refusal. A requestor also has the right to request an internal review of how a request was handled.
- 2.6. There is additional scope within the legislation to refuse to disclose information to requestors whose requests become repeated or vexatious; Wirral has issued two refusal notices in total since the access rights came into force in 2005.
- 2.7. There is a local quarterly performance indicator in relation to complying with requests within the legal timeframe. The target is a challenging 95% and this target is usually met, although the increased numbers of requests in 2009 meant this target was not achieved on a few occasions. If the target is not met then the Information Manager reports the reasons to the Finance Department Management Team who agree the necessary action to rectify the position through the performance management process.

3. FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1. Due to the increasing number of requests the staffing establishment may have to be reviewed. Management is currently considering the requirement which would be the subject of a report to the Cabinet.
- 3.2. The staffing of the Information Services Section was last reviewed by the Cabinet on 23 April 2009.
- 3.3. The particularly high level of information requests at Wirral has been cited by the Audit Commission as one of the reasons why the external audit fees payable by the Authority are above the scale level.

4. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. There are none arising directly out of this report.

5. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. There are no planning implications in this report.

6. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. There are no community safety implications in this report.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. There are none arising directly out of this report.

8. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. There are none arising directly out of this report.

9. MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

9.1. There are no particular implications for any Member or ward.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1. No background papers used in the preparation of this report.

11. RECOMMENDATION

11.1. That the report be noted.

IAN COLEMAN
DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

FNCE/34/10