

Access to information is now more important than ever - Daren Fitzhenry, Scottish Information Commissioner

Posted by RM64 - 28 Sep 2020 16:21

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Daren Fitzhenry, Scottish Information Commissioner

UNESCO International Day for Universal Access to Information

28 September 2020

Over the last few months our behaviour has changed in all sorts of ways.

Who could have foreseen this time last year that we'd have to don a face mask before picking up our groceries, or that we'd spend the summer carefully calculating the number of households or people before catching up with friends and family?

Of course, our behaviour has changed in other ways too, including the manner and frequency with which we access official information.

Many of us, for example, are now following officially-published data in ways which would have been unprecedented a few months ago.

Whether we're seeking updates on the latest rules we should be following, the number of cases in our area, or tracking national reinfection rates, our collective appetite for accurate and reliable official information has never been stronger.

To their credit, many Scottish public authorities have worked hard to meet this demand at a difficult time.

NHS boards and the Scottish Government, for example, publish a range of Covid-19 data on a daily and weekly basis, with, I am encouraged to see, care taken to ensure that the information is as accessible and clear as possible.

From the number of hospital patients with Covid-19 to the number of Scottish school pupils absent for coronavirus-related reasons, a wide range of data is available at our fingertips, helping to inform the day-to-day decisions we make in our own lives.

This proactive publication of information is one of the core duties of Scotland's freedom of information (FOI) law, with Scotland's public authorities being required to publish and update information about their activities and performance.

However, even with extensive proactive publication, the information that public authorities think may be most useful to us may not always be the information that we, as individuals, most need to see.

Published information will sometimes only tell us part of the story, and it is another element of FOI law - the right to ask for and receive information - that can often help us see the full picture.

The FOI right to request information allows us to fill the gaps in our own understanding, shining light on the issues that are most important to us, our families, or our wider community.

September 28 is UNESCO Access to Information Day, established to highlight and celebrate the benefits that the FOI principles of transparency and accountability bring to us as citizens.

And while at the present time we may feel there is not much to celebrate in the world generally, it is a good time to reflect on the practical benefits of the right to information and how it has been used during the pandemic.

Over the last few months we've seen the FOI right used to access additional information on a range of important issues.

This has included information on the number of Covid-19 patients discharged into care homes; on how many people received eviction notices in the early months of the pandemic, or on the impact for patients on waiting lists with non-coronavirus-related conditions.

Information disclosed through FOI complements, expands on and enriches the information which is proactively published by organisations.

It enables people to raise issues about policy or practice, to identify unexplored trends and call for action, or simply to be given information which provides reassurance and alleviates our concern.

It also, of course, allows for the boundaries of what can and can't be disclosed to be tested, helping to ensure that as much information as possible that is of public interest and public value finds its way into the spotlight of public scrutiny.

While many of the FOI requests that gain prominence are those made by journalists, we also know that most of the day-to-day FOI requests in Scotland are made by members of the public.

Indeed, my newly-published Annual Report reveals that the public were responsible for 75% of the appeals to my office in 2019/20.

The value of FOI to the public has arguably never been clearer.

My ongoing monitoring of public authority FOI performance recognises this, and I will continue to step in and support authorities to improve performance wherever it is appropriate to do so.

This will include, of course, Scottish Government performance which, following substantial improvement during 2019/20, was significantly disrupted in the early months of the pandemic.

I will continue to monitor and support the Scottish Government as it works to restore its FOI function.

It is also reassuring, however, that both the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government have been separately considering how the legislation may be improved.

In May, for example, and following post-legislative scrutiny, the Scottish Parliament's Public Audit Committee published a number of recommendations for FOI improvement.

Likewise, the Scottish Government is, following the designation of registered social landlords last year, considering the extension of FOI to more organisations, including those providing health and social care services under contract to Scottish public authorities.

We will all, inevitably, have questions from time to time about the decisions made by providers of public services.

Never more so than at a time when those decisions may restrict our freedoms, or impact on our health and wellbeing.

FOI is a key route through which these questions can be answered, and it is vital that our right to information continues to be supported, protected and enhanced.

Daren Fitzhenry

Scottish Information Commissioner

You can access the Scottish Information Commissioner Website here -

[www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/Scottis...ionCommissioner.aspx](http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/Scottish...ionCommissioner.aspx)

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**Re: Access to information is now more important than ever - Daren
Fitzhenry, Scottish Information Commissioner**

Posted by RM64 - 28 Sep 2020 16:31

You can read the Scottish Information Commissioner FOI Annual Report 2019/20 here -

www.itspublicknowledge.info/uploadedfile... FOR PUBLICATION.pdf