

SOUTH NORFOLK RESPONSE (VIA E-MAIL)

Good Afternoon,

I email you in order to respond to the Government's consultation on Open Data. Whilst sharing the Government's desire to increase accountability and transparency in the public sector, we have a number of comments to make in relation to the proposals.

South Norfolk Council approaches each FOI request it receives with a view to disclose the information. The Council is already actively reviewing what data is published on its website. We have added a new section onto the Freedom of Information pages of the website, which adds links to current pages that are the subject of repeated requests, with the view to make information more accessible. We are also publishing information that is frequently requested, but that is not already available on the website. This not only increases the Council's transparency, but will also decrease the number of FOI requests received, which are increasing year on year.

This Council has seen a 43% increase in the number of requests received in the last 2 years, which is undeniably a significant increase in the workload. In addition, it should be noted that we have experienced a large increase in the number of FOI requests received from organisations. Requests received from companies and organisations rose by 33% between 2009 and 2010, with requests from all other sectors decreasing. It has been my concern for some time that FOI is being misused and taken advantage of by companies touting for business. I do not believe this was the original intention of the FOI Act, nor is it now. I would like to suggest that the Government consider the impact of this on Local Authorities. It seems to me that these requests have little to offer the transparency agenda and are instead a drain on precious Council resources that are stretched at present.

With regard to a potential increase in the time limit at which Local Authorities can refuse a request (currently 18 hours), I am strongly in favour of retaining this level. I do not consider that a higher cost limit should be introduced and think that it would be unreasonable to expect Local Authorities to comply with requests which are extremely time consuming - the equivalent of 2.5 days work to locate, retrieve and extract. However I do agree that Local Authorities should consider the ease at which information can be extracted from IT systems when they are being commissioned. New systems should enable easy access to information, particularly data sets that would be of interest and help to the public. I would also like to highlight the extent of the use of this power - in 2010 this Council only refused 4 out of 318 requests due to excess costs. This safeguards the Council against costs resulting from time consuming and lengthy requests. I should also point out that requesters have the opportunity to narrow down their request to avoid excess costs and burdening the Council.

With regard to a time limit for conducting internal reviews, I agree that this would be useful and assist the public - particularly if there is a time constraint regarding access to the information. I would also suggest that the Government should consider applying a time limit relating to how long a requester has to request an internal review - perhaps 60 days or 40 working days?

UNCLASSIFIED
UNCLASSIFIED

I hope that the comments made are helpful and provide additional points that you feel would benefit from further consideration.

UNCLASSIFIED
UNCLASSIFIED