

**Report of the Cabinet Member  
Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital  
Transformation**

I have been asked to Report by Councillor Whitton for Full Council on 22 July 2021 on:

*the current situation on the handling of Freedom of Information requests, including how many are not being replied to within the normal recommended response time, what is the average time that is currently being taken for requests to be answered in full, the current trend in numbers of requests received, and what action is being taken within the Council to deal with any backlog or to address any anticipated increase in the number of requests expected to be received. Can the cabinet member also indicate whether a similar situation is arising with regard to general enquiries received through the Customer Services Centre or individual department mailboxes.*

**Response:**

**1. Outline the current situation on the handling of Freedom of Information requests**

At the start of the pandemic in March 2020 it was agreed through DCC's Pandemic Incident Management Team that the Freedom of Information (FOI) service would be temporarily suspended to enable the Access to Information team to be re-deployed to help support DCC's response to the pandemic and enable greater resource to help vulnerable people in Devon. The service was reinstated in July 2020. This approach mirrors the agreed approach taken for customer complaints and was an approach which the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) endorsed as a recognition of the public sector's ability to manage information effectively. The ICO continue to take a pragmatic approach to compliance during the pandemic.

**A. how many are not being replied to within the normal recommended response time**

There are currently 37 information requests that are overdue (over the 20 day response timescale). Customers with overdue cases are regularly contacted to update them on progress and advise of the delay. Some of these requests are of a more complex nature and require co-ordination across more than one service.

**B. what is the average time that is currently being taken for requests to be answered in full**

16 days on average for June 2021, within the 20 day legislative timescale for responding to requests.

**C. the current trend in numbers of requests received**

Broadly the figures remain at c.100 information requests received per month and we have not seen any significant fluctuations to that figure in the last 12 months.

**D. what action is being taken within the Council to deal with any backlog or to address any anticipated increase in the number of requests expected to be received**

Within the Access to Information Service, more complex time consuming Subject Access Requests are being commissioned to enable the team to focus on dealing with reducing the current FOI backlog, however based on the trend outlined above we are not currently anticipating an increase.

Since Feb 2021 the backlog of FOI requests has reduced from 45 to 37 in May 2021.

Since April 2021 a new Access to Information Manager has been in post to directly oversee the service.

**2. Is there a similar situation arising with regard to general enquiries received through the Customer Services Centre or individual department mailboxes?**

There is a general upward trend of phone contact into the Customer Service Centre over the last 3 months from c.26000 in April to c.31000 in June.

Volumes in corresponding months this year (2021) are higher than the same period in 2020.

The Customer Service Centre also deals with a number of Service Mailboxes for the Council. Mailboxes have a 5 day response target turnaround, however the current response time is between 1 and 3 days.

The performance of the Customer Service Centre is monitored on a regular basis by the Digital Transformation and Business Support Leadership Team and plans are in place to increase resources where there are known increases in call volumes (for example in September due to School Admissions or at times of bad weather).

**Andrew Saywell**

Cabinet Member

Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital Transformation