

# Freedom of Information Statistics in Central Government for Q4 2016

This bulletin presents headline statistics for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in central government for October to December 2016, including key breakdowns by monitored body.

## Key statistics:

From October to December 2016 there were **10,892 FOI requests received** across all monitored bodies\*. This is a decrease of 147 (-1%) from the same period in 2015.

Across all monitored bodies, **89% of requests were responded to in time**, unchanged from the same period in 2015.

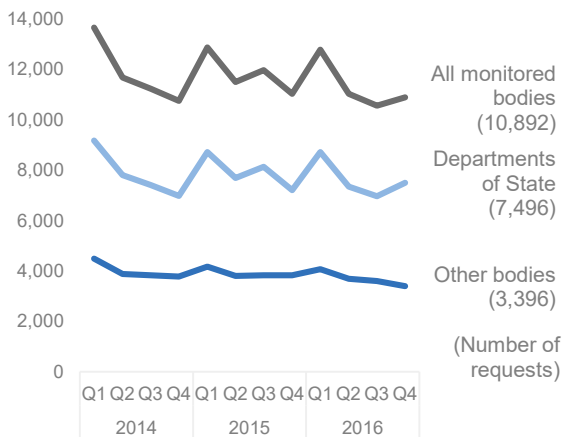
Of the 10,892 FOI requests received, 8,030 were resolvable. Of these, **44% were granted in full, and 35% were withheld in full**. This is a decrease of one percentage point for those granted in full and no change on those withheld in full on the same period in 2015. The remaining resolvable requests were not yet processed or were partially withheld.

Of the 3,892 requests withheld in full or in part, 29% were withheld due to the cost of response exceeding the limit, 2% were withheld as vexatious or repeated, and the remaining 69% fell under other exemptions.

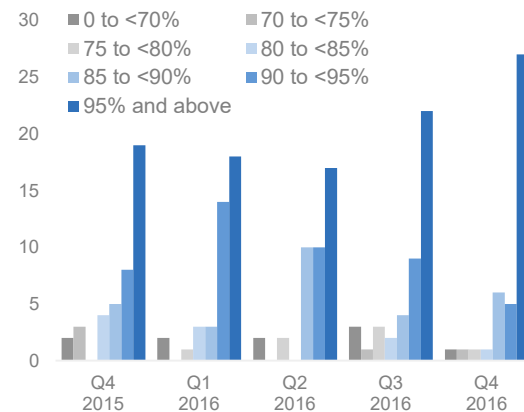


\* A full list of monitored bodies included in these statistics is provided on page 7

Volume of FOI requests by quarter since Q1 2014 (see Table 3)



Number of monitored bodies by their percentage of responses to requests in time since Q4 2015 (see Table 5)



Cabinet Office



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## Contacts

Lead Statistician: Joshua Wallace

Tel: 020 7271 6446

Email: [foistatistics@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foistatistics@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

Press enquiries: Siobhan Bruce

Tel: 020 7276 2210

Email: [Siobhan.Bruce@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:Siobhan.Bruce@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

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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 42 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 quarterly 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

## 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

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>. National Statistics status is awarded following an assessment by the UK Statistics Authority.

Freedom of Information statistics were assessed during 2016 by the UK Statistics Authority. An assessment report was published in July 2016<sup>4</sup>. The Authority judged that FOI Statistics may continue to be designated as National Statistics, subject to implementation of the requirements listed in the assessment report by March 2017.

We have published a plan<sup>5</sup> outlining specific actions we have taken and plan to take to ensure the increased trustworthiness, quality and public value of FOI statistics.

## 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/2015/12/images-codeofpracticeforofficialstatisticsjanuary2009\\_tcm97-25306.pdf](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/images-codeofpracticeforofficialstatisticsjanuary2009_tcm97-25306.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> UK Statistics Authority report:  
<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/assessment-report-328-statistics-on-freedom-of-information-implementation-in-central-government/>

<sup>5</sup> Plan of actions:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-foi-statistics>

# Volumes

See Tables 1, 2, 3

From October to December 2016 there were **10,892 FOI requests received** across all monitored bodies. This is a decrease of 147 (-1.3%) from the same period in 2015. Just over two thirds of these (7,496) were at Departments of State, with the remaining 3,396 being received by other monitored bodies.

The Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Defence, and the Home Office account for over half of requests to Departments of State; while the Health and Safety Executive and the National Archives account for over half of requests to other monitored bodies.

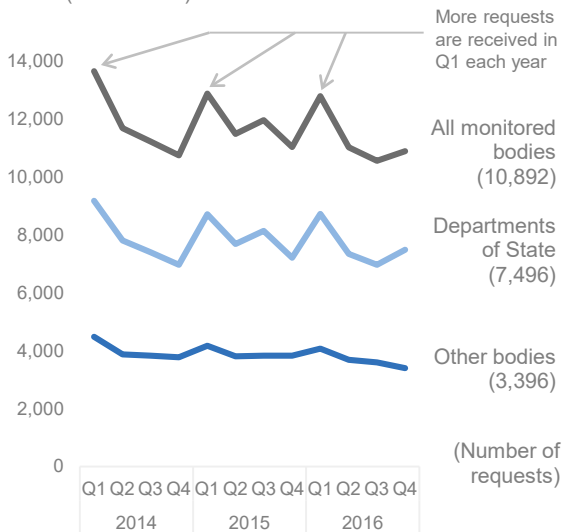
Despite fluctuations in the total volume of requests, the percentage of requests accounted for by each monitored body has remained fairly stable.

The National Archives had the largest decrease in requests (-186) amongst all monitored bodies compared to the same period in 2015. The Department for Work and Pensions had the largest increase comparing across the same period (+113).

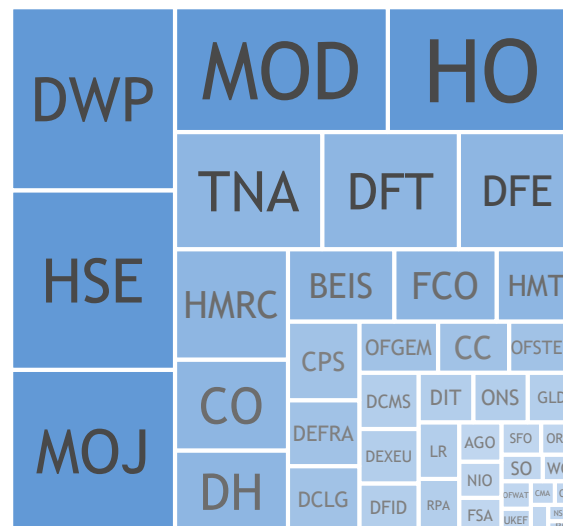
### Statistical Note

Comparisons are made to the same period in the previous year rather than the previous quarter due to consistent differences in the volume of requests per quarter each year.

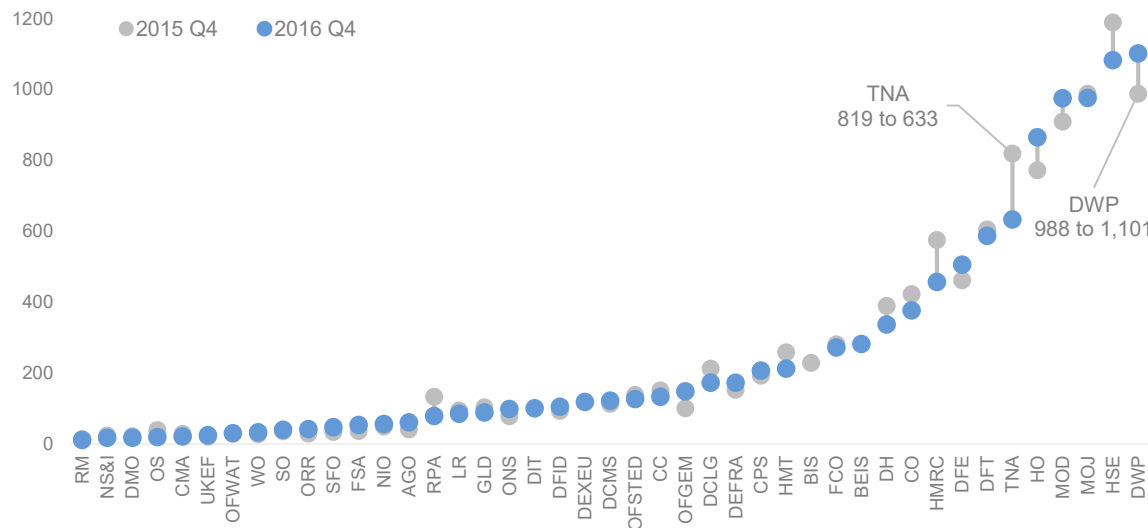
Volume of FOI requests by quarter since Q1 January 2014 (see Table 1)



Proportion of FOI requests across all monitored bodies in Q4 October to December 2016 (see Table 2)



Volume of FOI requests across all monitored bodies in Q4 September to October 2016 compared to Q4 September to October 2015 (see Table 3)



# Timeliness

See Tables 4, 5

## 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.

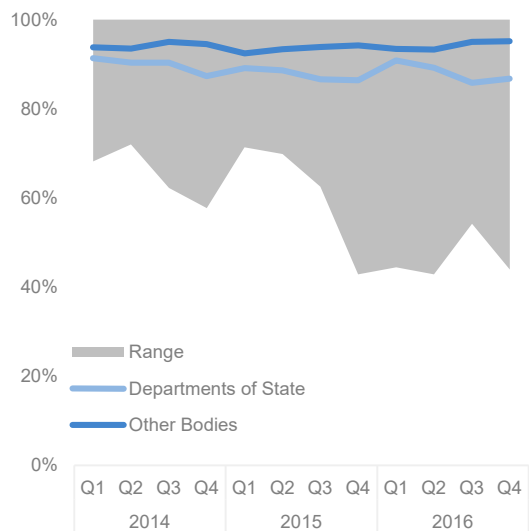
**Across all monitored bodies, 89% of requests were responded to in time, unchanged from the same period in 2015.**

- Across all Departments of State 87% of requests were responded to in time, up from 86% on the same period in 2015.
- Across all other monitored bodies 95% of requests were responded to in time, an increase from 94% in the same period in 2015

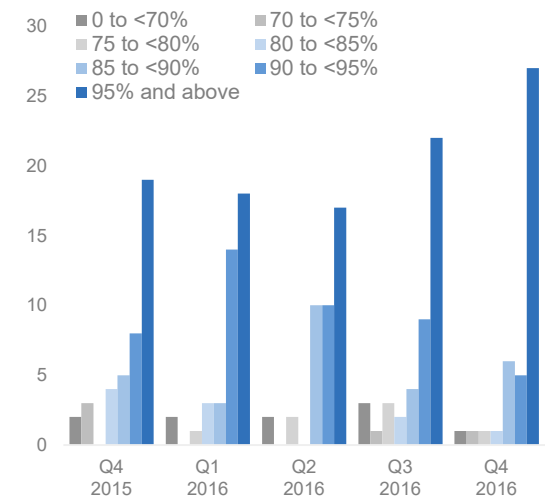
### Statistical Note

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

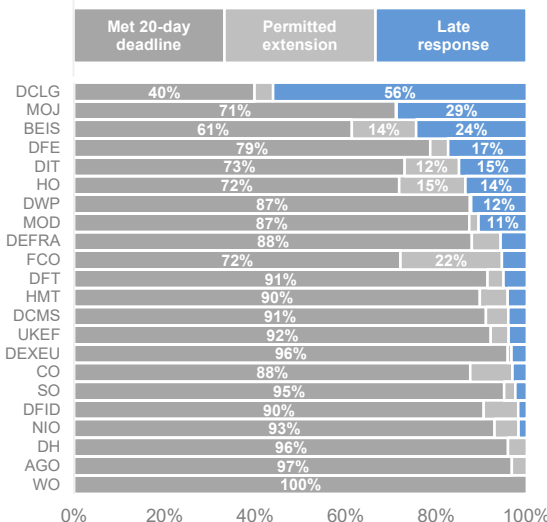
Percentage of responses to FOI requests in time across all monitored bodies since Q1 2014 (see Table 5)



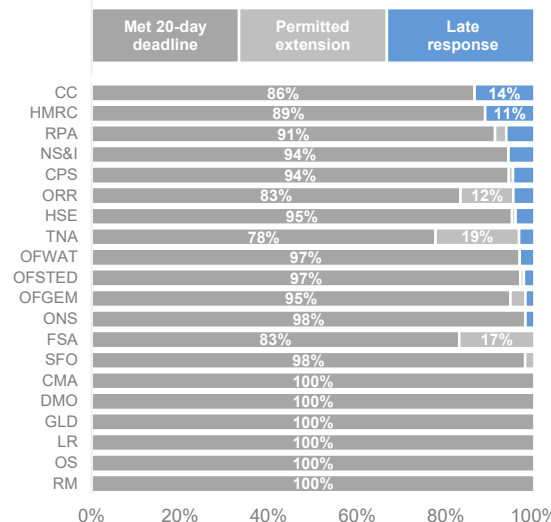
Number of monitored bodies by their percentage of responses to requests in time since Q4 2015 (see Table 5)



Departments of State: Timeliness of response to FOI requests (see Table 4)



Other monitored bodies: Timeliness of response to FOI requests (see Table 4)



# Outcomes

See Tables 6, 8, and dataset

10,892 “non-routine”\* requests were received in October to December 2016. Of these:

## 8,030 (74%) of these were resolvable.

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

Of these:

- 3,536 were granted in full.
- 3,892 were withheld in full or in part, where:
  - 46 were vexatious, as defined in Section 14 of the Act.
  - 28 were repeated, as defined in Section 14 of the Act.
  - 1,139 had a cost of response which exceeded the limit as defined in Section 12 of the Act.
  - 2,679 involved information subject to one of the exemptions and exceptions listed under Sections 22-44.
- 602 were not yet processed.

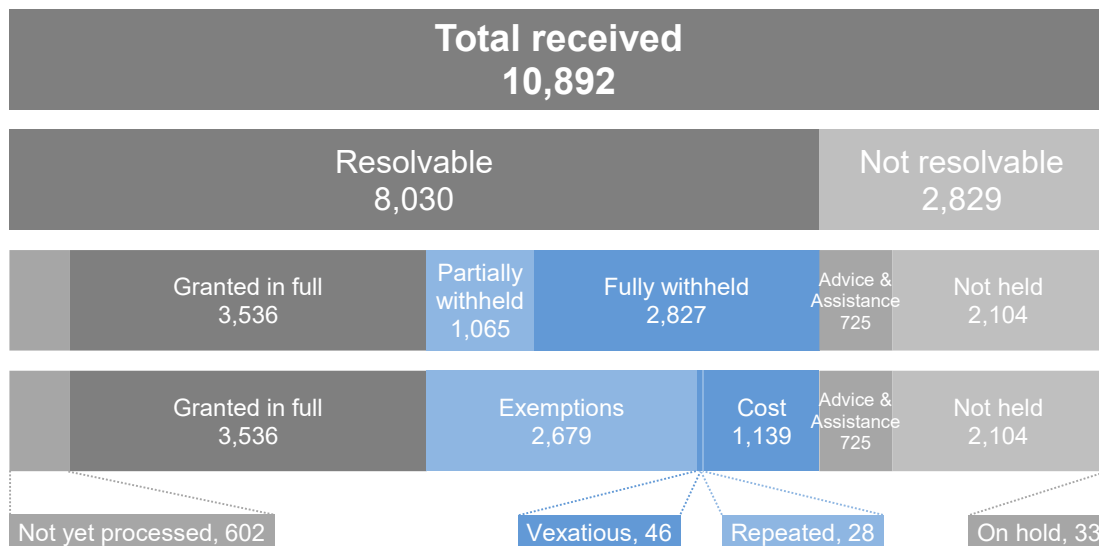
## 2,829 (26%) of requests were not resolvable.

Of these:

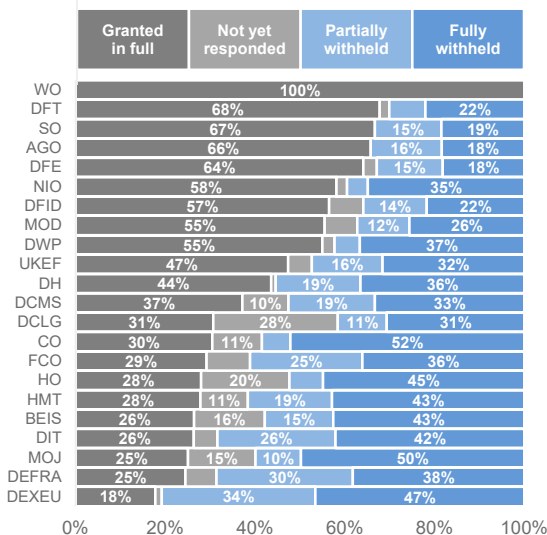
- 725 requests required further clarification prior to responding, and monitored bodies provided “advice and assistance” on how to reformulate the request.
- 2,104 involved information not held by the responding body.

## 33 (0.3%) were on hold at the time of monitoring.

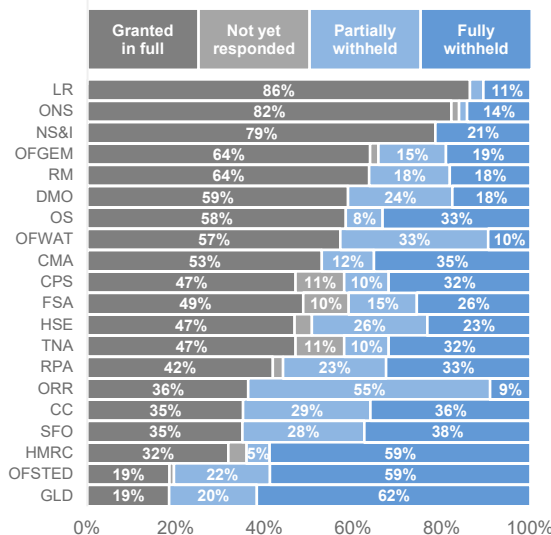
Outcomes of FOI requests received in Q4 October to December 2016 (see Tables 2, 6, and dataset)



Departments of State: Outcomes of FOI requests as a percentage of resolvable requests (see Table 6)



Other monitored bodies: Outcomes of FOI requests as a percentage of resolvable requests (see Table 6)



\* See definition on page 8

# Exemptions

See Table 11 and dataset

## 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 3,892 requests withheld in full or in part, **29% were withheld due to the cost of response** exceeding the statutory limit, 2% as vexatious or repeated, and the remaining 69% concerned exempt information. Of these, **Section 40 (covering personal information) was by far the most commonly cited**, as in previous quarters.

## Section 21

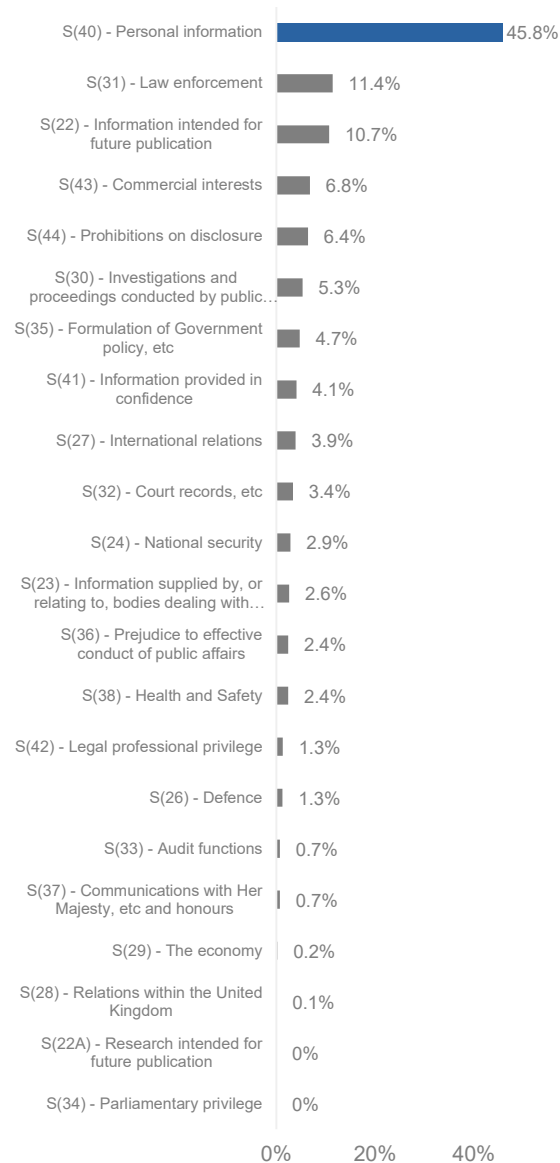
A Section 21 exemption can be used under the FOI Act when information is reasonably available by other means. Requests where a Section 21 exemption was the sole exemption used are reported separately because the FOI Act is not meant to act as a means to access data in the public domain.

Across all monitored bodies 584 requests subject to a Section 21 exemption were reported.

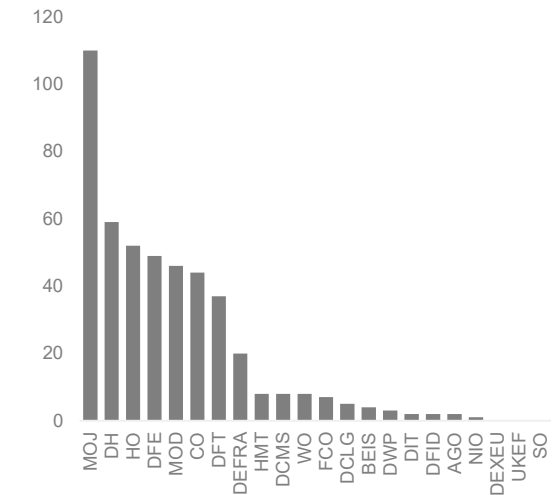
## Statistical Notes

Percentages for exemptions may sum to more than 100 as each request may cite multiple exemptions. Requests exempted under Section 21 are not counted in any other figures.

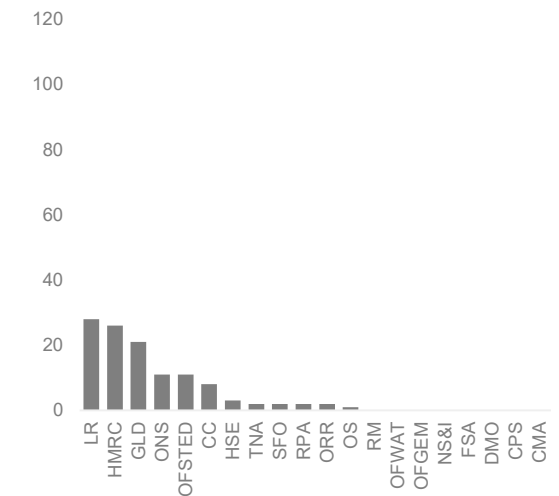
Use of exemptions<sup>1</sup> in Q4 October to December 2016, as a percentage of all exempted requests (see dataset)



Departments of State: Volume of requests subject to a Section 21 exemption in Q4 October to December 2016 (see Table 11)



Other monitored bodies: Volume of requests subject to a Section 21 exemption in Q4 October to December 2016 (see Table 11)



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

# Scope of monitoring

Bodies included in centrally monitored statistics in Q4 October to December 2016

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=12)
	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
	Land Registry (LR)
	Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service
	Companies House
	Insolvency Service
	Met Office
Cabinet Office (CO)	UK Intellectual Property Office
	UK Space Agency
Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)	Crown Commercial Service
Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)	Planning Inspectorate
	Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre
	National Archives (TNA)
	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
Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)	Skills Funding Agency
	Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT)
	Rural Payments Agency (RPA)
	Animal and Plant Health Agency
	Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs
Department for Exiting the European Union (DEXEU)	Veterinary Medicines Directorate
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
Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)	FCO Services
	Wilton Park Executive

HM Treasury (HMT)	Office for Budget Responsibility
	Debt Management Office (DMO)
	National Savings and Investments (NS&I)
Home Office (HO)	Government Internal Audit Agency
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)	
HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC)	Valuation Office
Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM)	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
Ordnance Survey (OS)	Royal Mint (RM)

\* 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 2017.

The formal monitoring work covers a total of 42 central government bodies as of 2016, 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 2016 can be found on page 7.

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.

## Revisions

A small number of figures in this document have been revised since the first version was published – please see the associated data tables ([here](#)), for full details of what has changed.