

**STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS**

**PROFORMA**

Cabinet Meeting .....11th March 2010

1. Title of Item/Report

Freedom of Information Requests

2. Record of the Decision

Members considered a report that provided a summary of the procedures currently in place across the Council for the receipt of, and replying to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. The reports also outlined the implications arising from those procedures and indicated how it was proposed to address them.

The Council's culture was one of openness and transparency, and being customer focused. This often involved officers doing everything that they could to ensure that requests were replied to as fully and efficiently as possible, often "going the extra mile" to do so, by compiling information that was not readily available, or spending time confirming that the information requested was not held.

Clearly, there was a real risk, if not properly managed that this approach could become disproportionate and could constitute an inefficient use of resources, at a time when currently they were in short supply and needed to be focused on key priorities.

Recent concerns in this respect had been specifically expressed by officers in CESC, particularly in relation to requests around safeguarding, the obvious risk being that operational officers may become distracted from their key priority work.

Each Corporate Director/Director of Service had sight of all requests for their service area when they were received, as well as the proposed replies before they were sent. The Chief Executive/Corporate Management Team/Communications' Team were also informed of any requests of note because of their sensitivity (requests regarding Members' Allowances and officers salaries for example).

In addition, the FOI Officers met regularly as a sub-group of the Officer Corporate Governance Group, to discuss requests received and the effectiveness of the procedures for handling them and ways in which they

could be refined and become more efficient.

In this way, it was intended that decisions could be taken about how best to handle particular requests, taking into account the nature of the information required, officer availability, operational workloads and other priorities. The procedure should also assist in avoiding duplication of effort across the organization, achieving consistency of approach to the same or similar requests and maximizing available knowledge and resources. In particular, these arrangements would assist in spotting trends within service areas and across the organization, so that steps could be taken, for instance, to share information about responses already provided, and to publicise relevant information on the website and in other ways, in order to minimise the work and costs associated with the same or similar future requests.

To supplement this approach, it had also been agreed that information regarding the number and nature of FOI requests being received by Services would be reported to the Corporate Management Team Performance Clinics. This information would in turn be reported to the Executive Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet, along with the existing information relating to Complaints, Compliments, Commendations and Comments.

Members were provided with details of requests received during 2008/09 by service area. Similar details for requests received during the period 1 April 2009 to 31 December 2009 were also provided.

Details of costs involved in dealing with requests were also provided. These had been estimated on a standard basis for each Service and related only to the Officers who dealt directly with the administration of requests. They did not include the time spent by other Officers in relation to FOI (eg Heads of Service, Corporate Directors). In future FOI Officers would record and cost the total time spent on FOI requests specific to their own service area. This would provide a much more analytical picture of the resources which were being used.

An assessment of requests by type over the period October to December 2009 was also provided and gave specific details of where the requests had come from and what topics were asked about in each service area.

.An FOI charging policy had recently been drafted by the FOI Officers Group and a draft copy was provided to members. This would be finalized by the Group together with appropriate guidance following which charging would take place in appropriate cases.

Cabinet noted the next steps:-

- extend and improve the FOI Officer Group's data gathering, sharing and statistical analysis processes
- review and refine the procedures for dealing with requests
- finalise the charging policy and related guidance
- subject to this, to ensure that, wherever appropriate, the charging policy is applied and costs are recouped
- become more effective in minimizing the time and costs expended on dealing with requests, by information sharing and more extensive publication
- embed the reporting arrangements regarding requests.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted/ratified.

3. Reasons for the Decision

To note/ratify, as appropriate, the procedures for handling FOI requests.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

None

6. Details of any Dispensations

N/A

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

Not later than Midnight on Friday, 19th March 2010

Proper Officer  
15 March 2010