



Freedom of Information Act

Making a request for information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) gives rights of public access to information held by public authorities. This guidance is for members of the public and explains how you can make a request for information to a public authority.

What can I request?

The FOIA gives you a “right to know”.

You have a legal right to request any recorded information held by a public authority, such as a government department, local council or state school.

- You can ask for any information you think a public authority may hold. The right only covers recorded information.
- Your request can be in the form of a question, but the authority does not have to answer your question if this would mean creating new information or giving an opinion or judgement that is not already recorded.
- You should clearly identify the information you want.
- Some information may not be given to you because it is exempt, for example because it would unfairly reveal personal details about somebody else.

For more information, see our guidance [When is information caught by the Freedom of Information Act?](#)

If the information is environmental, then the authority should respond according to the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR). You don't have to know whether the information you want is covered by the EIR or the FOIA. When you make a request, it is for the public authority to decide which law they need to follow. We also have separate guidance on [Making a request for environmental information: a guide for applicants](#).

When can I request information?

You can ask for any information you choose, at any time, but you may not always succeed in getting it. Before you make a request, it may help to consider the following questions.

1. Is the information you want already available, for example, on the authority's website?

Authorities must make certain information routinely available. You should be able to find out what information is available by contacting the authority or by looking at its website (this may be under “publication scheme” or “guide to

information”). There’s more about this on the [Model Publication Scheme](#) page of our website.

2. Is the information you want your own personal data?

If your request is for information about yourself, such as your medical records, you should make a **subject access request** under the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA). See our guidance on [How to access your information](#).

3. Is it information that would not be suitable for general publication?

The FOIA intends to make information available to the general public. It does not take into account who is asking for it or why they want it. You can only obtain information that would be given to anybody who asked for it, or would be suitable for the general public to see.

Some information, such as records about a deceased relative or documents you need for legal purposes, may not always be available under the FOIA. You should consider whether you may have a right to see the information you want under other legislation. The public authority holding the information you want may be able to advise you.

4. Is the authority likely to have the information?

It may save you time if you check with the authority whether it is likely to have the information you want. For example, you may not be sure whether the town council or the county council provides the service you want information about. Public authorities must give reasonable advice and help to anyone asking for information, so you should feel free to ask for help in making your request.

What are the legal requirements for a request?

For your request to be dealt with according to the FOIA, you must:

- contact the relevant authority directly;
- make the request in writing, for example in a letter or an email;
- give your real name; and
- give an address to which the authority can reply. This can be a postal or email address.

Some websites offer a service which allows you to contact public authorities and make a request through the site. You can make a request through an independent website, as long as the authority can reply to it.

It’s sensible to make requests in a dated letter or email, and keep a copy, so you have a reliable record of your request.

The Information Commissioner cannot request information from another authority on your behalf. You should address your request directly to the authority. There is no need to send us a copy of your request.

You do **not** have to:

- mention the FOIA, although it may help to do so;
- know whether the information is covered by the FOIA or the EIR; or
- say why you want the information.

It can be helpful to check whether the authority recommends you send your request to a specific person or email address. Some authorities also offer their own online request service.

How should I word my request?

Your request should set out clearly the information you want.

- You have a right to information, however it is recorded. You don't have to specify particular documents.
- Be as clear as possible. If the authority isn't sure what you want, it will have to ask you for further explanation.
- Try to pinpoint what you really want. Your request may be refused if it would be too expensive for the authority to deal with. The authority may also charge you for some expenses, such as photocopying. If necessary, start by asking for a list of the information available about the topic.
- Where possible, ask for specific information rather than using open-ended questions. "What" or "how much" are more likely to get a useful response than "why".
- Use straightforward, polite language; avoid basing your request or question on assumptions or opinions, or mixing requests with complaints or comments.
- Say how you would prefer to receive the information. For example, do you want the information electronically or as a hard copy?

Good examples

✓ "How much did the council spend on refurbishing its offices in the financial year 2007/08?"

✓ "Please send me your policies and internal guidelines on customer services, and a copy of your complaints procedure."

✓ "Please could you tell me what categories of records you hold relating to the Anyshire Regiment from 1939 to 1945."

Poor examples

✗ "Please send me information on the refurbishment of the office."

✗ "Why does your authority seem to think it is acceptable to treat its customers with contempt?"

✗ "Please send me any information you have on the Anyshire Regiment."

✓ “Please send me the minutes of any meetings at which the university discussed cancelling the course in graphic design, and any reports, papers or internal correspondence dealing with this issue.”

✗ “Why has the university decided not to offer a course in graphic design after the 2008/09 academic year?”

What happens after I make my request?

The authority must reply to you within 20 working days. It may:

- give you the information you’ve asked for;
- tell you it doesn’t have the information;
- tell you that another authority holds the information;
- say that it has the information and offer to provide it on payment of a fee (the fee it charges must be in accordance with the regulations, outlined in our guidance on [Using the fees regulations](#));
- refuse to give you the information, and explain why; or,
- say that it needs more time to consider the public interest, and tell you when to expect a response. This should not be later than 40 working days after the date of your request. It can only extend the time limit in certain circumstances, and it must explain why it thinks the information may be exempt.

If you are unhappy with how your request has been handled, you should first complain to the authority. If after this you are still not satisfied, you can complain to the ICO. If you do so, we will need to see copies of all your correspondence with the authority. Before making a complaint, read our guidance on [When and how to complain](#).

Requests for environmental information may be handled differently from other requests. However, the authority should still respond within 20 working days and give reasons if it refuses your request. See our guidance [Making a request for environmental information: a guide for applicants](#).

More information

You can find more guidance and advice on our website. If you need more information about this or any other aspect of freedom of information, please contact us.

Phone: 08456 30 60 60
01625 54 57 45

Email: please use the online [enquiry form](#) on our website

Website: www.ico.gov.uk