

# Project Report

Understand and resolve the issues preventing an effective and efficient freedom of information request service.

## **Contents**

Introduction .....	2
Background .....	2
Issues.....	2
Clarifying Responsibilities.....	2
Openness and Transparency.....	3
Establishing Guidelines .....	3
Communication Methods.....	3
Responding to FOIs quickly.....	3
Culture Change .....	4
Tracking Issues.....	4
Implementation of the new system.....	5
Tracker and Dashboard.....	7
Tracker .....	7
Dashboard.....	8
Next Steps .....	9
Short-term Steps .....	9
Migration of Data.....	9
Awareness .....	9
Longer-term Steps.....	9
Surveys.....	9
FOI Training.....	9
Publishing .....	9
Data Sets .....	9
Information Governance Portal .....	10
Project Successes .....	11
Quick Turnaround .....	11
Cost-Efficiency .....	11
Engagement Sessions With staff .....	11
The New Design Process.....	11
Lessons Learned .....	11
Staff Engagement Time Restraint .....	11
Respecting The Time of Other Colleagues .....	11
Looking at External Application .....	12

## Introduction

The primary objective of this project has been to gain a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles hindering the functionality of the Freedom of information request (FOI) service, with the ultimate goal of devising effective solutions. This report will delve into the diverse array of challenges that have been identified, outline the enhancements that are being introduced, and elaborate on the strategic measures that will be implemented in the long run to ensure a more efficient and streamlined process FOI process.

## Background

The Freedom of Information Policy ensures that the Council acts in compliance to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. This Policy also covers the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR). It has been identified that there is an urgent need for improvement in our FOI statistics in order to meet the Information Commissioner's (IC) requirement of [90%](#) of requests being answered on time. The Council's current rate of [71%](#) (Table 1) falls below the IC's standards and must be addressed as soon as possible. The council is currently facing a variety challenges. Some of these challenges include delays in response times, limited managerial capacity, unclear guidance, lack of accountability, and difficulty managing complex FOI requests.

Year	Number	No. on time	% on time	Late/OD
2020	607	408	67%	199
2021	577	400	69%	177
2022	544	311	57%	233
2023	650	463	71%	187



Table 1: Rushmoor Freedom of Information Data

## Issues

FOI Projects Team identified various problems with the current FOI process. Below is a summary of the key obstacles identified by the FOI Projects Team that hinder the development of a cohesive FOI system. The data was collected using surveys, various FOI sessions, feedback via email and several one-to-one sessions between staff and the members of the FOI project team. The issues are stated below. Snapshots of survey results can also be seen in the photos below.

## Clarifying Responsibilities

Staff members have consistently brought up the need for a clear identification of the lead officers for specific FOIs. Delays in responding to FOIs have occurred due to the FOI being directed to the incorrect lead officer, leading to further delays. *Table 2* below illustrates the challenges staff encounter in clarifying responsibilities within the FOI process. With scores of 2.3 and 2.1 out of five, it is evident that there is a pressing need for a more effective solution.

<b>Problems with Responsibility</b>		<b>Strongly Disagree</b> <b>1</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b> <b>5</b>
Responsibilities in the FOI process is clear and work well		2.3 	
It's easy to track and manage the progress of FOI responses		2.1 	
<b>Good</b>	<b>Not so Good</b>	<b>Not so Good</b>	
Colleagues providing oversight	Unclear accountability/responsibility for requests with multiple contributors	Lack visibility of other FOIs and their progress	
Service successfully using their own 'tracker'	When requests are passed around it can be unclear who is leading the response	Lack clear time frames and reminders	
		Progress is not updated/shared/visible	

*Table 2: Problems with Responsibility Survey Data Results. \*Our rating scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating strong agreement\**

### Openness and Transparency

All stakeholders engaged in handling FOIs have emphasised the importance of enhanced openness and transparency in the process. It has been suggested that the increased publication of FOI data is essential. By making this data more readily available, staff anticipate a decrease in the volume of FOI requests received, as the most information will be readily accessible on the council website. Furthermore, it is crucial to learn from past experiences and continuously strive to enhance current methods for optimal performance.

### Establishing Guidelines

The need for explicit service guidelines is also something that needs to be addressed. The guidelines need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis because each directorate has different retention policies. Having a centralised source for all retention guidance will provide staff with clear instructions on how long to store documents before destroying them, especially if they are unfamiliar with their department's specific retention policies. For instance, the Licensing Team may be required to retain all gambling applications for six years before disposal. A central source of information ensures that all staff know the appropriate retention periods for various records. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) also offers guidance on their website, stating that "authorities must define retention periods and dispose of information when it is no longer needed. Disposal can involve destruction, transfer to another body, or transfer to an archive. Authorities must be able to explain why information is no longer held, either through a record of its destruction or by referencing the authority's policy." Feedback from the staff survey, which can be seen in *Table 3* below highlights there needs to be less dependence on others and a move towards a more collaborative approach. With scores of 3.8 and 4.2 out of five, some improvement is still need.

<b>Positive about support &amp; understanding FOI rules</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b> <b>1</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b> <b>5</b>
<i>I can get support when I'm struggling with a response</i>		
<i>I understand FOI rules well enough to play my part</i>		
<b>Good</b>	<b>Not so Good</b>	
<i>Having colleagues who provide help/support with coordination/oversight/keeping things on track</i>	<i>Dependence on others to access data</i>	
<i>Support from Legal (Heather) for specific questions/issues such as use of an exemption</i>		

*Table 3: Positive about Support and Understanding FOI Rules Survey Data Results. \*Our rating scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating strong agreement\**

### Communication Methods

It is essential to establish clear communication methods to ensure that staff have a voice in determining the most effective ways to communicate about FOI requests and escalate important issues pertaining to FOIs. Staff have mentioned that they have had challenges with identifying the appropriate contact for FOI requests. Reinstating the "FOI Inbox" will provide a central contact point for all FOI-related enquiries, streamlining the process and reducing confusion for staff.

### Responding to FOIs quickly

Responding to FOIs quickly was also mentioned as an important issue. Staff have a legal obligation to respond to Freedom of Information requests within 20 working days. Many staff have highlighted difficulties in meeting this deadline due to unclear communication channels and delays in assigning requests. By promptly directing incoming FOIs to the appropriate staff member, the lead officer can efficiently allocate time to provide a thorough

and timely response. This streamlined process will help ensure compliance with legal obligations and improve the overall efficiency of handling FOI requests.

### Culture Change

Culture change is crucial for the effective handling of FOIs. In the various surveys and feedback sessions carried out, staff mentioned a lack of emphasis on culture change, which has hindered the FOI process. A culture that values openness, transparency, and accountability is essential so that, as a Council, we can fulfil our obligations in responding to FOIs in a timely and thorough manner. Embracing these values will not only improve compliance but also build public trust and enhance the overall efficiency of our FOI responses.

### Tracking Issues

Staff have identified a critical need for an enhanced tracking system to improve the visibility and management of all open, closed, and urgent FOIs. The current reliance on a manual Excel tracker has proven inadequate, particularly as Heather is managing it single-handedly. This approach has led to challenges in maintaining up-to-date records, ensuring timely responses, and effectively prioritising urgent requests.

Staff have mentioned that implementing an updated and more sophisticated tracking system would provide several significant benefits. Firstly, it would streamline the FOI handling process by offering a centralised, real-time overview of all requests, thereby reducing the risk of errors and omissions. Secondly, it would ease the administrative burden on Heather, allowing her to focus on higher-value tasks and ensuring that the management of FOIs is not reliant on a single individual.

Additionally, a robust tracking system would enhance collaboration among staff by making it easier to share information and updates about ongoing FOIs. This transparency and improved communication would contribute to more efficient workflows and better allocation of resources, ensuring that urgent requests receive the prompt attention they require. Overall, such a system would support the Council's commitment to accountability and transparency while significantly improving operational efficiency.

Table 4 below illustrates the problems with the process and accessing data. With scores of 2.7 and 3.3 out of five, it is evident that there is a pressing need to improve tracking system.

<i><b>Problems with the process and accessing data</b></i>	<i><b>Strongly Disagree</b></i> <b>1</b>	<i><b>Strongly Agree</b></i> <b>5</b>
<i>The process works well and avoids hold ups</i>	<div> <div>2.7</div> </div>	
<i>Its easy for me to gather data needed for requests</i>	<div> <div>3.3</div> </div>	
<i><b>Good</b></i>	<i><b>Not so Good</b></i>	<i><b>Not so Good</b></i>
<i>Support from colleagues</i>	<i>Short notice &amp; rushed requests for information</i>	<i>Requests involving multiple teams need coordination which is often lacking</i>
<i>Being notified of new FOIs</i>	<i>Delays when key staff are absent</i>	<i>People don't keep to timelines</i>
	<i>Competes with other work pressures</i>	<i>Dependence on IT for some data gathering</i>

Table 4: Problems with the process and Accessing Survey Data Results. \*Our rating scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating strong agreement\*

## Implementation of the new system

The enhanced system, managed through Microsoft Lists, will offer improved robustness and functionality. Key enhancements will include clearly defined oversight roles, automatic timeline triggers, a collaborative tracker accessible to all users, and a comprehensive Power BI dashboard for easy visualisation of FOI data.

1. **Requester Action**  
Involves initiating the process by submitting an FOI request in written form. This can be done through a letter, email, social media, an online form, or fax. The requester plays a crucial role in providing the necessary information for the request.
2. **Triage**  
Heather then enters the data into the tracker and validates the request. This ensures that the request is accurately recorded and can be processed efficiently. Clear communication between the requester and the team handling the request is key during this phase.
3. **Assigning**  
The new FOI request is vital to ensure that it is processed in a timely manner. Confirmation of the assignments of various requests should be done within 3 working days. This helps to manage the workload effectively and prioritise requests as needed.
4. **Responding**  
An FOI request is a critical part of the process. Depending on the information received, a response may or may not be required. Exceptions, withholdings, or pauses may be applied as necessary in the tracker. It is important to consider any clarifications from officer leads before responding. Responses are sent to the FOI inbox, with the goal of addressing all FOIs within 18 days.
5. **Closing**  
The FOI request occurs once a response has been sent. The request is then marked as closed, and the response is recorded. Legal and service oversight are essential throughout the process timeline to ensure compliance with regulations and quality service delivery.

By following these steps, the FOI request process can be effectively managed and completed in a timely manner, ensuring transparency and accountability in the handling of information requests. *Figure 1* shows a snapshot of the new system and its processes. The various stages involve the triage, assign, respond and close phase, with a service oversight group included.

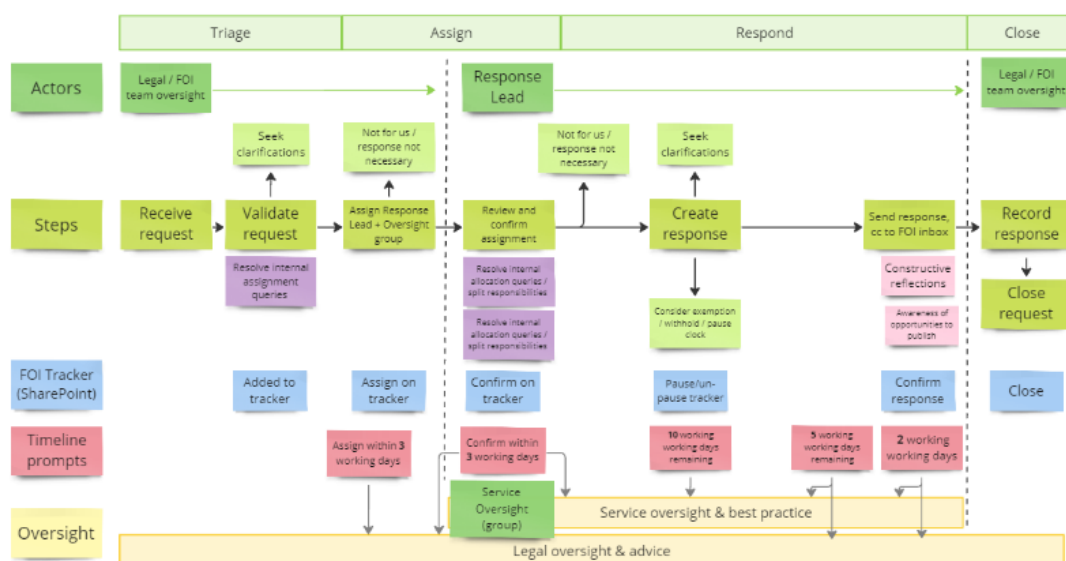


Figure 1: The New FOI System

Role	Expectations
<b>Legal / FOI Team Oversight</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Initial triage &amp; assignment of Response Lead (within 3 days of request)</li> <li>- Create initial record on tracker</li> <li>- Provide support &amp; oversight on request or escalation</li> </ul>
<b>Response Lead</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review assigned FOI requests and confirm their Lead role or arrange an alternative Response Lead and re-assign (within 3 days of assignment)</li> <li>- Coordinate and create response, including engaging other contributors</li> <li>- Update the tracker with status &amp; completion</li> <li>- Note on tracker any actions arising on completion and/or reasons for delay</li> </ul>
<b>Service Oversight Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monitor the FOI Tracker and respond to escalation prompts</li> <li>- Take action when the Response Lead is unable to</li> <li>- Incorporate FOI oversight into BAU service practices</li> </ul>

Prompts
Assign within 3 working days
Confirm within 3 working days
@ 10 working days remaining
@ 5 working days remaining
@ 2 working days

Figure 2: Roles and Expectations

## Tracker and Dashboard

### Tracker

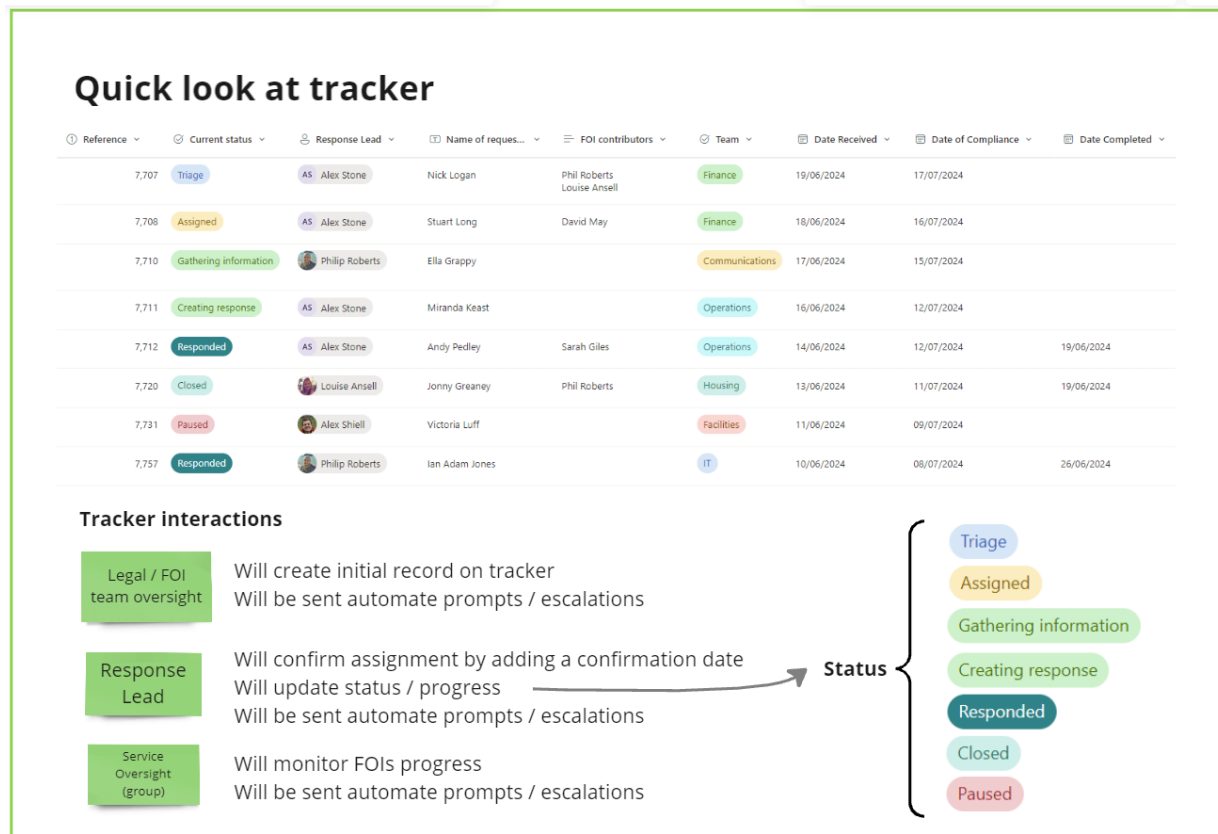


Figure 3: The Tracker

The image above showcases the streamlined and user-friendly design of the upcoming tracker using Microsoft Lists. The carefully curated headings make it easy for users to input information accurately and efficiently.

The categories within the tracker include:

- Reference
- Current Status (with a range of options)
- Response Lead
- Name of request
- FOI Contributors
- Team
- Data Received
- Date of Compliance
- Date Completed

These headings are designed to ensure that all necessary information is collected and organised effectively. With this user-friendly interface, tracking and managing data will be seamless and convenient for users.

Dashboard

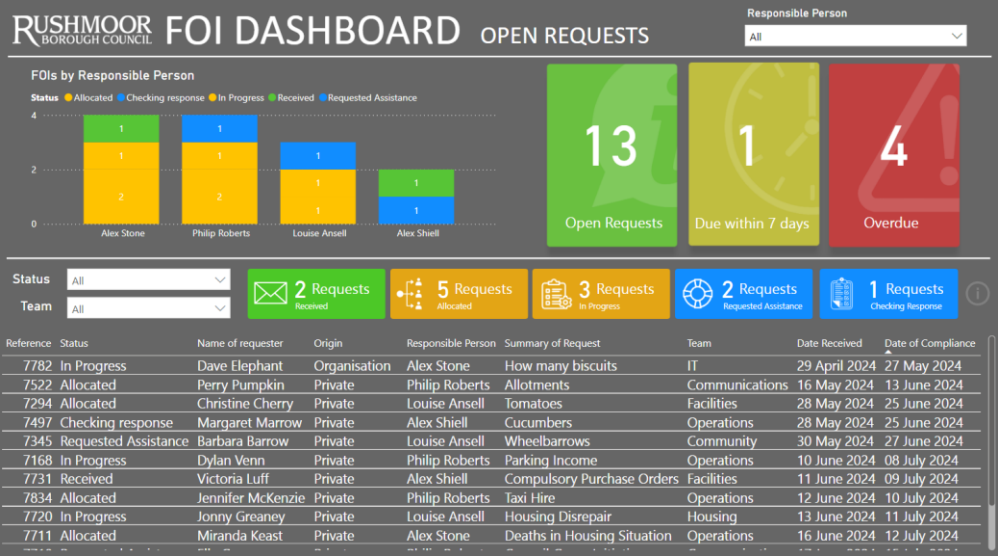


Figure 4: FOI Dashboard Example

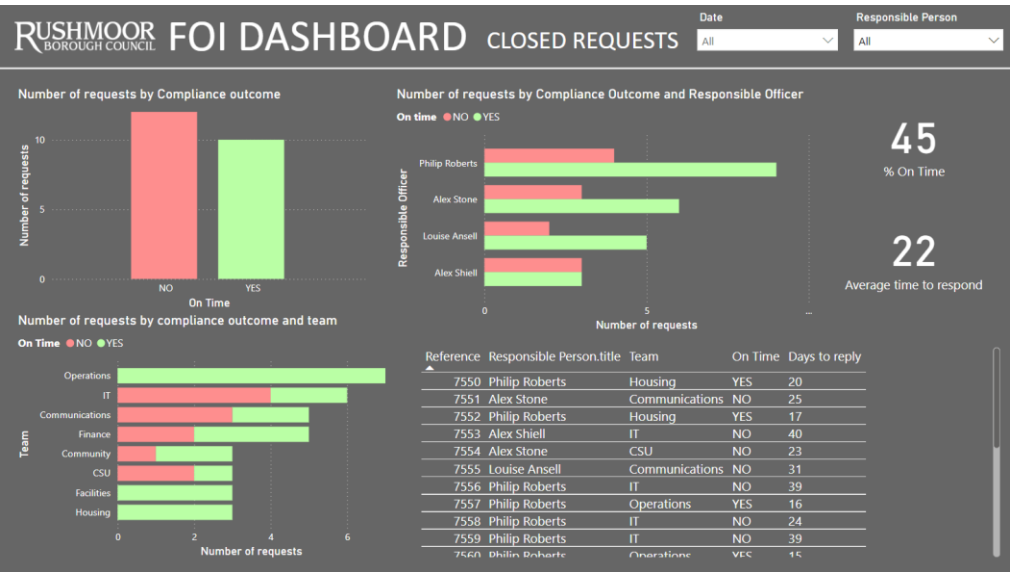


Figure 5: FOI Dashboard Example

The screenshot above highlights the design of the upcoming FOI Dashboard powered using Power BI. This innovative dashboard is designed to assist staff in visualising all the data within their Microsoft List SharePoint site.



## **Next Steps**

### **Short-term Steps**

#### *Migration of Data*

Our immediate goal is to complete the migration of all active FOIs to the new tracker by Monday 15th July. This includes transferring all relevant information and ensuring a smooth transition for all users. Additionally, the FOI Projects Team aim to organise and establish service oversight groups before the deadline, ensuring effective oversight and communication within the organisation.

#### *Awareness*

To increase awareness and engagement with the FOI project, the FOI Projects Team plan to promote it through an executive leadership team (ELT) slot and staff live sessions. This will help to educate and inform staff members about the new project and encourage their participation and support.

### **Longer-term Steps**

#### *Surveys*

The FOI Projects Team is planning to conduct an extensive follow-up survey in September to gather valuable feedback from staff regarding their experiences and satisfaction with the newly implemented FOI tracker. This survey aims to collect detailed insights into how effectively the tracker meets the needs of the users, any challenges encountered, and suggestions for enhancement. The feedback obtained will be instrumental in pinpointing specific areas that require improvement and will guide the team in making necessary adjustments to optimise the system's performance. By actively seeking and incorporating staff input, the FOI Projects Team is committed to ensuring that the FOI tracker not only functions efficiently but also meets the highest standards of user satisfaction and operational excellence.

#### *FOI Training*

The new system will be implemented as part of an overarching initiative led by our legal team. This comprehensive rollout includes specialised training designed to equip staff with the essential skills and in-depth knowledge required to effectively utilise the new tracker system. The training program will cover all aspects of the system's functionality, ensuring that staff members are well-prepared to navigate and operate the tracker proficiently. Additionally, this training will emphasise the importance of adhering to FOI regulations, providing detailed guidance on compliance requirements.

#### *Publishing*

To enhance the efficiency of the (FOI) process and decrease the volume of individual requests, the FOI Projects Team will focus on publishing a broader range of FOI queries on the Rushmoor website. This proactive approach involves regularly updating the website with frequently requested information and common queries. By making more data readily accessible online, the FOI Projects Team intends to address the most common public inquiries, thereby reducing the need for individual requests. This initiative is aimed at fostering greater transparency and openness, ensuring that the public has easy access to valuable information without the need to submit formal FOI requests. Through these efforts, the FOI Projects Team aspires to create a more informed and engaged community.

#### *Data Sets*

Staff have provided valuable feedback, suggesting that the information governance team should start opening up large data sets to the public. This initiative aligns with the growing demand for transparency and accessibility of information. By making these large data sets available, we can significantly enhance the public's ability to access and utilise information, fostering a more informed and engaged community.

Opening up large data sets will serve multiple purposes:

1. **Enhancing Transparency:** Providing open access to large data sets will demonstrate our commitment to transparency and accountability in handling FOI requests. It will show that the Council is willing to share detailed information openly, fostering trust and confidence among the public.
2. **Reducing FOI Requests:** By proactively publishing frequently requested data, we can reduce the volume of individual FOI requests. This will streamline the FOI process, allowing the team to allocate more resources to handling complex or sensitive requests that require more detailed attention.
3. **Encouraging Public Participation:** Access to large data sets can enable citizens to engage more actively in local governance. They can analyse data related to their community, identify trends, and participate in discussions and decision-making processes with a well-informed perspective.

4. **Improving Operational Efficiency:** Internally, having these data sets readily available can improve the efficiency of various departments within the Council. Staff can access and utilise this information for planning, reporting, and strategic initiatives without having to go through multiple request processes.

To implement this initiative, the FOI Projects Team will collaborate with the information governance team to:

- Identify and prioritise the data sets that are most valuable and frequently requested by the public.
- Ensure that the data is presented in an easily accessible and understandable format.
- Develop a robust framework for maintaining and updating these data sets regularly.
- Address any privacy, security, and ethical considerations related to the publication of large data sets

#### *Information Governance Portal*

The information governance team will shortly be launching the Information Governance Portal which will streamline access to all FOI-related resources, including the tracker, templates, and additional information. This centralised portal will serve as a one-stop shop for staff, providing easy access to all necessary tools and documents for managing FOI requests. By consolidating these resources into a single, user-friendly platform, the Council can improve efficiency, reduce response times, and ensure consistency in handling FOI requests. The portal will also feature guidelines, FAQs, and contact information for further support, ensuring that staff have all the information they need at their fingertips.

In conclusion, these initiatives will collectively enhance the FOI process, making it more efficient, transparent, and user-friendly for both staff and the public. By continuously seeking feedback, providing comprehensive training, proactively sharing information, and leveraging advanced tools and resources, the Council will strengthen its commitment to openness and accountability in handling FOI requests.

## **Project Successes**

### *Quick Turnaround*

The project serves as a compelling demonstration of how significantly processes can be enhanced in a relatively short timeframe. From the moment the project was officially launched on Monday, June 3rd, to the the Show and Tell event on Thursday, June 27th, our team successfully developed a draft solution for handling Freedom of Information requests in just 19 business days.

This remarkable achievement was made possible through the dedicated collaboration of members from several crucial departments. These include the transformation team, the digital team, and the legal team. Each group brought its unique expertise and perspective to the table, fostering a dynamic environment for innovation and problem-solving.

### *Cost-Efficiency*

The FOI Project team has effectively leveraged existing resources to tackle the challenges associated with this issue. By utilising Microsoft Lists, we have streamlined our processes and enhanced our operational efficiency. This strategic choice not only maximises our current technological capabilities but also eliminates the necessity to allocate additional funds towards procuring an external application. By relying on tools already at our disposal, we are able to maintain budgetary constraints while still achieving our project goals effectively. This approach demonstrates our commitment to resourcefulness and cost-effective solutions in our ongoing efforts to improve the project's overall performance.

### *Engagement Sessions With staff*

Moreover, the two engagement sessions that took place in the middle of June were exceptionally well received by staff members across various departments. These sessions provided a much-needed platform for employees to express their concerns and share their experiences regarding the ongoing challenges associated with tracking FOI requests. Attendees appreciated the open and supportive environment fostered during these discussions, which encouraged candid conversations. By allowing staff to voice their grievances, the sessions not only validated their concerns but also highlighted the importance of collaboration and communication in addressing the issues at hand. As a result, valuable insights were gathered, paving the way for potential solutions and improvements in the FOI tracking process moving forward.

### *The New Design Process*

Moreover, the feedback we've received from our staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Team members have expressed their satisfaction with the simplicity and user-friendly nature of the new system. Staff members are not only pleased but are also eager to engage fully in the project's implementation. Their willingness to contribute and collaborate underscores a shared commitment to making this initiative a resounding success. This enthusiastic support bodes well for the project's future.

## **Lessons Learned**

### *Staff Engagement Time Restraint*

One of the primary takeaways from our experience is the crucial role of proactive and meaningful engagement with staff members throughout the FOI process. As a team, we employed a diverse range of communication channels to connect with our users and facilitate their participation. This included hosting two dedicated FOI engagement sessions, conducting several ad-hoc meetings with users to address specific concerns, and distributing a survey designed to gather feedback on their experiences. Each of these communication methods proved effective in soliciting valuable input from staff and allowed us to capture a range of perspectives.

However, upon reflection, we recognise that if we had allocated more time and resources to deepen staff engagement, the feedback pool would have been significantly larger and more comprehensive. A greater investment in this area could have fostered an environment of open dialogue, encouraging even more staff members to share their thoughts and insights. By dedicating additional time to actively engage with employees, we could not only have improved the quality of our feedback but also strengthened their sense of involvement in the FOI project.

### *Respecting The Time of Other Colleagues*

Respecting the time of others is a fundamental principle that can significantly enhance teamwork and project efficiency. Heather (Information Governance Officer) has demonstrated exceptional skill in managing her responsibilities, effectively juggling the extra workload involved in the FOI project while balancing it with her part-time schedule of working just three days a week. During Heather's occasional absences, we were fortunate to have the support of Sophie (Corporate Manager of Legal Services) who stepped in to assist wherever possible. However, it is important to note that Sophie was also managing a very demanding workload and had previously scheduled annual leave during the initial phases of the FOI project. This situation highlighted a critical challenge:

there were times when neither Heather nor Sophie were available to provide the necessary guidance and support.

To address this issue in future projects, it is essential to adopt a more strategic approach to planning. This entails a careful consideration of the schedules and commitments of all team members involved. By tailoring project timelines around the availability of key personnel, we can ensure that everyone's time is respected and that resources are optimally utilised. Ultimately, acknowledging and accommodating the time constraints of colleagues not only fosters a more collaborative work environment but also enhances the overall efficiency and success of any project.

#### *Looking at External Application*

The project team initially approached the challenge by focusing solely on internal solutions that were available at no cost. This strategy was guided by our understanding that utilising free, internal resources would be the most efficient and straightforward way to address the issue at hand. However, this narrow focus may have limited our exploration of potentially effective external applications that could offer innovative solutions.

While it was important to prioritise free internal options, allowing some flexibility in our strategy to consider external applications could have opened up a wider array of possibilities. In retrospect, establishing a more open-minded approach towards evaluating external solutions—even if they involved some costs—would have been beneficial. Such an approach would have fostered a more comprehensive and innovative problem-solving mindset within the team, ultimately leading to a more robust solution for the challenges we faced.