

NICS Freedom of Information Annual Report 2017



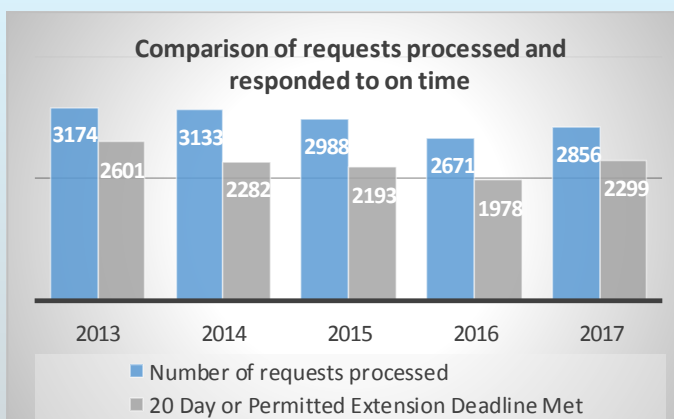
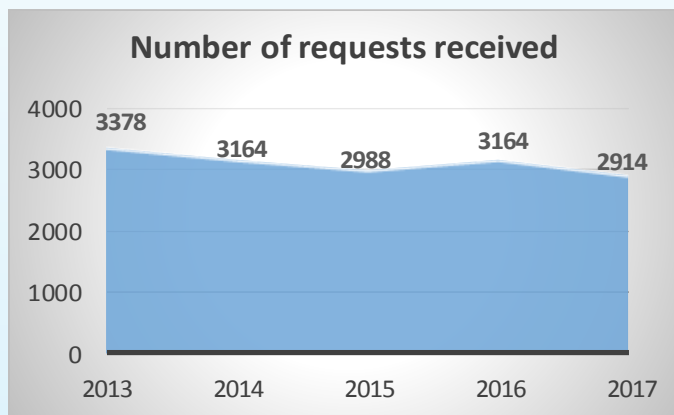
Introduction

This is the thirteenth Annual Report on the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (and Environmental Information Regulations 2004) within the Northern Ireland Civil Service departments. This management report provides a summary of information requests and internal reviews, dealt with in 2017.

The NICS remains committed to fulfilling its statutory obligations under the Freedom of Information Act and we are pleased to record that 2017 saw an increase in punctuality and response rates. We will endeavour to build on this in future years.

Also, in support of the principles of freedom of information, during 2017, departments released hundreds of historical files with terminal dates of 1991 and 1992 to the public through the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

We hope you find the information in this report of interest, and evidence of the commitment of the departments in meeting their obligations under freedom of information legislation.



Key Statistics

- There were 2,914 information requests received across all 9 departments; this is a decrease of 250 (8 percentage points) on 2016.
- A total of 2,856 requests were processed; this is an increase of 185 (7 percentage points) on 2016.
- Across all Departments 2,299 of requests were responded to on time (80%); this is an increase of 321 (6 percentage points) on 2016.
- In 168 cases the applicant asked for an internal review of our decisions; this is an increase of 39 (30 percentage points) on 2016.

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Background

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) further the Government's aim of greater openness in the public sector, enabling members of the public to better understand the decisions of public authorities, and ensuring that services provided by the public sector are seen to be efficiently and properly delivered.

By conforming to the FOIA Section 45 Code of Practice public authorities are able to discharge their functions under Part 1 of the FOIA through:

- facilitating the disclosure of information under the FOIA by setting out good administrative practice that it is desirable to follow when handling requests for Information;
- protecting the interests of applicants by setting out standards for the provision of advice and assistance which it would be good practice to make available to them, and to encourage the development of effective means of complaining about decisions taken under the FOIA;
- facilitating consideration of the interests of third parties who may be affected by any decision to disclose information, by setting standards for consultation; and
- promoting consideration of the implications for Freedom of Information before agreeing to confidentiality provisions in contracts and accepting information in confidence from a third party more generally.

The Information Commissioner has a duty under section 47 of FOIA to promote the following of good practice by public authorities and, in particular, to promote observance of the requirements of FOIA and of the provisions of the Code of Practice. The FOIA confers a number of powers on her to enable her to carry out that duty specifically in relation to the Code such as practice recommendations (Section 48), decision notices (Section 50) and enforcement notices (Section 52).

This annual report presents FOI statistics for the 9 NICS departments on matters such as:

- Requests received
- Request handling - timeliness of responses
- Outcome of requests
- Internal reviews - Timeliness of responses

For further information regarding the legislation please see the links below:

- Full text of the FOI Act:
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/contents
- Full text of the EIR regulations:
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/3391/made

Contacts and Feedback

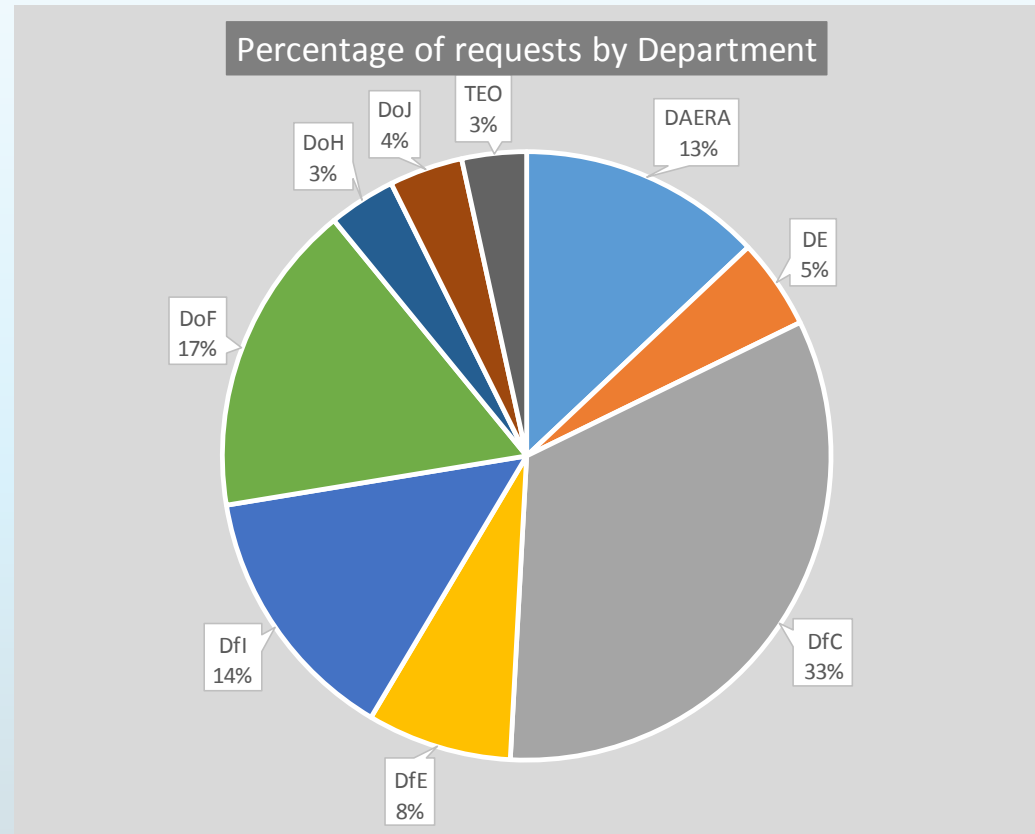
We welcome any feedback on this report; and can be contacted:

- ⇒ by email to: foi@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk
- ⇒ in writing to: Information Management and Central Advisory Branch
Room A5.18
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SR



Requests received

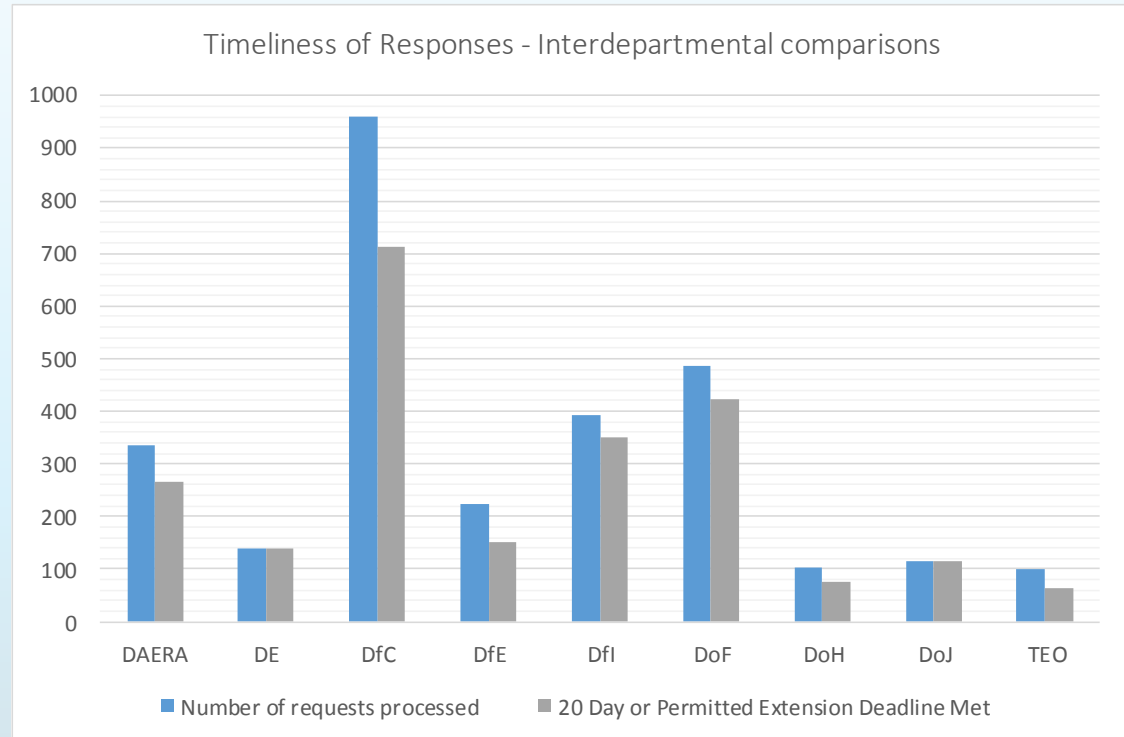
| Department | Number of requests |
|---|--------------------|
| Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) | 378 |
| Department of Education (DE) | 140 |
| Department for Communities (DfC) | 964 |
| Department for the Economy (DfE) | 224 |
| Department for Infrastructure (DfI) | 404 |
| Department of Finance (DoF) | 486 |
| Department of Health (DoH) | 104 |
| Department of Justice (DoJ) | 114 |
| The Executive Office (TEO) | 100 |
| TOTAL | 2914 |



A total of 2,914 information requests were received by the 9 NICS departments in 2017.

Request handling - Timeliness of responses

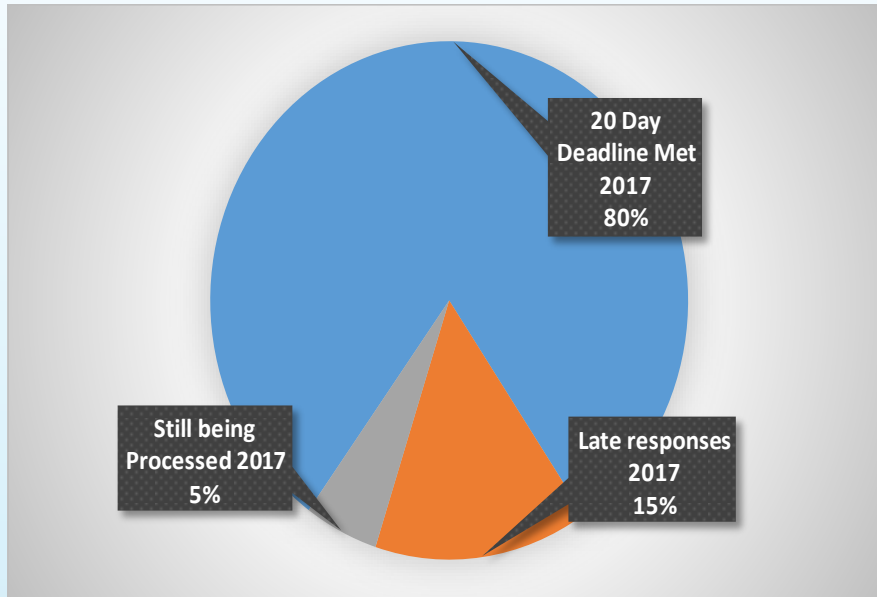
| Department | Number of requests processed | 20 Day or Permitted Extension Deadline Met | Percentage met |
|--------------|------------------------------|--|----------------|
| DAERA | 336 | 267 | 79 |
| DE | 140 | 138 | 99 |
| DfC | 959 | 712 | 74 |
| DfE | 223 | 152 | 68 |
| DfI | 394 | 351 | 89 |
| DoF | 486 | 424 | 87 |
| DoH | 104 | 76 | 73 |
| DoJ | 114 | 114 | 100 |
| TEO | 100 | 65 | 65 |
| TOTAL | 2856 | 2299 | 80 |



Freedom of Information legislation requires departments to respond to requests for information in a timely manner (within 20 working days, or a maximum of 40 working days with a permitted extension).

80% of the requests for information received by the departments were processed within the required timeframe.

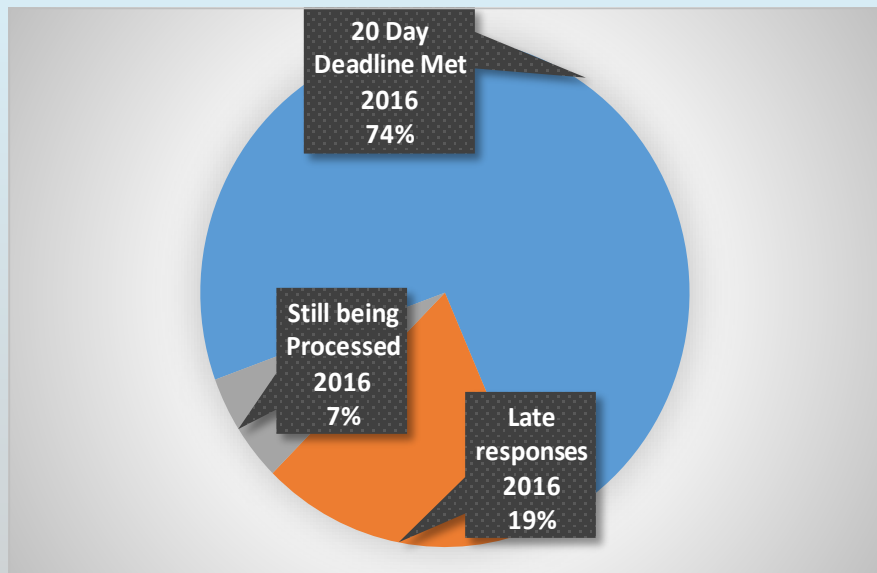
Outcome of requests



By the end of 2017, 95% of requests for information had been processed (an increase of 2 percentage points on 2016).

80% of requests processed met the statutory deadline (an increase of 6 percentage points on 2016).

5% of requests were still being processed at the end of the reporting period.



By the end of 2016, 93% of requests for information had been processed.

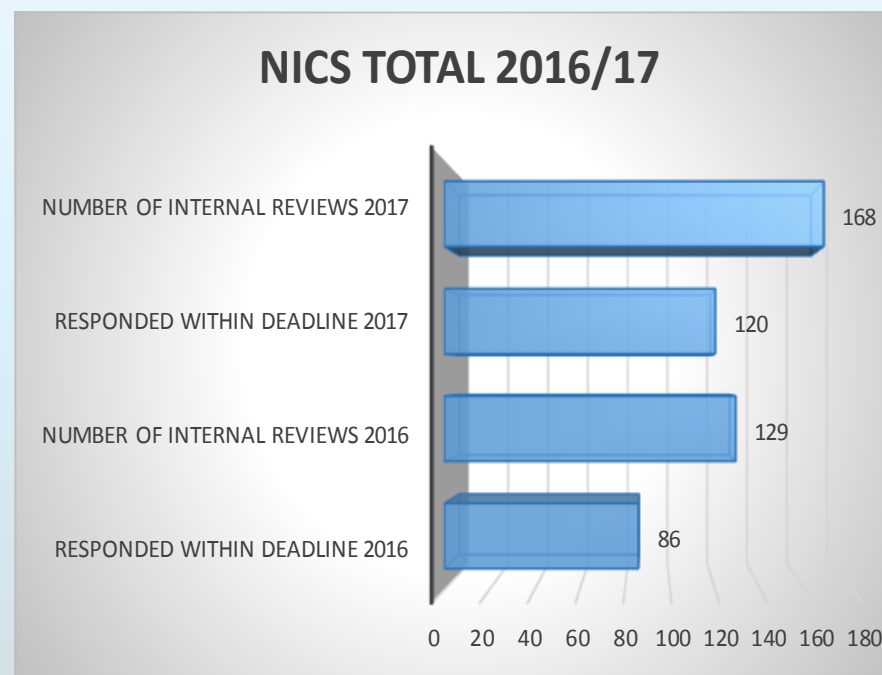
74% of requests processed met the statutory deadline.

The number of requests still being processed at the end of the reporting period was 7%.

Internal reviews - Timeliness of responses

In the event that a requestor is dissatisfied with a department's response to a request for information, they can request that department to carry out an internal review. The internal review involves a fresh and thorough examination of the initial decision, where possible by a person other than the original decision maker. A total of 168 internal reviews were requested, of which 120 (71%) were responded to within the 20 working days stipulated by the Information Commissioner.

| Department | Number of requests processed | Number of Internal Reviews | % of requests requiring a review | Responses within deadline | % of responses on time |
|--------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| DAERA | 336 | 21 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| DE | 140 | 10 | 7 | 9 | 90 |
| DfC | 959 | 34 | 4 | 22 | 65 |
| DfE | 223 | 40 | 18 | 37 | 93 |
| DfI | 394 | 22 | 6 | 17 | 77 |
| DoF | 486 | 20 | 4 | 14 | 70 |
| DoH | 104 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 100 |
| DoJ | 114 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 100 |
| TEO | 100 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 100 |
| TOTAL | 2856 | 168 | 6 | 120 | 71 |



There were 48 (30%) more internal reviews requested in 2017 than in 2016 with the number answered on time increasing by 4 percentage points from 2016 to 2017.