

# Freedom of Information Statistics in Central Government for 2017

This bulletin presents statistics on Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in central government for 2017, including key breakdowns by monitored body.

## Key statistics:

In 2017 there were **46,681 FOI requests received** across all monitored bodies\*. This is an increase of 1,266 (+3%) on 2016 levels.

Across all monitored bodies, **92% of requests were responded to in time**, up from 91% in 2016.

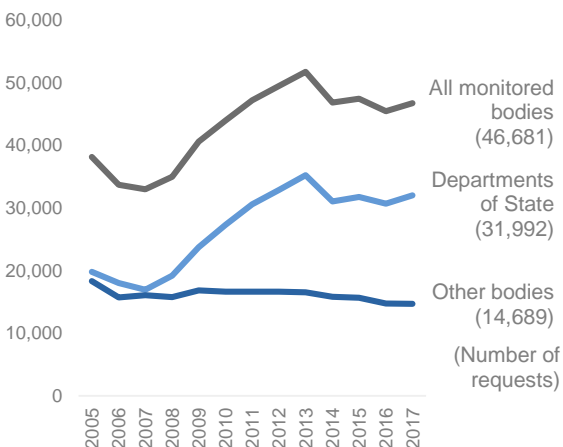
Of the 46,681 FOI requests received, 34,137 were resolvable. Of these **46% were granted in full, and 37% were withheld in full**, both unchanged on 2016 levels. The remaining resolvable requests were not yet processed or were partially withheld.

Of the 17,309 requests withheld in full or in part, 29% were withheld due to the cost of response exceeding the statutory limit, 2% were withheld as vexatious or repeated, and the remaining 68% fell under other exemptions.

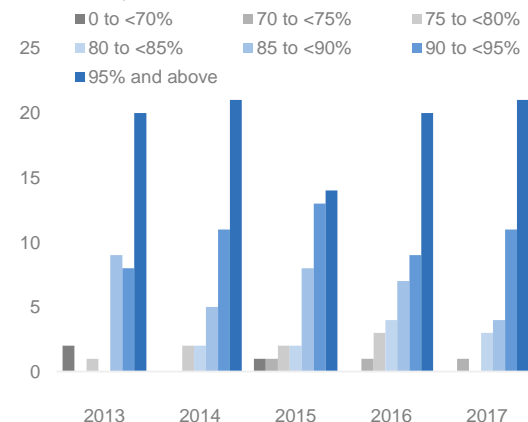


\* A full list of monitored bodies included in these statistics is provided on page 18

Number of FOI requests by year since 2005 (see Table 1 (Expanded))



Number of monitored bodies by their percentage of responses to requests in time since 2013 (see Table 4 and dataset)



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# Introduction

The FOI Act 2000<sup>1</sup> and the associated Environmental Information Regulations<sup>2</sup> 2004 allow individuals to request information from public bodies.

This bulletin presents FOI statistics for 40 central government bodies, including all major Departments of State, and a number of other bodies with significant regulatory, policy-making or information handling functions. A listing of all monitored bodies and associated acronyms is included in the section on scope at the end of this bulletin.

The annual statistics report on:

- The initial handling of FOI requests
- The number received during the quarter
- The timeliness of issuing a substantive response
- The rates of disclosure of requested information
- The exemptions applied when withholding information
- The outcome of internal reviews and external appeals

## Corrections and Revisions

Monitored bodies review the figures provided in the quarterly monitoring, and may make internal revisions to the statistics after publication. The revised figures are then included in the annual end of year monitoring. As a result, the quarter to quarter statistics will not always sum to the annual figures. Where departments have made revisions to quarterly figures these will be noted in the statistical tables published in the annual report.

## Further analysis and methodology

Summary information on the scope and methodology of monitoring is available at the end of this bulletin, with full details available in the quality and methodology information document published on the gov.uk website, along with previous versions of this bulletin: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-foi-statistics>

## National Statistics

Freedom of Information statistics are designated National Statistics in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. National Statistics status means that official statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality, and public value.

All official statistics should comply with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics<sup>3</sup>. They are awarded National Statistics status following an assessment by the UK Statistics Authority's regulatory arm. The Authority considers whether the statistics meet the highest standards of Code compliance, including the value they add to public decisions and debate. FOI statistics were most recently assessed by the Authority during 2016, with continuing designation granted in June 2017.

## Request for Feedback

We always welcome user feedback on our publications. We can be contacted at: [foistatistics@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foistatistics@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Full text of the FOI Act:  
[www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents)

<sup>2</sup> Full text of the EIR regulations:  
[www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/3391/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/3391/made)

<sup>3</sup> Code of Practice for Official Statistics:  
<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Code-of-Practice-for-Statistics.pdf>



# Volumes

- There were 46,681 FOI requests received across all monitored bodies in 2017
- The number of requests has increased by 1,266 (+3%) from 2016
- There were 1,489 requests treated under the Environmental Information Regulations

## The number of requests in 2017 was 46,681

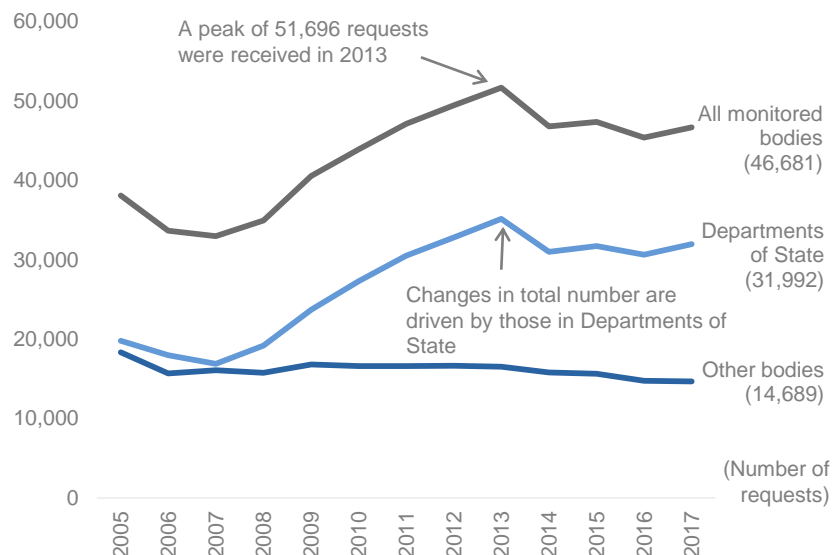
- During 2017 there were **46,681 FOI requests received** across all monitored bodies. This is an increase of 1,266 (+3%) from 2016.
- Just over two thirds of these (31,992) were at Departments of State
- The remaining 14,689 were received by other monitored bodies.

### 'Non routine' requests <sup>1</sup>

The statistics in this bulletin relate to 'non-routine' information requests where:

- It was necessary to take a considered view on how to handle the request under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act, and
- Freedom of Information officers were informed of the request and logged it in their case management systems.

Number of FOI requests by year since 2005 (see Table 1 (Expanded))



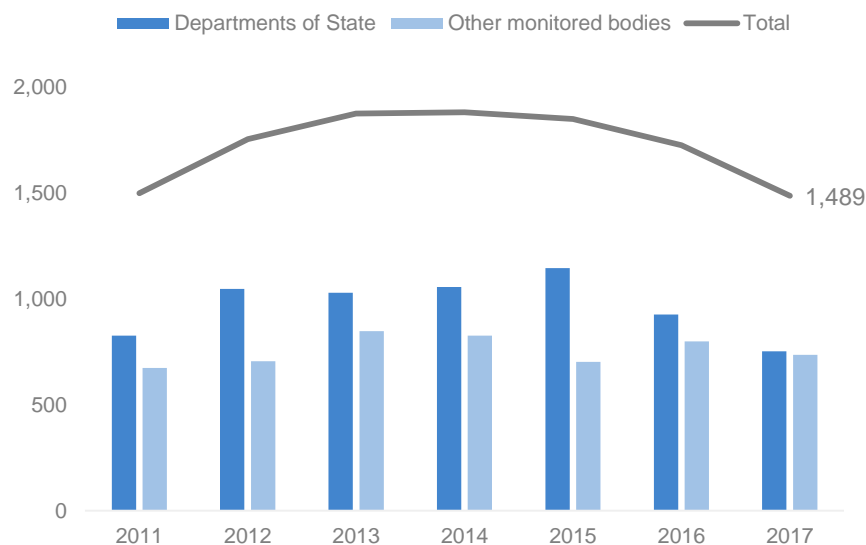
## The number of requests handled under EIRs has dropped by 14%

### Environmental Information Regulations requests (EIRs) <sup>1</sup>

Any recorded information that falls within the definition of 'environmental information' will be subject to the regulations in addition to the FOI act.

- Departments of State handled 753 requests under EIRs. A decrease of 175 (-19%) on 2016
- Over 2017, the number of requests handled under EIRs for other monitored bodies fell by 64 (-8%) since 2016.
- Since 2016, the number of FOI requests handled under EIRs has decreased by 239 (-14%).

Number of requests handled under EIRs since 2011 (see Table 2)

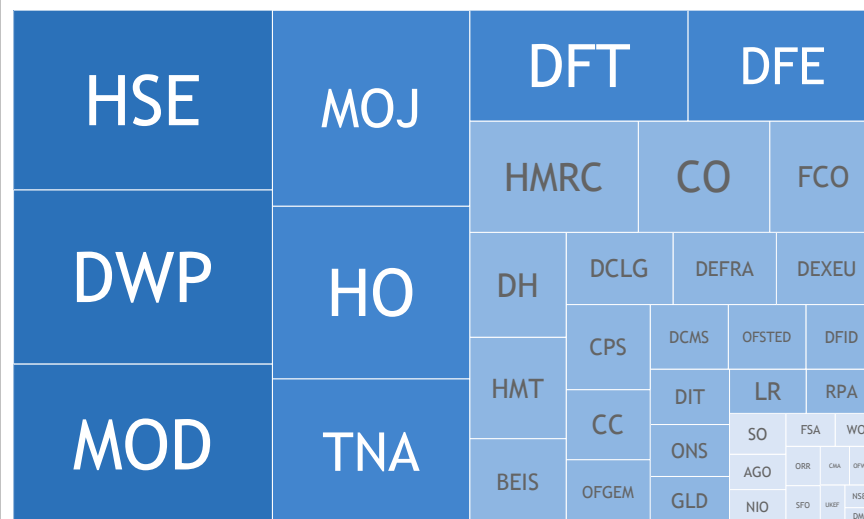


<sup>1</sup> Please see the FOI Statistics quality and methodology information document for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/foi-statistics-supporting-documents>

## Four departments received over half of FOI requests made to Departments of State

- During 2017, DWP, MOD, MOJ and HO made up the four largest Departments of State in terms of number of FOI requests for the fourth year in a row.
- Combined, they make up over half (52%) of FOI requests made to Departments of State.
- The Health and Safety Executive and The National Archives account for over half (54%) of requests to other monitored bodies.

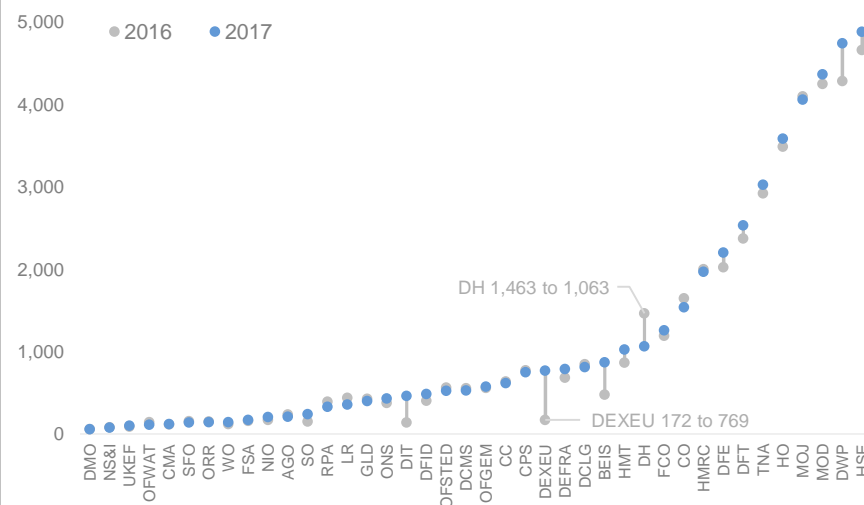
Proportion of all FOI requests across all monitored bodies in 2017 (see Table 2)



## The number of requests received decreased for 18 bodies, and increased for 22

- The proportion of requests accounted for by each monitored body has remained fairly stable over time.
- The largest decrease in requests amongst all monitored bodies since 2016 occurred at the Department of Health (-400).
- The Department for Exiting the European Union saw the largest increase on 2016 (+597). However, it should be noted that the department was created in July 2016 and has only been reporting figures from this point in time.

Number of FOI requests across all monitored bodies in 2017 and 2016 (see Table 2 and dataset)





# Timeliness

- 92% of FOI requests were responded to in time
- More than half of monitored bodies responded to 95% or more of requests in time
- Across all monitored bodies the percentage of requests responded to in time ranged from 73% to 100%

# 92% of requests were responded to in time, up from 91% in 2016

## Timeliness

The FOI Act requires public bodies to respond to requests for information in a timely manner.

'In time' responses are those processed within the statutory deadline (20 working days) or subject to a permitted deadline extension, including:

- Additional time for public interest tests under the FOI act.
- Extensions under the Environmental Information Regulations for complex requests.
- 10 additional working days for archival records from The National Archives.

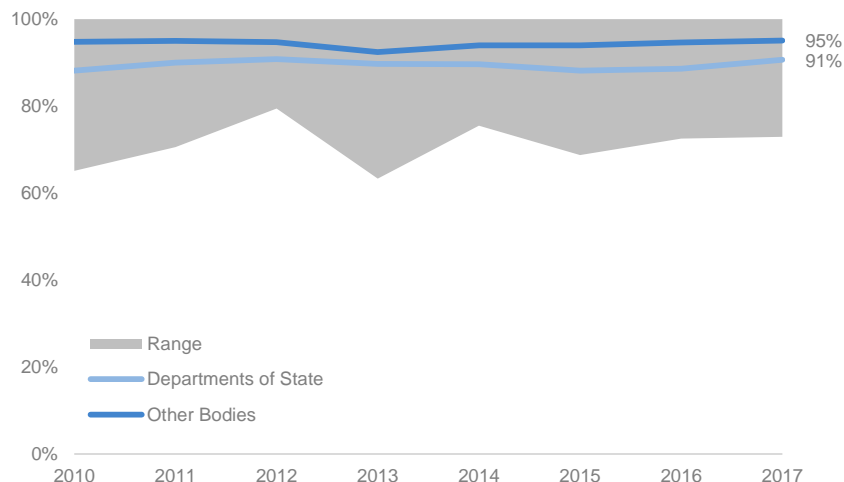
Across all monitored bodies, 92% of requests were responded to in time, up from 91% in 2016.

- Across all Departments of State 91% of requests were responded to in time, up from 89% in 2016.
- Across all other monitored bodies 95% of requests were responded to in time, unchanged on 2016.
- Across all monitored bodies the percentage of requests responded to in time ranged from 73% to 100%.
- Twenty one monitored bodies responded to 95% or more of requests in time, up from 20 bodies in 2016.
- Some monitored bodies showed large changes in timeliness between 2016 and 2017 (see next page).

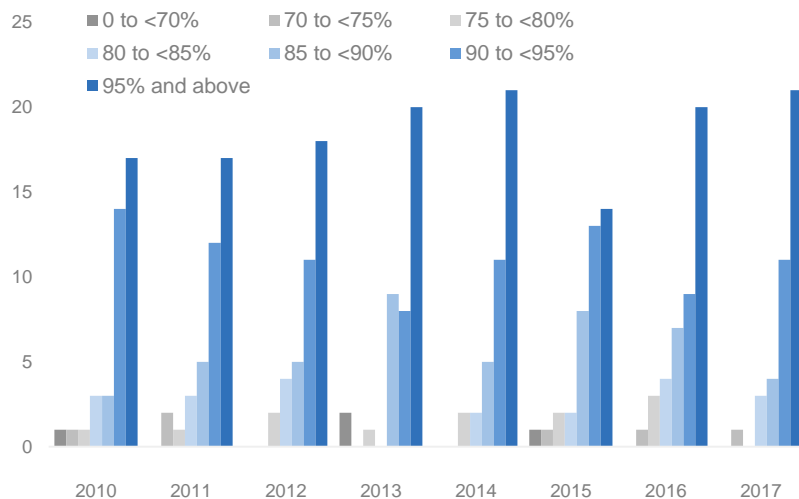
## Statistical Note

Where monitored bodies only receive a small number of requests they can demonstrate higher variability in their statistics.

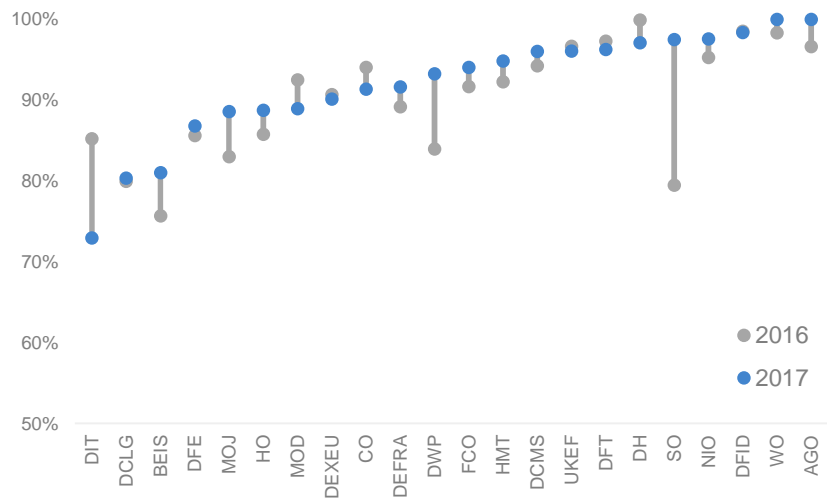
Percentage of responses to FOI requests in time across all monitored bodies since 2010 (see Table 5 and dataset)



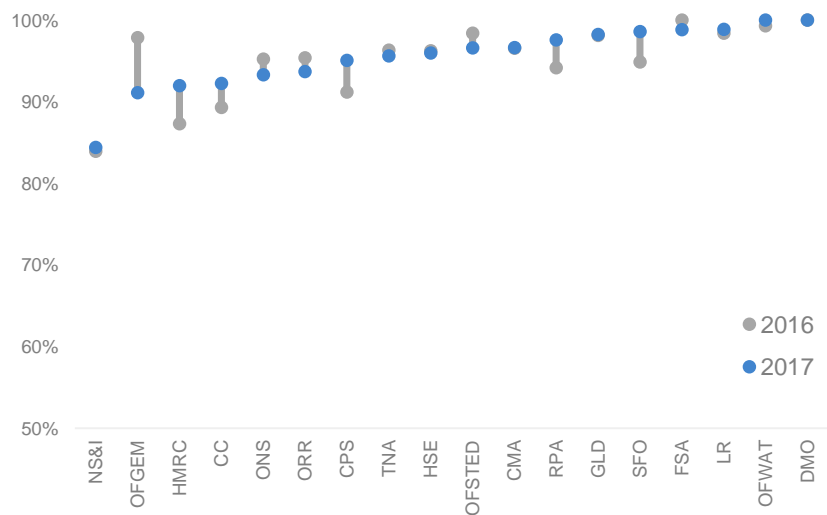
Number of monitored bodies by their percentage of responses to requests in time since 2010 (see Table 5 and dataset)



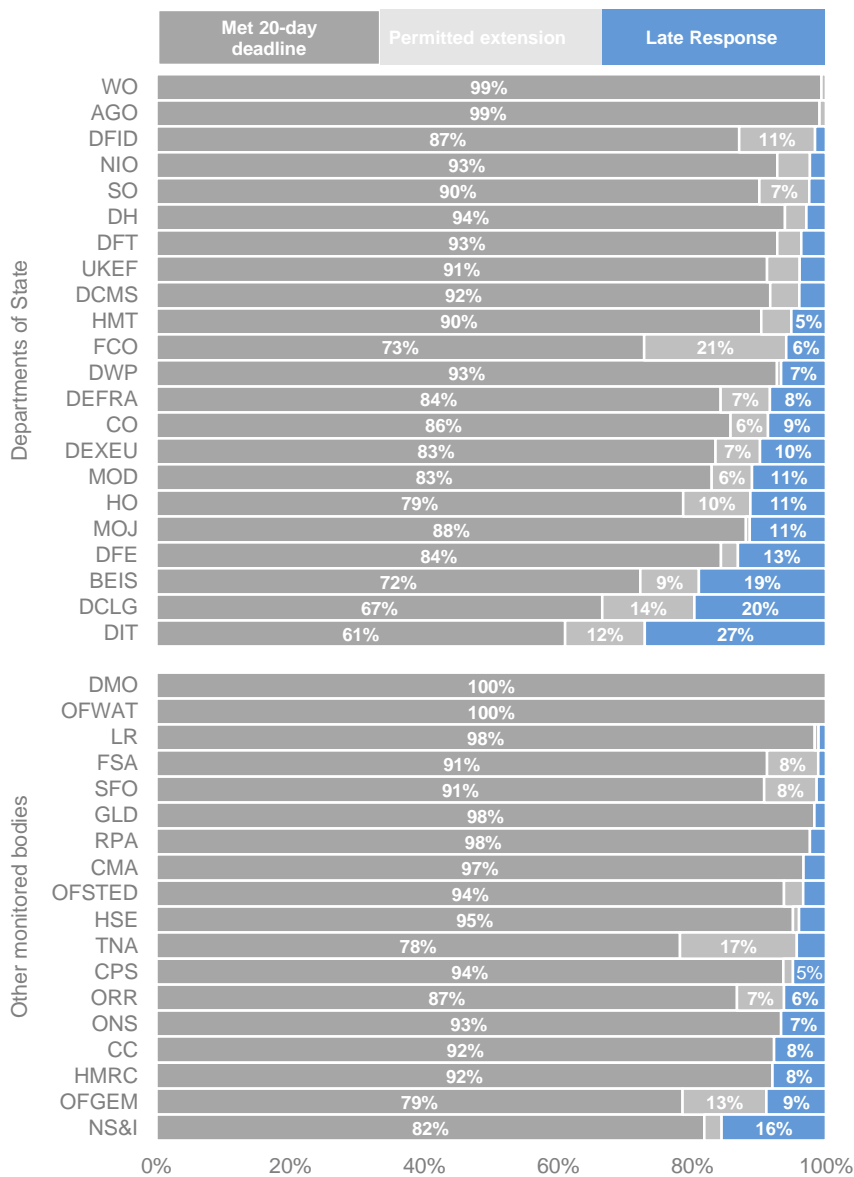
Departments of State: Percentage of requests responded to in time by department in 2016 and 2017 (see Table 4 and dataset)



Other monitored bodies: Percentage of requests responded to in time by other monitored bodies in 2016 and 2017 (see Table 4 and dataset)



Timeliness of response to FOI requests in 2017 (see Table 4)







# Outcomes of FOI requests

- 73% of the 46,681 requests received in 2017 were resolvable
- 46% of resolvable requests were granted in full
- There was wide variation in the outcome of FOI requests across monitored bodies

# Almost three quarters of the 46,681 requests received in 2017 were resolvable, of which 46% were granted in full

46,681 requests were received in 2017. Of these:

## 34,137 (73%) of requests were resolvable.

Resolvable requests are those where it was possible to give a substantive decision on whether to release the requested information.

Of these:

- 15,657 were granted in full.
- 17,309 were withheld in full or in part, where:
  - 272 were vexatious, as defined in Section 14 of the Act.
  - 135 were repeated, as defined in Section 14 of the Act.
  - 5,090 had a cost of response which exceeded the statutory limit as defined in Section 12 of the Act.
  - 11,812 involved information subject to one of the exemptions and exceptions listed under Sections 22-44.
- 1,171 were not yet processed.

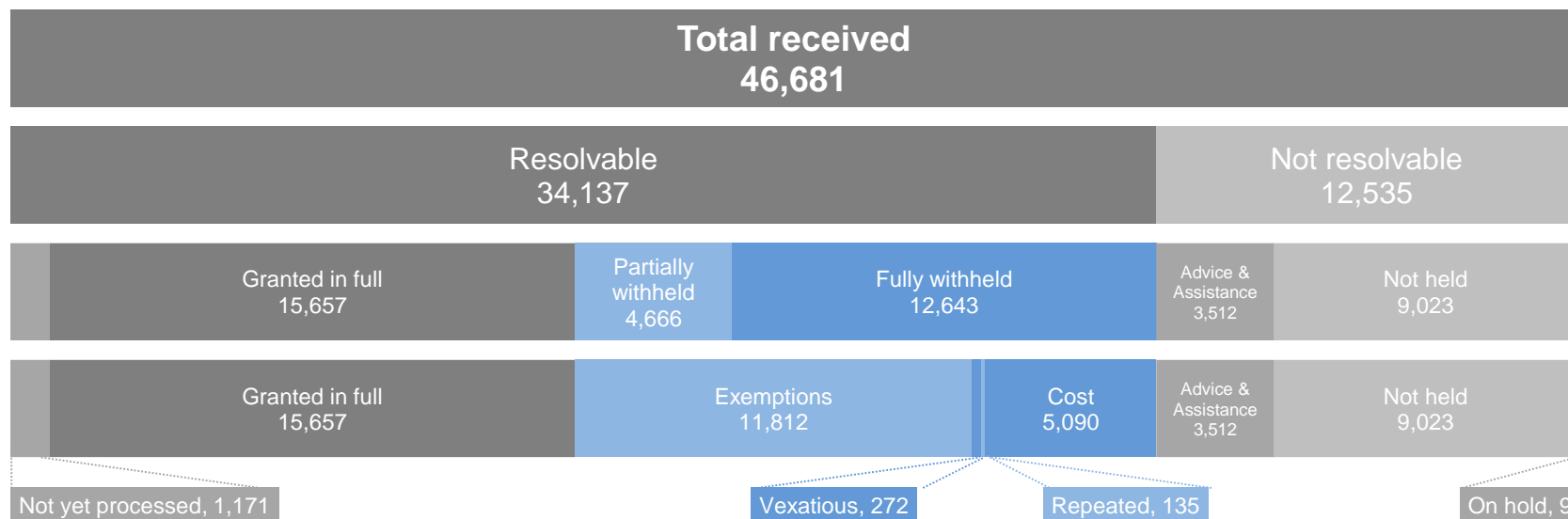
## 12,535 (27%) of requests were not resolvable.

Of these:

- 3,512 requests required further clarification prior to responding, and monitored bodies provided “advice and assistance” on how to reformulate the request.
- 9,023 involved information not held by the responding body.

9 (0.02%) were on hold at the time of monitoring.

Outcomes of FOI requests received in 2017 (see Tables 2, 7, and dataset)



# There is wide variation in the outcome of FOI requests across monitored bodies

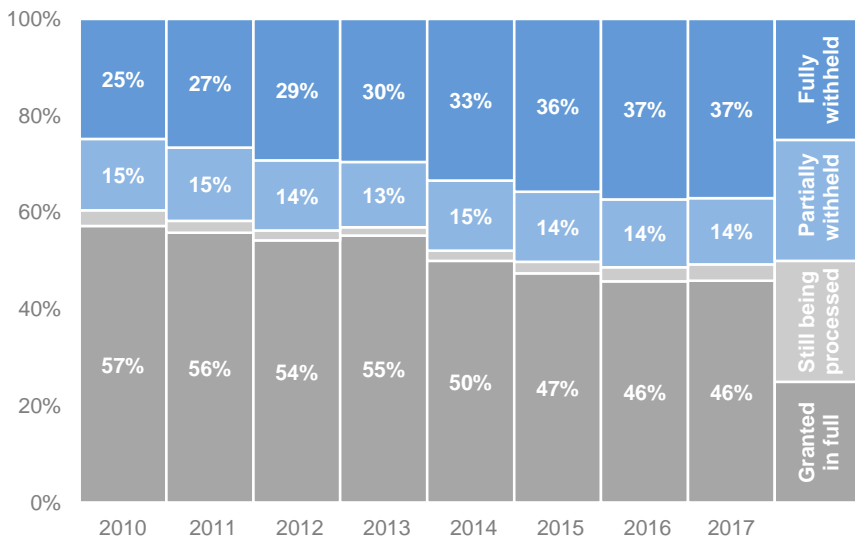
Of resolvable requests:

- 46% were granted in full, unchanged since 2016.
- 14% were partially withheld, unchanged since 2016.
- 37% were fully withheld, unchanged since 2016.

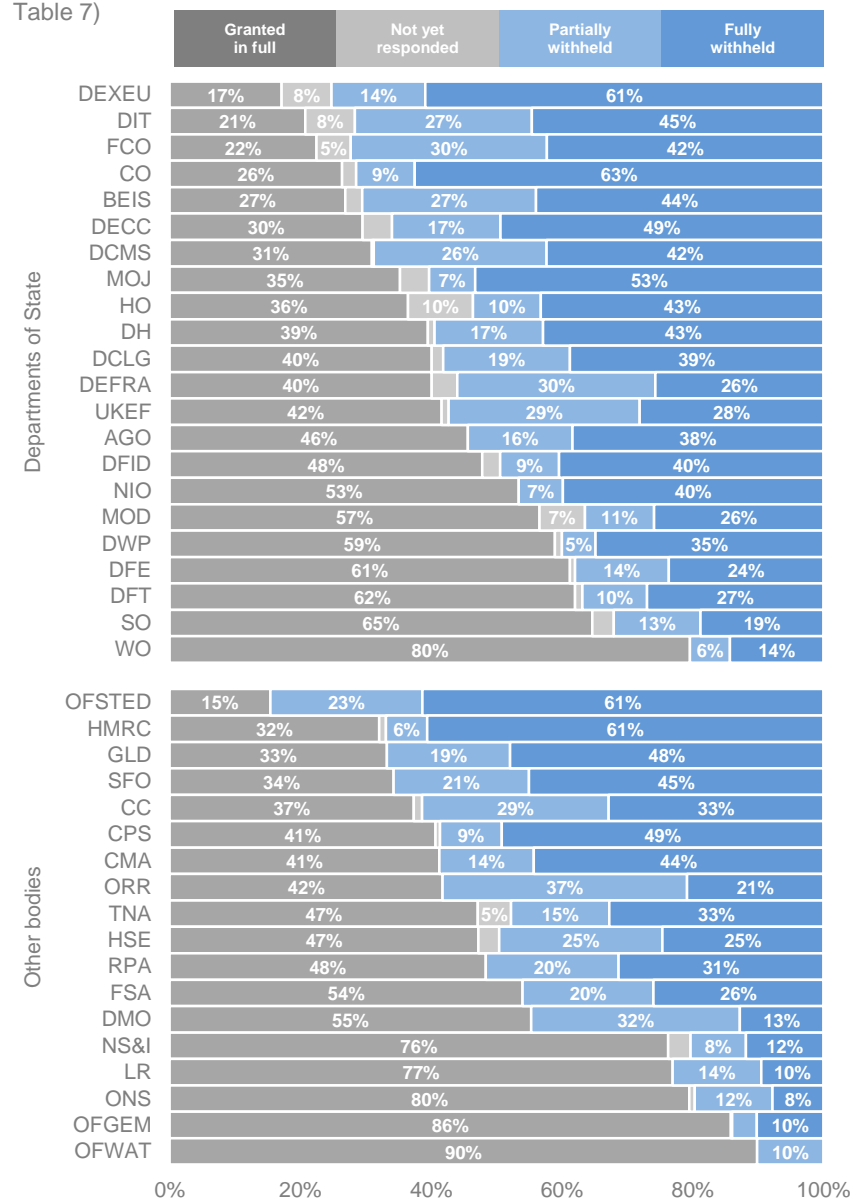
These outcomes varied across monitored bodies:

- Requests were granted in full 75% or more of the time at six bodies.
- Four monitored bodies granted 25% or fewer requests in full.

Outcomes of FOI requests as a percentage of resolvable requests since 2010 (see Table 7 and dataset)



Outcomes of FOI requests as a percentage of resolvable requests in 2017 (see Table 7)





# Use of exemptions

- Section 40 (personal information) was cited in 47% of exemptions
- 2,227 requests were exempted under Section 21

## Section 40 (personal information) was cited in 47% of exemptions

### Exemptions

Under the FOI Act, public bodies can only refuse to provide requested information that they hold if the information falls under one of the specific exemptions within the Act.

Of the 17,309 requests withheld in full or in part in 2017, 11,812 cited exemptions relating to the nature of the requested information as a cause for withholding the information, as listed under Sections 22-44 of the FOI act.

- Section 40 (covering personal information) was by far the most commonly cited exemption as in previous years, listed in 47% of exemptions.
- Section 31 (covering law enforcement) was cited in 11% of exemptions.
- Overall, no other exemption was cited in more than 10% of exemptions.

Use of exemptions differed across monitored bodies, reflecting the nature of the requests received (see the next page for a graph of the most frequently cited exemption for each body):

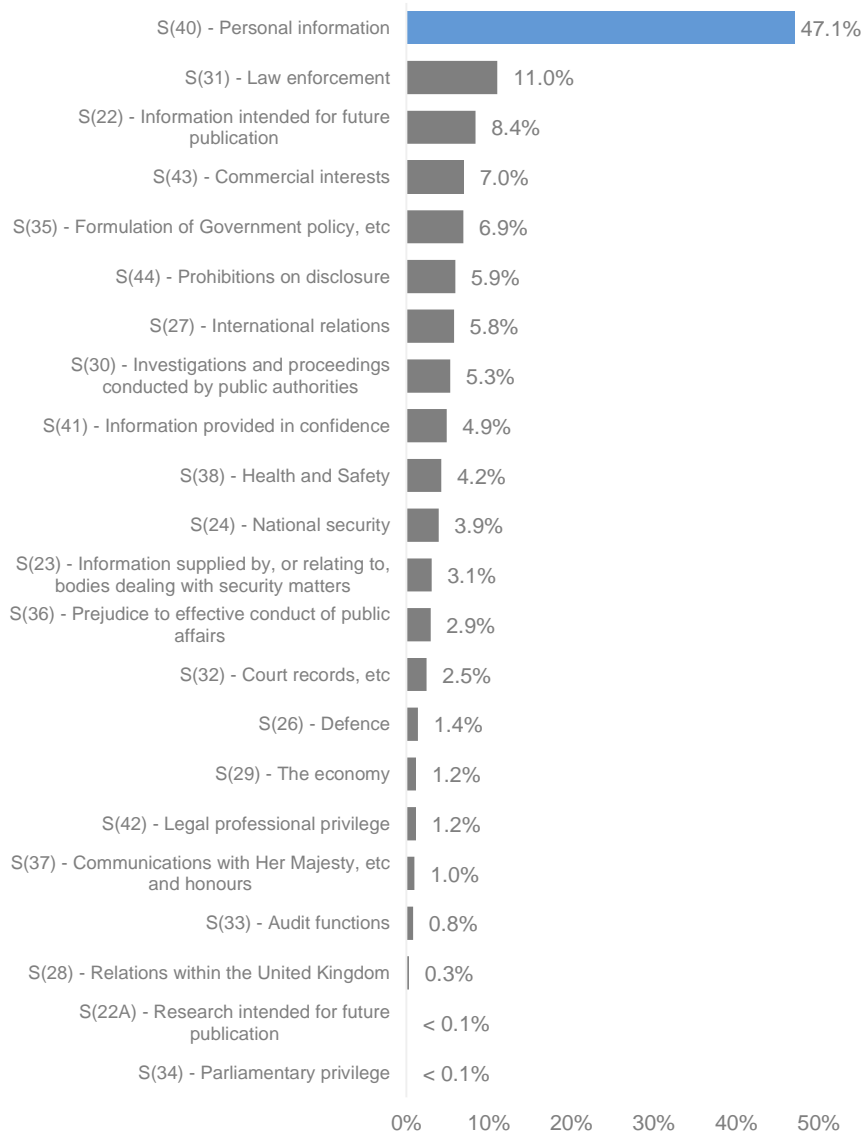
- Section 40 was the most commonly used exemption for 11 Departments of State and 11 other monitored bodies, including those with the largest volume of requests.
- Four Departments of State most frequently cited Section 35, covering formulation of government policy.
- Four other monitored bodies most frequently cited Section 44, covering prohibitions on disclosure.

### Statistical Note

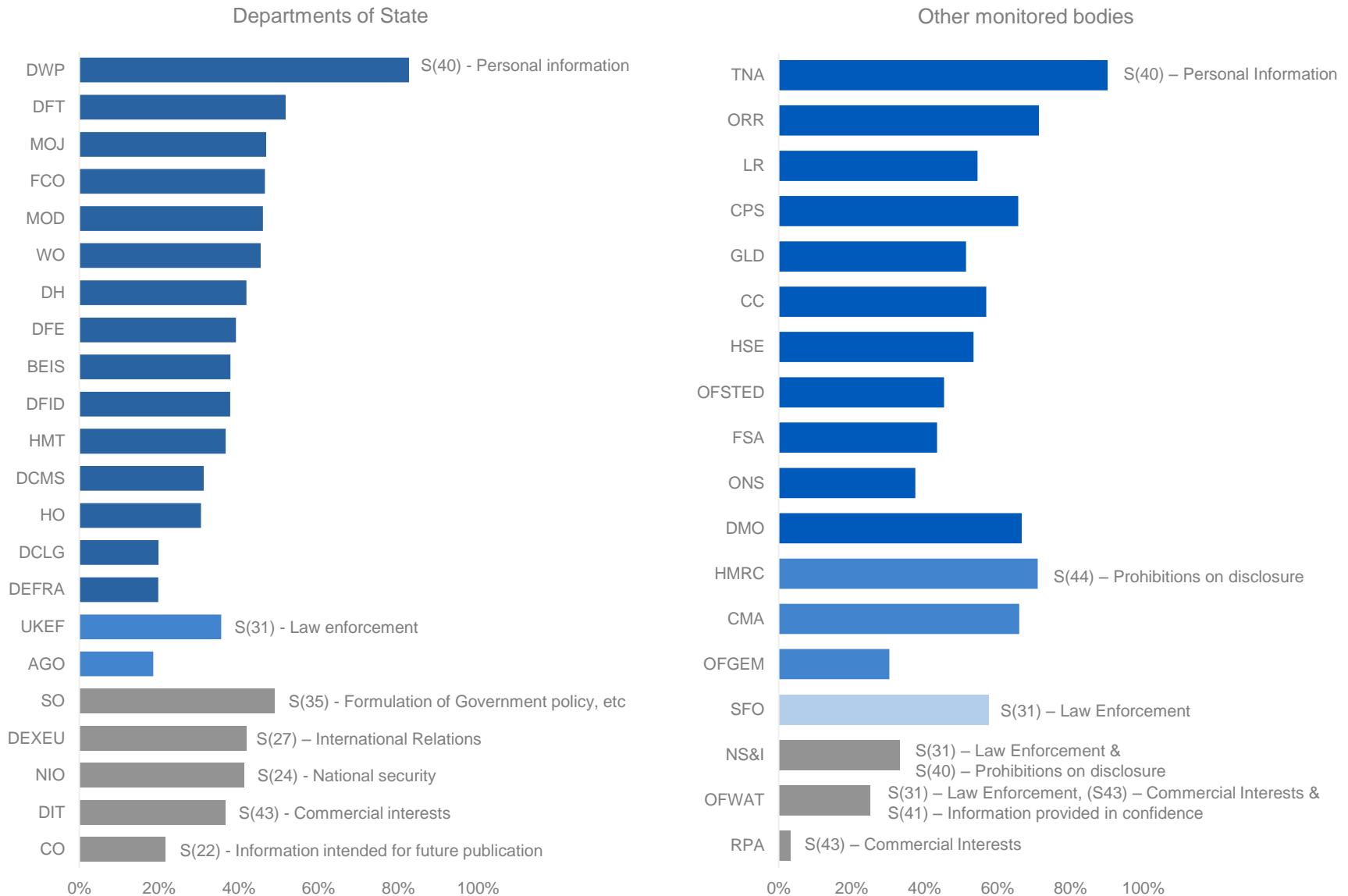
Percentages for exemptions may sum to more than 100 as each request may cite multiple exemptions.

<sup>1</sup> Note that exceptions under EIRs are not included here

Use of exemptions<sup>1</sup> in 2017, as a percentage of exempted requests (see dataset)



Most commonly used exemption<sup>1</sup> in 2017, as a percentage of exempted requests (see dataset)



<sup>1</sup> Note that exceptions under EIRs are not included here

# 2,227 requests were exempted under Section 21

## Section 21

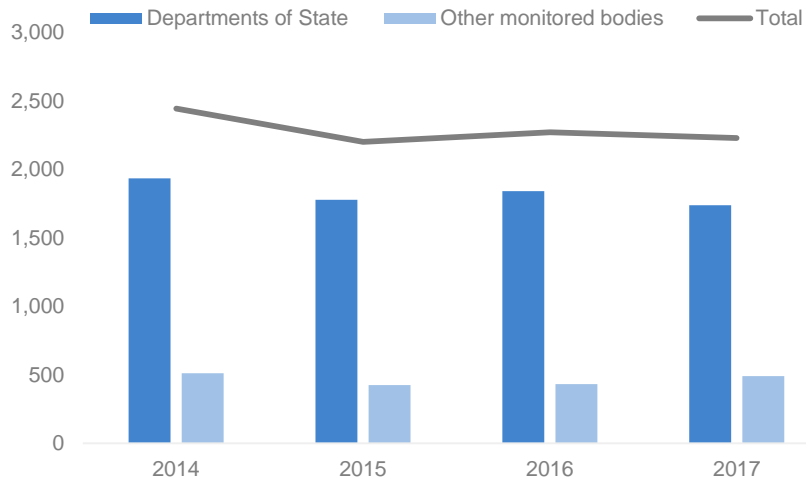
A Section 21 exemption can be used under the FOI Act when information is reasonably available by other means. Requests where a Section 21 exemption was the sole exemption used are reported separately because the FOI Act is not meant to act as a means to access data in the public domain.

- Across all monitored bodies 2,227 requests subject to a Section 21 exemption were reported.
- The number of reported Section 21 exemptions has remained fairly stable since 2014, when it was first included in the data collection.

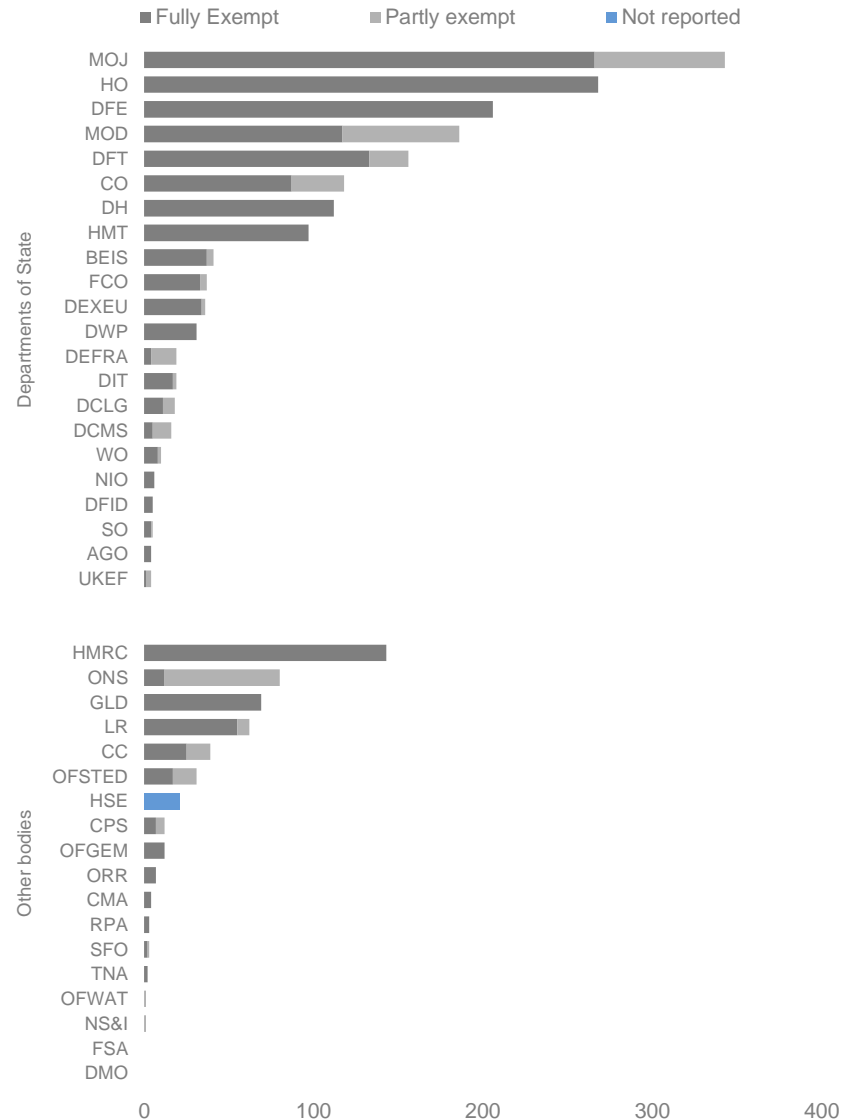
## Statistical Note

Requests exempted under Section 21 are not counted in any other figures.

Number of requests subject to a Section 21 exemption in 2014-2017 (see Table 12 and dataset)



Number of requests subject to a Section 21 exemption in 2017 (see Table 12)





# Internal reviews and ICO appeals

- An internal review was initiated in 2,861 (17%) of the 17,309 requests where information was initially withheld in 2017
- 377 FOIs received in 2017 had been appealed at the time of monitoring.



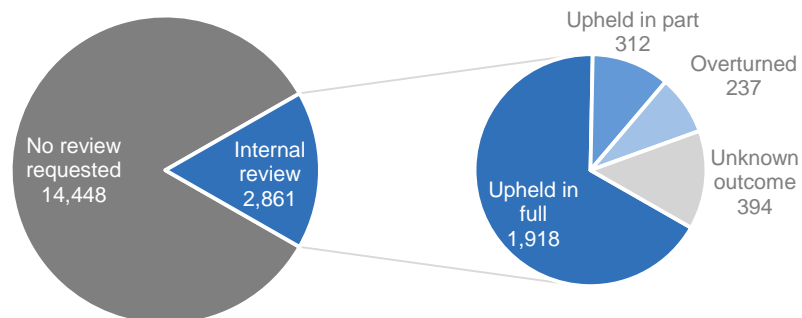
## One in six withheld requests were internally reviewed

### Internal reviews

Applicants are able to ask a public authority for an Internal Review if they are not content with the public authority's initial decision on whether or not to release requested information, if their request was not dealt with within 20 working days or if they felt a fee was wrongly charged.

- An internal review was initiated in 2,861 (17%) of the 17,309 requests where information was initially withheld in 2017.
- Of these, the decision was overturned fully or partially in 549 cases (22% of those with a known outcome).
- Of reviews with a known outcome, 55% were completed within 20 days.
- Of the 204 internal reviews with an unknown outcome at the time of end of year monitoring in 2016, 59 were still incomplete at the time of end of year monitoring in 2017 (see Table 15).

Internal reviews of FOI requests where information was initially withheld in 2017 (see Table 13)



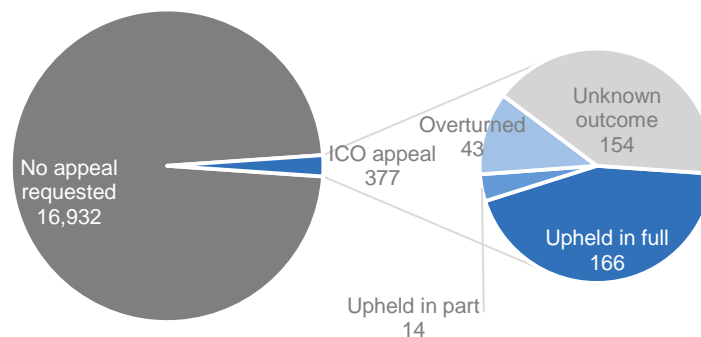
## There were 377 appeals to the ICO in 2017

### Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) appeals

If a requester has applied for an Internal Review of a public authority's response to an FOI request, but remains dissatisfied with the outcome, he or she is able to make a free formal appeal to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

- In total there were 377 appeals to the ICO in 2017.
- Of the 223 ICO appeals with a known outcome at the time of monitoring, 57 (26%) overturned the initial handling of the request either fully or in part.
- For further details, and how to make an appeal: [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)
- See the Annual Tribunal statistics: [www.justice.gov.uk/statistics/tribunals/annual-stats](http://www.justice.gov.uk/statistics/tribunals/annual-stats)

ICO appeals of FOI requests where information was initially withheld in 2017 (see Table 11)



# Scope of monitoring

## Bodies included in centrally monitored statistics

Key	
Departments of State (N = 22)	Bodies included in monitoring by parent department (N=22)
Other monitored bodies (N=8)	Bodies monitored separately from parent department (N=10)
	Unmonitored bodies* (N=19)

Attorney General's Office (AGO)	Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)
	Government Legal Department (GLD)
	Serious Fraud Office (SFO)
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)	Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate
	National Measurement and Regulation Office
	Oil and Gas Authority
	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service
	Companies House
	Insolvency Service
	Met Office
	UK Intellectual Property Office
	UK Space Agency
	Cabinet Office (CO)
Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)	Planning Inspectorate
	Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre
Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)	Royal Parks

Department for Education (DFE)	Education Funding Agency
	National College for Teaching and Leadership
	Standards and Testing Agency
	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED)
	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
	Skills Funding Agency
Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT)
	Rural Payments Agency (RPA)
	Animal and Plant Health Agency
	Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs
	Veterinary Medicines Directorate
Department for Exiting the European Union (DEXEU)	
Department for International Development (DFID)	
Department for International Trade (DIT)	
Department for Transport (DFT)	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency
	Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency
	Maritime and Coastguard Agency
	Vehicle Certification Agency
	Office of Rail and Road (ORR)
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
Department of Health (DH)	Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency
	Public Health England
	FCO Services
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)	Wilton Park Executive

HM Treasury (HMT)	Office for Budget Responsibility
	Debt Management Office (DMO)
	National Savings and Investments (NS&I)
	Government Internal Audit Agency
Home Office (HO)	
Ministry of Defence (MOD)	Defence Electronics and Components Agency
	Defence Equipment and Support
	Defence Science and Technology Laboratory
	UK Hydrographic Office
Ministry of Justice (MOJ)	HM Courts and Tribunals Service
	Legal Aid Agency
	National Offender Management Service
	The Office of the Public Guardian
	Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority
Northern Ireland Office (NIO)	
UK Export Finance (UKEF)	
Scotland Office (SO)	
Wales Office (WO)	
Charity Commission (CC)	Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)
Food Standards Agency (FSA)	The National Archives (TNA)
HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC)	Valuation Office
Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM)	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Land Registry (LR)	

\* Only unmonitored civil service bodies that belong to a monitored parent department are included in the unmonitored bodies category.

# Notes

See the [quality and methodology information document](#) for further detail

## Defining the scope of FOI monitoring

Section 1 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000<sup>1</sup> states that (subject to certain conditions):

‘Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled—

- (a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and
- (b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him’

Regulation 5 of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004<sup>2</sup> states that (subject to certain conditions):

‘A public authority that holds environmental information shall make it available on request.’

Following their introduction on 1 April 2005, the above provisions apply to all relevant requests for information made to public authorities, no matter how routine and straightforward they may be.

Government departments supply large amounts of information, both on request and proactively, as an established and routine part of their business. This includes information released in the form of leaflets, correspondence exchanges, reports and other published material, and through websites and departmental FOI Publication Schemes. All information released on request is covered by the Freedom of Information Act, however it would be both uninformative and fundamentally unfeasible to count all such activity in departmental FOI monitoring returns.

The statistics in this bulletin therefore relate to all ‘non-routine’ information requests that government departments have received, and those routine information requests that are handled under Section 21. Essentially, this means that departments’ statistics should only count those requests where:

1. It was necessary to take a considered view on how to handle the request under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act, and

2. Departmental Freedom of Information officer(s) were informed of the request and logged it in their case management systems.

More information can be found in our [quality and methodology information document](#):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/foi-statistics-supporting-documents>

## Defining a request

The full definition of an ‘information request’ for the purposes of inclusion in the Cabinet Office’s monitoring returns is shown below:

‘[An information request for monitoring purposes is one ...]

1. Which meets the criteria in section 8 of the Freedom of Information Act and if the request falls under the Environmental Information Regulations it includes requests made in any form or context, including oral requests; and
2. Which is a request for information that is not already reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means; and
  - (i) Which results in the release of one or more documents (in any media) or inclusion of extracts of documents in the information released; or
  - (ii) Results in information being withheld under an exemption or exception from the right of access (either the Freedom of Information Act or the Environmental Information Regulations); or
  - (iii) The request is not processed because the department estimates the cost of complying would exceed the appropriate limit in accordance with section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act; or
  - (iv) The request is not processed because the department is relying on the provisions of section 14 of the Freedom of Information Act; or
  - (v) Where a search is made for information sought in the request and it is found that none is held.’

<sup>1</sup> Full text of the FOI Act: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents)

<sup>2</sup> Full text of the EIR regulations: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/3391/made>

# Notes (continued)

See the quality and methodology information document for further detail

## Consistency of the statistics

The definition shown above has been widely disseminated to FOI officers in government. It is necessary to apply a definition of this sort to set a clear boundary to the coverage of our monitoring, and thereby obtain meaningful information from the process.

However there is considerable variation in the way these bodies are structured and managed, and in the mechanisms that they have put in place to meet their obligations under the FOI Act. For example, some bodies operate a centralised Freedom of Information secretariat that co-ordinates responses to all information requests received. Others give a greater degree of autonomy to individual work areas in the handling of information requests.

Because of these differences, there could be a degree of inconsistency in the way in which bodies have interpreted and applied the definition of an 'information request' for monitoring purposes. However, the statistics effectively count those requests which have been dealt with by each monitored body formally under the FOI Act. As such, the statistics report on how many such requests for information each monitored body has received and how they have implemented the Act's requirements in providing responses. Direct comparisons between the statistics for different monitored bodies can therefore be made on this basis.

In summary:

- (i) These statistics cover both 'non-routine' information requests, and 'routine' information requests which are answered under a Section 21 exemption. This does not give a representative picture of all requests for information received in government.
- (ii) There is likely to be a degree of inconsistency between monitored bodies' interpretations of the definition of an 'information request' for monitoring purposes. This should be borne in mind when using these statistics.

## Coverage

The statistics in this bulletin have been derived from monitoring returns completed by Freedom of Information officers in government departments during February-March 2018.

The formal monitoring work covers a total of 40 central government bodies as of 2017, including major Departments of State. The monitored bodies which are not Departments of State nonetheless have significant policy-making, regulatory or information-handling functions.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 applies in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and to UK public authorities operating in Scotland. The Northern Ireland Office, Scotland Office and the Wales Office are included in these statistics. However, data is not collected from the Welsh Government, or from the bodies that make up the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 applies to Scottish public bodies. This legislation covers public bodies over which the Scottish Parliament has devolved jurisdiction, and as such lies outside the scope of the monitoring work on which this bulletin is based. The Scotland Office has been included here because although it deals with matters relating to Scotland it is based in England and hence falls under the scope of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 rather than the corresponding Scottish legislation. In addition, Scottish parts of UK-wide bodies which are ordinarily under the remit of the Scottish Parliament act (such as the Forestry Commission) are subject to the UK-wide 2000 act rather than Scottish Government's 2002 Act. A full list of the bodies covered by the monitoring statistics in 2017 can be found on page 18.

Statistics on FOI requests made to the Scottish Government can be found here: <http://www.gov.scot/About/Information/FOI/Reporting>. Note that there are several differences in the UK and Scottish FOI Acts which mean that the figures are not directly comparable.

## Users and uses of the statistics

The main users of these statistics are departmental FOI teams responsible for coordinating responses and requests, Ministers and officials with responsibility for developing information access policy, and other non-governmental bodies and individuals with an interest in the accessibility of government information. The statistics are used to monitor the implementation of the FOI Act by central government, both as a whole and by each individual body included in the figures.