

HEVINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL
ACCESS TO INFORMATION POLICY
Adopted December 2024

Purpose

1. The purpose of this policy is to set out the expectations of Hevingham Parish Council (“the Council”) staff and councillors when dealing with requests for information under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 (“the Act”) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (“the EIR”). It takes account of the guidance provided by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO).

The Act - general outline

2. As the Council is a public authority, it is accountable for all aspects of information handling which include the collection, processing, disclosure, and deletion and/or destruction of information. Anyone can make a request to a public body for information, regardless of where they live, or their status and the Council is not required to confirm the identity of the applicant unless there is justification to do so. The information being requested does not have to be included on the Council’s publication scheme for it to be in the scope of the Act.

3. In general, responses to FOI requests are to be completed as soon as is practical but no later than 20 working days after the request was received, unless clarifications or a public interest test are needed for the response work to continue.

The Act - principle

4. The principle of the Act is that people have a right to know about the activities of public authorities, unless there is a good reason for them not to.

5. It is also the case that disclosure of information to one person is the equivalent of it being released to the world at large. This means that disclosure under the Act cannot be conditional, therefore an applicant is free to pass it on without limitations.

The scope of information

6. Information can be held in any format and could include, among other things, maps, documents, both approved and in draft, whether in hard copy or held electronically, the content of emails held by staff and councillors on their private devices as well as devices provided by the Council, handwritten memos and invoices.

7. Typically, information is related to, among other things, statistical data, running costs for the Council and supporting functions, social care matters and planning applications.

8. What is not covered by the Act is personal data for which requests come under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where information being requested includes or makes references to named individuals, due regard is made to their rights and freedoms, under the UK GDPR, before disclosure.

Information and documentation

9. The Act covers information, not documents, which means that:

- An applicant does not have to ask for a specific document (although this is possible)
- A request can be about a specific topic and the requester can expect the Council to gather the relevant information to answer their enquiry, or
- The request might describe other features of the information (e.g., author, date or type of document)

Valid requests

10. The Council is only obliged to respond to valid requests. For a request to be valid it must:
- Be in writing (could be a letter or email) or made via the web, including the *whatdotheyknow.com**
 - Include the applicant's real name
 - Include an address for correspondence
 - Describe the information being requested

* the '*what do they know*' platform has its own rules about the responsible use of the platform which includes the non-inclusion of personal email addresses. These are normally removed automatically from the routine messages, but the Council is to ensure that email addresses included in attachments uploaded to the platform are redacted or removed beforehand.

11. The onus is on the Council to be helpful so if the description of the requested information does not meet the criteria needed, then the Council will work with the requester to establish a workable description.

The general approach of the Council when processing FOI requests

12. The processing of any FOI request is conducted as follows:
- A check is made to determine whether any and all requests being made are valid
 - Acknowledge the request in the first instance and indicate whether the Council does or does not hold the requested information, but only if it is known. *Under the circumstances where sensitive information is being requested, the Council may return a 'we cannot confirm nor deny' statement regarding the possession of the relevant information before further investigations are made.* Include in the response a reference to Annex A of the AIP, the **FOI Complaints Procedure**
 - If clarifications are needed to enable the Council to fulfil its obligations, then the applicant is to be approached without undue delay
 - A check is made as to whether the information being requested is held
 - An initial estimate of the cost of retrieving and disclosing any information is made
 - Where the threshold of £450 (based on 18 hours work at £25 per hour), is exceeded, the Council are not required to proceed, but the applicant will be informed with options
13. Assuming there is information for disclosure, the Council will:
- Undertake the search which will also include requests to councillors to search their personal devices for any information they hold relating to the request
 - Review and decide whether an absolute exemption applies, or whether prejudice and public interest factors must be considered in line with the Act
 - For disclosable materials, decide whether parts of them should be redacted, either because they are not relevant to the request or to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals whose personal data would otherwise be revealed unnecessarily
 - For material that has been redacted or withheld, an explanation is to be provided to the applicant setting out the exemption(s) used
14. The Act requires the Council to respond within 20 working days, where a working day is normally taken to mean Monday to Friday but does not include bank holidays that occur anywhere in the UK. If a public interest test is needed (see the approach to exemptions section below), then an extra 20 working days can be claimed.

Internal Review

15. If the applicant is not satisfied by the response of the Council, they are entitled to ask for an 'internal review'. Such a request must be in writing and be submitted within 40 days of the Council's original (full) response. Unless there is a justifiable reason not to do so, the Council will then revisit the

actions and any related decisions taken in preparing the response. Ideally (but only when possible) involving someone or third parties with appropriate standing, that were not directly involved in the original proceedings. The Council shall provide an updated response to the applicant ideally within 20 working days of the internal review request being made. Where this timeline is not possible, the Council will shall provide an estimated date of delivery to the applicant.

16. The internal review, when completed, is to also include a reminder to the applicant that if they are not satisfied by the findings of the internal review, they can refer the matter to the ICO.

17. It should be noted that undertaking internal reviews is not a statutory requirement, but it is considered good practice to do one, when it has been requested.

Refusal to disclose information

18. There are occasions when the Council is not obliged to provide the information being requested and Part II of the Act sets out the conditions when disclosure is exempt. Where a public interest exemption may apply, the Council shall consider and record both sides of the argument, namely whether information being released is or is not in the public interest. This is important as the rationale behind any decision made may be requested by the ICO should any subsequent complaint result in their intervention.

19. On those occasions when the Council has information but is not obliged, for justifiable reasons, to confirm that such information is held, it is to issue a simple statement that it can 'neither confirm nor deny' it is in possession of the information.

20. Regardless of the scenarios described above, the Council is to provide a response to the applicant, as soon as is practical and no later than 20 working days of the original request, unless a public interest test is being applied (see below). Where appropriate, the response shall include an explanation as to why information is not being disclosed with references to which exemptions are being applied.

The Council's approach to applying exemptions

21. If the requested information could be subject to exemptions or where public interest considerations are necessary, the Council is to:

- Assess the risk of disclosing the requested information
- Decide on the most appropriate exemption where disclosure could be harmful:
 - Absolute as defined in the Act
 - Public Interest (PI) Test (see below)
 - Prejudice & PI Test – need to prove prejudice, then apply the PI Test

22. Public interest broadly speaking is something that the public would benefit from knowing. The Council will need to make a thorough analysis for disclosure as well as non-disclosure to ensure credibility of the reasoning.

Refusal to respond

23. If a request is deemed vexatious or has already been dealt with, then only the briefest of responses will be made with an explanation to that effect. The term vexatious is not strictly defined but a vexatious request can be interpreted as being:

- Manifestly unreasonable/ unjustifiable, inappropriate, or improper use of a formal procedure or
- One that is disproportionate, or giving rise to an unjustified level of disruption, irritation, or distress

24. The Council is to refer to the latest ICO's guidance document on dealing with vexatious requests.

25. In determining whether a request is vexatious, the Council shall also consider:

- The burden being placed upon individual staff members or the Council as a whole
- The motive of the applicant, (to irritate/annoy deliberately)
- Whether a request is a cause of harassment of or distress to staff
- Value or the seriousness of the purpose of the request

26. The Council is to record all decisions regarding vexatious or burdensome requests with references to the salient points of the requests in question and be prepared to provide the justification to the ICO if required.

Information not held

27. For requests for information that the Council does not have, it is not necessary to search elsewhere for information, instead it will respond by either:

- Advising the requester that the Council does not hold the requested information and/or
- Advising the requester of the public authority that is more likely to have the information, if this is already known or
- Transferring the request to the public authority who is known to have the information

Information integrity

28. The Council is to maintain the integrity of the information being held at the time of the request. It is allowed to make routine changes to the information whilst dealing with the request, as long as these would have been made regardless of the request. Scheduled deletion of requested information should be put on hold unless there is a clear justification to proceed.

What Do They Know (WDTK) website

29. A requester is entitled to use the WDTK website to channel requests, rather than addressing the Council directly. WDTK allocate the applicant with a bespoke email address that is used thereafter by all concerned. All correspondence with the applicant, via WDTK, is published on the website for public viewing. For this reason, the email address of the applicant must not be made visible in any correspondence including attachments such as additional letters. Furthermore, documentation that has already been delivered to the applicant by other means, must not be uploaded/attached with correspondence, although it can be referred to, if it is relevant to do so.

EIR general outline

30. The Council is also accountable for all aspects of its various actions which include the collection, processing, disclosure and deletion and/or destruction of information as it relates to environmental matters. Broadly speaking, the way the Council will process such requests mirror that for FOI and are to be handled within 20 working days.

31. There are some notable differences to the FOI process:

- Requests can be made verbally: If this happens the Council is to communicate with the requesting party, in writing, stating its understanding of the request and to seek confirmation to ensure all parties have the same understanding
- The Council may charge fees for responding to EIR requests set at £25 per hour for the locating, retrieval and extraction of the information only. Other costs may apply including 20p per sheet of black and white photocopying or printing and postage – if required.

EIR principles

32. The main principle behind the EIR is that people have a right to know about the activities of public authorities, unless there is a good reason for them not to, that is to say disclosure is the default position unless there is a justifiable reason or exemption.

33. It is also the case that disclosure of information to one person is the equivalent of it being released to the world at large. This means that disclosure under the EIR cannot be conditional to the receiver not passing on the information.

34. Requests do not need to be justified and all requests are to be treated equally and no consideration of who the requester is to be made.

The scope of information

35. Information can be held in any format and could include, among other things, maps, documents, both approved and in draft, whether in hard copy or held electronically, the content of emails held by staff and councillors on their private devices as well as devices provided by the Council, handwritten memos and invoices.

36. Typically, information held may be related to

- street scene
- planning and building control
- Pollution and/or contamination levels
- Wildlife/conservation
- Parking/traffic management
- energy production
- waste and recycling
- new house builds and maintenance

37. If it is not clear whether a request is under EIR or under the Act, the Council is to seek advice from South Norfolk and Broadland District Council or the ICO.

38. The EIR does not cover personal data for which requests are handled by subject access request processes which comes under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where information includes or makes references to named individuals, due regard is made to their rights and freedoms, set out in the UK GDPR, before disclosure.

The general approach of the Council when processing requests under the EIR

39. The processing of any EIR request is to be conducted as follows:

- Assess the risk of disclosure
- Identify if an exemption applies
- Consider whether there would be an adverse effect with disclosure
- Compile evidence (or provide a demo) as to what is likely to happen
- Apply the public interest test

40. Assuming there is information for disclosure, the Council will:

- Undertake the search which will also include requests to councillors to search their personal devices and/or for copies of any correspondence that they may have
- Review the findings and decide whether an absolute exemption applies, or whether prejudice and public interest factors must be considered in line with the EIR
- For disclosable material, decide whether parts of it should be redacted, either because it is not relevant to the request or to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals whose personal data would otherwise be revealed unnecessarily

Refusal to respond

41. The Council may have justifiable reasons for not disclosing information which are similar to those for FOI requests. Exemptions may apply and reference to the relevant section of the EIR is to be referred to in any response. For instance, Section 12 (5) shall be considered whereby a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that its disclosure would have an adverse effect on, for instance, international relations, defence, national security or public safety.

External support for FOI and EIR

42. When requests are of a complex or sensitive nature, the Council is to consider using external support services, such as the ICO or an external data protection specialist/ appropriate third party. In the

case of the latter, a data processing agreement and/or a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) is to be in place between the Council and the third party, prior to disclosure of information, confidential or otherwise.
Annex A to the Access to Information Policy

FOI Complaints Procedure

In the event that a requester is not satisfied with the outcome of the Council's response, they are entitled to raise a complaint as follows:

In the case where the Council has made its first full response, the requester may request the Council to conduct an Internal Review in line with the following sequence:

- A request must be in writing and be submitted within 40 days of the Council's full response
- Unless there is a justifiable reason not to do so, the Council will then revisit the actions and any related decisions taken in preparing its full response
- Ideally (but only when possible) the Council will involve someone or a third party with appropriate standing, who were not directly involved in the original proceedings
- The Council will provide an updated response to the applicant within 20 working days of the internal review request being made, but if this timeline is not possible the Council will shall provide an estimated date of delivery to the applicant

The Council recognises that whilst it is good practice to do an internal review, it may choose not to do one.

In the case where the Council does not consider an internal review is appropriate or the requester is not satisfied with the outcome of the internal review then:

- The requester is entitled to complain to the ICO using the contact details provided by the Council in the previous correspondence
- If the requester chooses to complain, they will be referred to as the Complainant thereafter
- If the ICO believes there is merit in the complaint, it will assign a case officer and reference number to initiate an investigation
- The ICO will inform the Council of the investigation and request the Council to undertake certain activities
- The Council will cooperate fully with the ICO in all aspects of the investigation

It should be noted that just because the ICO initiates an investigation, it does not imply any wrongdoing by the Council; it is only a procedural step to resolve the complaint. At the conclusion of the investigation, the ICO may issue a Decision Notice that will be sent to both the Council and the Complainant. It will also publish an anonymised version on the ICO's website. The Decision Notice may instruct the Council to undertake further action. If the ICO agrees with the course of action previously taken by the Council, it will state that no further steps are needed.

There are circumstances where the ICO does not issue a Decision Notice, typically where it asks the Council to respond directly to the Complainant to resolve the matter.