



Title of report: Annual review of the council's Information Requests & Complaints 2025/26

Meeting: Audit & Governance Committee

Meeting date: 21 July 2026

Report by: Claire Jacobs & Tilly Page

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

All wards

Purpose

To inform the committee of performance in the areas of complaints, data incidents and requests for information made to the council over the municipal year 2025/26.

Recommendation(s)

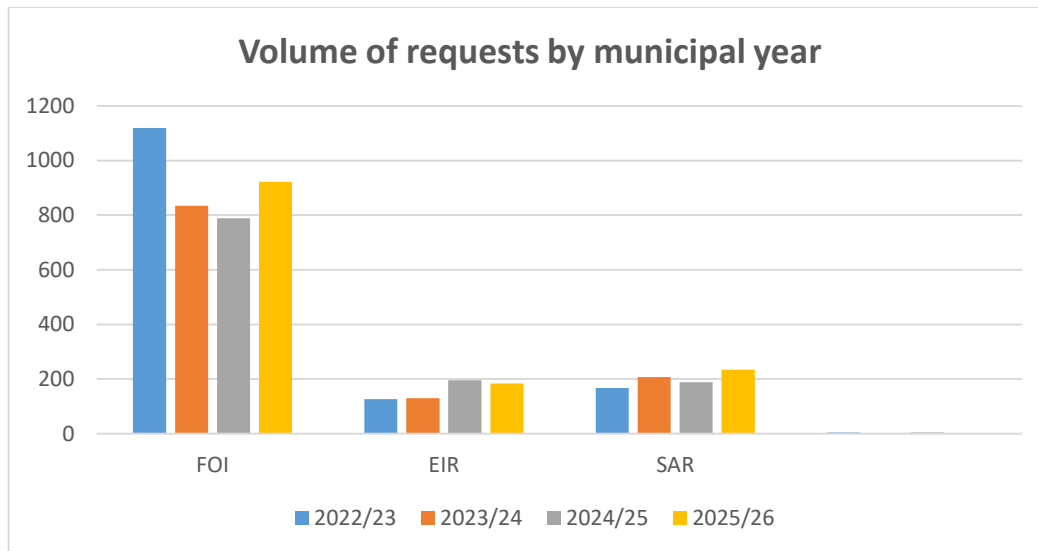
That the information set out in the report is noted.

Key considerations

Requests for information

1. The council is subject to legislation that requires openness and transparency, providing members of the public with rights of access to information. At the same time, the council is also required by legislation to protect certain information from unauthorised disclosure, and to exempt information from being released. The council therefore makes decisions on disclosure of information based on the law and regulatory guidance, occasionally having to balance the public interest in releasing information with the confidentiality of that data and the harm that release would cause. When the council undertakes this balancing exercise, it does so taking into account relevant case law and decision notices.

2. From 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 the council dealt with 922 requests under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000, and 247 requests under the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) 2004.
3. Of those requests, 36 were answered outside of the statutory deadlines (20 working days), meaning that the overall response rate was 97%. This exceeded the council's target of 95% compliance and was within the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) threshold of 90% for responses within deadline. Where information was withheld from disclosure this was because some of the information was exempt (for reasons such as the information consisting of personal data). If information is withheld the reasons for this are explained to the requester.
4. There were 184 more requests received in comparison to the previous municipal year. The total numbers of requests received had been falling year-on-year, but in the last couple of years the totals have started to increase again. We have undertaken work to try and make information publicly available as much as possible to reduce the need for individuals to submit requests. A disclosure log was introduced in 2021, and we publish requests / responses to all FOI and EIR requests except for those which have had an exemption applied for personal data. To date over 3,000 requests / responses have been published to the log. We also try and deal with requests as Business as Usual. These are requests for which the information is already publicly available either on the council's website or disclosure log or are otherwise easily answerable. During the municipal year we dealt with an additional 213 requests as business as usual. Handling them that way ensures a faster response for requesters and reduces the amount of time that service areas have to spend on FOI / EIR requests.
5. 48 requesters asked for an internal review of the response they had received. The number of requests for a review are rising year-on-year, with many being generated by AI. In 32 cases the original decision was upheld in full and in part in 13 cases. 13 cases went onto be referred to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). In 6 case the ICO upheld the council's decision, and we are waiting for the ICO to investigate further in the remaining 7 cases.
6. During the last municipal year there were also 234 requests where individuals asked for personal data about themselves under their right of subject access in data protection legislation. The majority of these are for social care information. The response rate for this period was 78% of requests responded to within the statutory deadlines. This was below the target for the calendar year, which we set at 95% response rate. The processing of these requests is very complex. For each request the Information Governance team have to review every single document to consider whether an exemption applies and redact accordingly. If the request is from a care leaver this can involve reviewing 1000+ documents. During the last year the Information Governance team have worked with officers in the Children & Young People directorate to improve the process, and experience of, individuals making requests for social care information. This included developing new handouts and FAQ's, revising letter templates and developing a glossary of social care terminology; feedback on which was gained from service users.
7. The graph below compares volumes of requests received in the municipal year 2025/26 with volumes received in previous years.



8. [Statistical data](#) on requests processed under FOI and EIR are published on the council's website and updated quarterly.
9. Where other councils publish their FOI / EIR request volume statistics, some informal benchmarking can be made based on requests received in the financial or calendar year, and the council is performing well in comparison to other such councils. During 2025/26, Powys had a response rate of 81%, Gloucestershire County Council 94% and Worcestershire County Council 98%.
10. Information request data is monitored monthly within the council with Corporate Directors provided with monthly Information Governance reports, at the information governance steering group and annually at Corporate Leadership Team. There is a section on processes for staff to follow regarding information requests within the mandatory training completed by all council staff upon joining the council and then annually.
11. The information governance team deals with requests made by the police in relation to criminal investigations to view council information, and requests from other public sector organisations in relation to such matters of investigation of fraud and child protection matters concerning closed social care cases. 50 such requests were received from other organisations. The total number of Police requests fell over the past year, with a total of 54 requests processed, including the locating, proportionate sharing and redaction of records.

Information Governance

12. The council's information governance team also monitors low-level data security incidents, near misses, and allegations of breaches of data protection legislation, of which 307 such cases were reported and dealt with over the past municipal year. Out of these, 1 met the threshold for reporting to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), however no action was taken against the council. The figures reflect that the council has sound processes in place for reporting data incidents, and that there is a high level of awareness from the mandatory training given to all council staff regarding data protection. It also indicates a more open culture around reporting things that have gone wrong. Incidents are reviewed at the information governance steering group and included in monthly reports to Corporate Directors, and learning from incidents is fed back through staff training, communications to officers and changes in processes and procedures.
13. The information governance team also assesses the mandatory data protection impact assessments that are completed for new programmes, projects or systems that involve

processing of personal data, advise on information sharing agreements, implement information security policies and procedures, and ensure that teams make information available on how the council processes personal data.

14. In addition to providing the council with a service, as of April 2026, 39 of the county's schools were signed up to a self-funding school's data protection officer service level agreement. A high-level service and support to schools is provided whether on the end of the telephone or via a face-to-face visit.

Complaints

15. This section of the report provides information on complaints and feedback received by Herefordshire Council for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 that relate to all services within the Council, excluding children's social care. Complaints about that specific service area are managed by a different statutory process and are subject to separate scrutiny.

The aim of the Corporate Complaints Procedure is to make sure that:

- Complaints are dealt with to a fair and consistent standard
- The Council responds to complaints in a reasonable timescale
- Outcomes from complaints are documented and shared throughout the Council
- A 'do it once do it right' approach is taken to complaints

The Council has based its complaints procedure on guidance set out in the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's 'Guidance on Running a Complaints System 2009'. The guidance explains the principles underpinning a successful complaints procedure:

16. Performance Metrics

Complaints and compliments have been categorised into each directorate.

There were **482** complaints processed through the Corporate Complaints Policy, a decrease in comparison to 560 received the previous year; a 13.93% decrease.

NB: complaints about Adult Social Care and Children's Services are reported and analysed separately

17. Please see appendix for full details of the Corporate Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2025/2026

Community impact

18. In accordance with the adopted code of corporate governance, the council must ensure that it has an effective performance management system that facilitates effective and efficient delivery of planned services. The council is committed to promoting a positive working culture that accepts, and encourages constructive challenge, and recognises that a culture and structure for scrutiny are key elements for accountable decision making, policy development, and review.

This report provides information about the council's performance in handling complaints and requests for information from members of the public, in order to provide assurance that the council handles requests and complaints effectively and derives learning from them to improve experiences for those who receive services from the council. It also provides information about the measures taken to protect personal data under the data protection legislation.

Environmental Impact

19. The council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.

Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the council's Environmental Policy, including through encouraging complaints and requests for information to be submitted electronically to the council.

Equality duty

20. This report is for information only and therefore there are no equality duty implications arising directly from this report.

Resource implications

21. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, which is for information. As outlined above however, there are risks of fines from the Information Commissioner's Office for breaches of data protection legislation, and compensation payments if the council has acted in a way that results in maladministration and injustice. The council has sufficiently protected the personal data it holds to not incur fines so far.

Legal implications

22. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report itself.

Risk management

23. The risks to the council are of non-compliance with legislation including the UK General Data Protection Regulations, the Data Protection Act 2018, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, and the Local Government Act 1974. Effective operational and governance processes mitigate these risks of non-compliance with information legislation and standards, and maintaining high standards of compliance mitigates risks to the reputation of the council.

Consultees

Not applicable.

Appendices

None.

Background papers

None identified.