

# REGIONAL BOARD REPORT

<b>Subject:</b> Freedom of Information Annual Report 2019/20	<b>Purpose:</b> <b>For Approval</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>For Discussion</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>For Information</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Prepared by:</b> Hazel Robertson, Vice Principal – Finance and Corporate Services	<b>Date:</b> 08 June 2020	
<b>Purpose:</b> To provide a report on activity relating to Freedom of Information for the year 2019/20		
<b>Linked to Strategic Goal 5: Build Sustainability.</b>		
<p>The Scottish Information Commissioner is responsible for enforcing and promoting freedom of information (FOI) law in Scotland:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002</a> An Act of the Scottish Parliament which gives everyone the right to ask for any information held by a Scottish public authority.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004</a> (the EIRs) The EIRs come from a European Directive on access to environmental information. The EIRs give everyone the right to ask for environmental information held by a Scottish public authority (and some other bodies).</li> </ul> <p>Since April 2013, Scottish public authorities have been providing the Scottish Information Commissioner with data about the information requests they receive, on a quarterly basis via a <a href="#">statistics portal</a>.</p> <p>The attached report provides information on Borders College FOI activity for the year from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.</p> <p>Borders College received 20 FOI requests in 2019/20, all of which were responded to within the statutory 20 day response deadline. No requests for review were submitted.</p> <p>Improvements have been made to FOI processing during the year and we will be updating our Publication Scheme in 2020 focussing on ensuring that information is routinely accessible in as easy a fashion as possible.</p>		
<b>Recommendation:</b> To note the content of the FOI report		
<b>Previous Committee Approvals:</b> n/a		
<b>For publication</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>For publication with redactions</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Not for publication</b> <input type="checkbox"/>

## Freedom of Information Annual Report 2019/20

### 1. Background

The Scottish Information Commissioner is responsible for enforcing and promoting freedom of information (FOI) law in Scotland:

- [Freedom of Information \(Scotland\) Act 2002](#)  
An Act of the Scottish Parliament which gives everyone the right to ask for any information held by a Scottish public authority.
- [Environmental Information \(Scotland\) Regulations 2004](#) (the EIRs)  
The EIRs come from a European Directive on access to environmental information. The EIRs give everyone the right to ask for environmental information held by a Scottish public authority (and some other bodies).

Since April 2013, Scottish public authorities have been providing the Scottish Information Commissioner with data about the information requests they receive, on a quarterly basis via a [statistics portal](#).

This report provides information on Borders College FOI activity for the year from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

### 2. Volume of activity

The overall volume of requests for information under the FOI has reduced for the College Sector as a whole for Borders College. In the latest reporting period there was a significant increase across Scotland, and a significant drop for Borders College (accounting for only 2.8 of all requests made to Scottish Colleges).

	College Sector	Borders College
2015/16	899	41 (4.6% of total)
2016/17	844	35 (4.1% of total)
2017/18	841	29 (3.4% of total)
2018/19	619	29 (4.6% of total)
2019/20	715	20 (2.8% of total)

### 3. Response times

The legislative requirement is for public authorities to provide a response within 20 working days of receipt of a request for information. Borders College performs well above average for the sector and in the last three reporting years has met the 20 day target on 100% of occasions.

	College Sector	Borders College
2015/16	83.8%	97.5% (4 delayed)
2016/17	83.6%	94.2% (2 delayed)
2017/18	86.0%	100%
2018/19	88.4%	100%
2019/20	93.0%	100%

#### 4. Refusing a request

Under the FOI Act, we can in certain circumstances refuse a request, for example, if:

- The individual has not provided enough detail to identify the information required
- We do not have the information asked for
- It will cost over £600 to provide the information
- We consider the request is "vexatious" - this term can apply to requests which are intended to disrupt the authority's work, rather than genuine requests for information
- The request is the same as one the individual has already made, and which has been dealt with, or
- The information is exempt under FOI law in Scotland. Some exemptions are absolute (ie no qualifications) whereas some exemptions can be over-ridden if it is felt that disclosure of the information would be in the public interest.

Historical information is not available for this College sector in relation to application of exemptions. In 2019/20 Borders College:

- Partially answered two of the 20 requests
  - Refused to supply information once because we did not hold the information
  - Refused to supply information once because information was exempt from disclosure due to personal data being requested
- Refused to answer two of the requests because we did not hold the information
- Did not apply a cost exemption to any requests
- Did not apply any other exemptions
- Had no vexatious or repeated requests.

During the year we have introduced stronger processes for answering FOI requests. This includes creation of a template letter for responses, centralised processing of answers to requests, and a matrix to help consider whether to use potential exemptions, along with standardised text to use when an exemption is being applied.

#### 5. Requests for review or appeal

If the individual is unhappy with how their request for information has been responded to, they have legal rights to challenge our response.

- In the first instance this would involve requesting a review from us. A review would be handled by someone other than the person initially providing the College response.
- If an individual has already been through the two steps of making a request and requesting a review and is still not happy, they can appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner.
- If the individual is unhappy with the Commissioner's decision on the appeal, the individual has a right of appeal to the Court of Session (but only on a point of law).

Information on requests for reviews across the sector is not available. In 2019/20 Borders College had no requests for review and no appeals to the Commissioner.

## 6. Types of information requested

A log of all requests made to Borders College is maintained on the College website under the Freedom of Information section. There is no particular theme although information regarding staffing, salaries and expenses do recur. We also maintain a database of all responses, which is publicly available in the same area of the website. Some of the requests received in the last year are listed below.

- Counselling services
- Senior salaries
- Termination of CLA Licence
  
- Arm's Length Foundation
- Teaching materials
- Sale of College assets
- Data access requests
- Volume and costs of sanitary products
- Rent guarantor scheme
- Transport
- Staff permanency
- First Aid
- Bereavement services
- Renewable energy courses
- Assaults at work
- Stress management
- Info re ICT support team
- NRPA
- Mental health
- ASN staff

If we receive repeated requests for similar information we should consider routinely making such information publicly available.

## 7. Publication Scheme

Borders College adopted the Model Publication Scheme as set out by the Scottish Information Commissioner. It was last updated in 2013. This scheme sets out what information is routinely available and where it can be found.

The Schemes sets out eight broad classes of information, and by adopting it, Borders College is committing to publishing everything that it holds which falls into the broad description given for each class. The classes are:

- Class 1: About the authority
- Class 2: How we deliver our functions and services
- Class 3: How we take decisions and what we have decided
- Class 4: What we spend and how we spend it
- Class 5: How we manage our human, physical and information resources
- Class 6: How we procure goods and services from external providers
- Class 7: How we are performing
- Class 8: Our commercial publications

We are required to review it and update it in 2020. The main changes required is to update references to organisational structures and roles, and to ensure that hyperlinks point to the most recently available information.

Our Publication Scheme is a PDF file. Some public authorities have their Scheme as an interactive web page. This will be explored as it is easier to keep information current and accessible.

## 8. Conclusion

Borders College received 20 Freedom of Information Requests in 2019/20, all of which were responded to within the statutory 20 day response deadline. No requests for review were received.

Improvements have been made to FOI processing during the year and we will be updating our Publication Scheme in 2020 focussing on ensuring that information is routinely accessible in as easy a fashion as possible.

Hazel Robertson  
Vice Principal Finance and Corporate Services  
8 June 2020