

FOI Officers: Their Value and Influence

FOI Practitioners' Conference 2022

Paul Gibbons

FOI and DP Practitioner



The Linchpin

In testing whether a Freedom of Information regime is meeting its objectives, it is no good making a judgement on the basis of the statute alone...legislation would be valueless unless supported by an administration that creates records systematically, retrieves them efficiently, and then provides them promptly. And so [FOI] administrators are critical to the success of [FOIA].

Lord Falconer on UK FOIA in 2004

The FOI officer, as the gatekeeper for the public body's FOI requests and conduit both to the requester and decision maker, is the linchpin of a public body's capability in relation to FOI.

Irish FOI Code of Practice

FOI Officers around the world

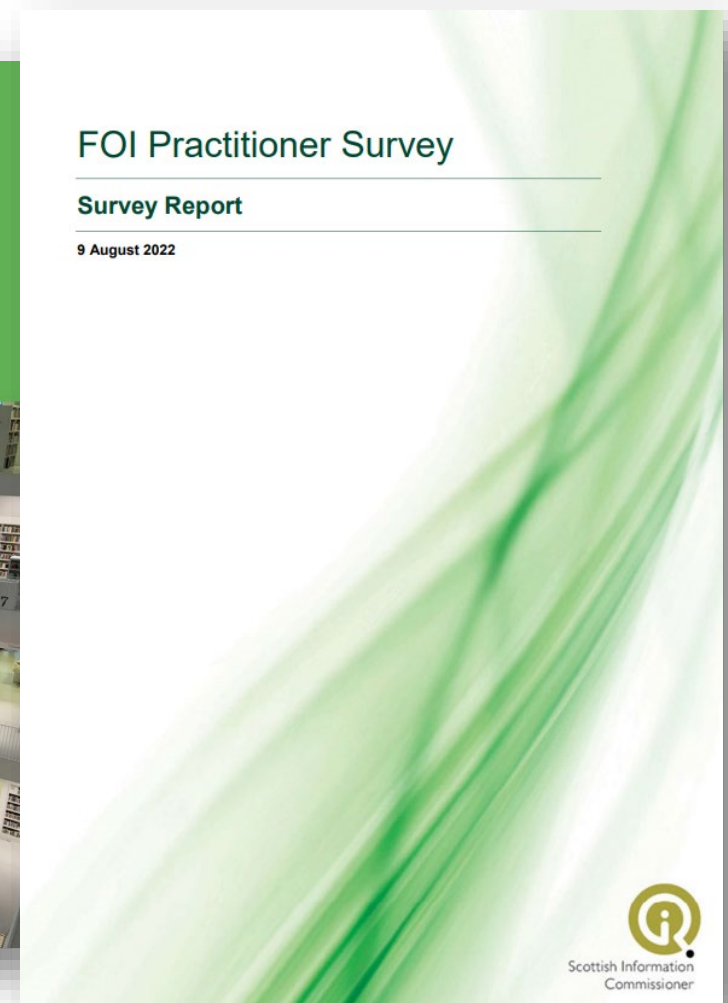
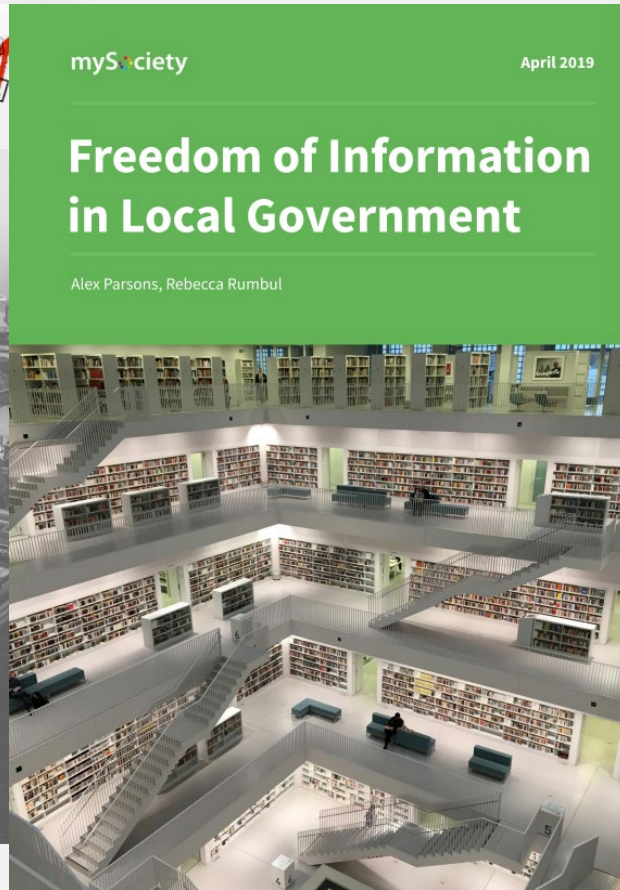
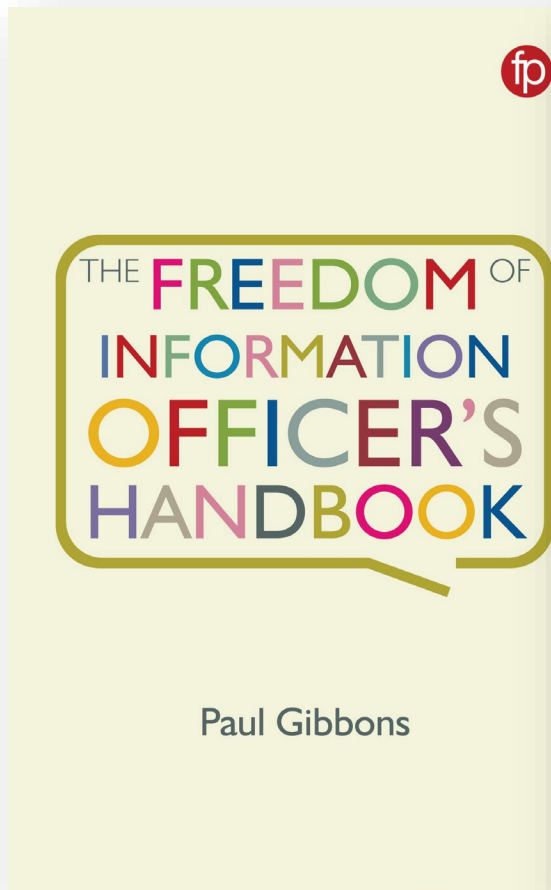
USA:
statutory
Chief FOI
Officers in
Govt
agencies

Mexico: 'Liaison
Section' has to
be appointed

Have to publish contact details of
named officer (Australia, Malta)

India: Public
Information
Officers have to
be appointed

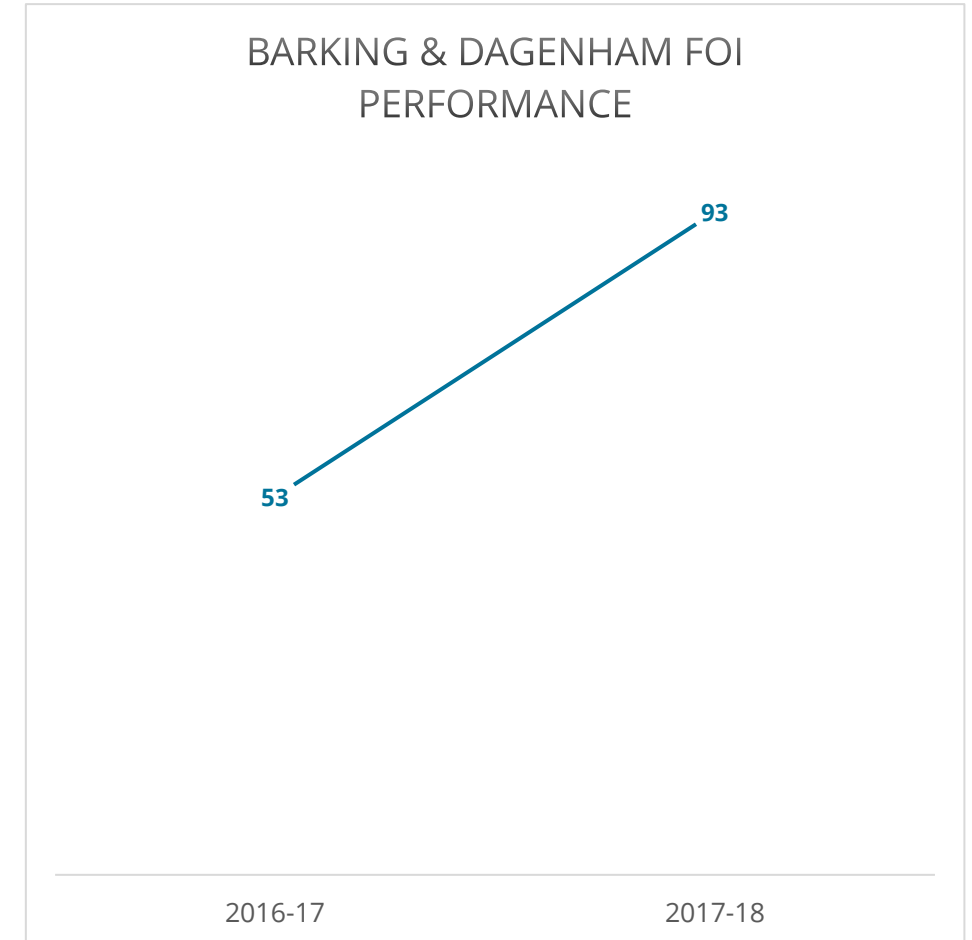
Research on FOI Officers in UK



How essential are we?

A study of local councils in London in 2018-19 found:

- Bromley axed their central FOI team in 2012...performance against deadlines reduced from 77% in 2014 to 64% in 2017-18
- Newham's FOI Officer was away in 2015/16; performance slipped to 66%. On their return: 90%+
- Barking and Dagenham outsourced their FOI function then brought it back in-house in 2015 after years of declining performance...

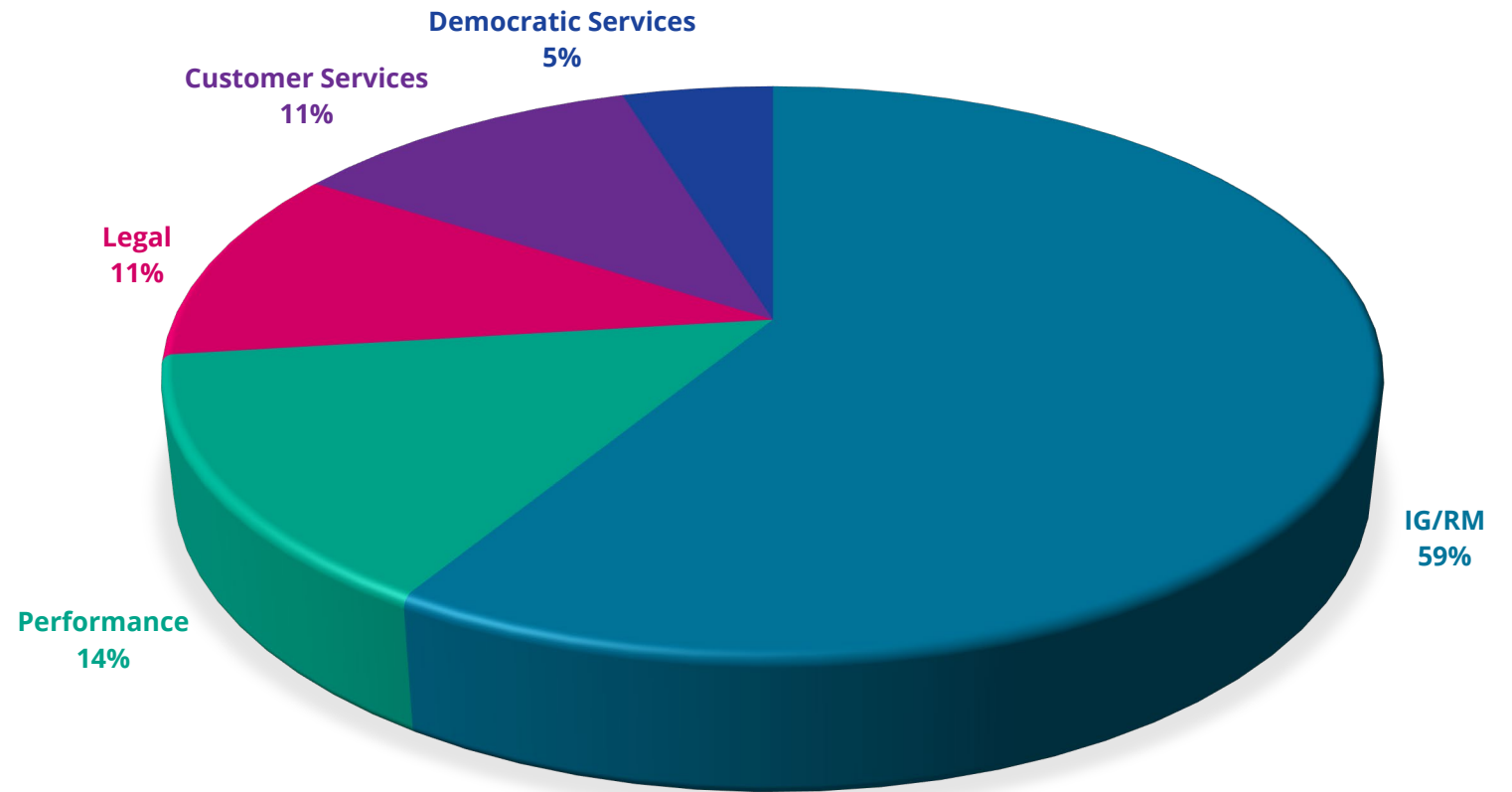


Where do we fit in/what else do we do?

My English councils
research 2017-18 59%
IG/RM

MySociety research
2019: 67.6% Data
Protection

OSIC Survey 2022:
76.4% Data Protection;
58.5% RM



Training and support

...adequate resources for the FOI function including a dedicated FOI resource

... bespoke training sessions for practitioners

... nationally accredited FOI Training for practitioners with a recognised qualification

Responses to OSIC survey

- Median FOI resource in all surveys is 1...yet volumes and complexity often increasing
- MySociety survey in 2019 found that only 27.2% of respondents had a professional qualification

What is our value?

- enhancing reputation (51% agree FOI enhances trust (and 59% don't agree that FOI doesn't enhance trust!); 77% more open and accountable; 51% FOI improves public engagement)
- saving money (55% think FOI serves as a check on wasteful public expenditure)
- soft benefits: knowledge of organisation; independence of thought

80% believe
advice is valued
(OSIC Practitioner
Survey)

Where do we go next?



- As a profession...are we a profession?
- Individually...
 - CPD – what are your goals?
 - Use your transferrable skills to do something else?
 - Are there enough opportunities for FOI Officers to do FOI?

Thank you!

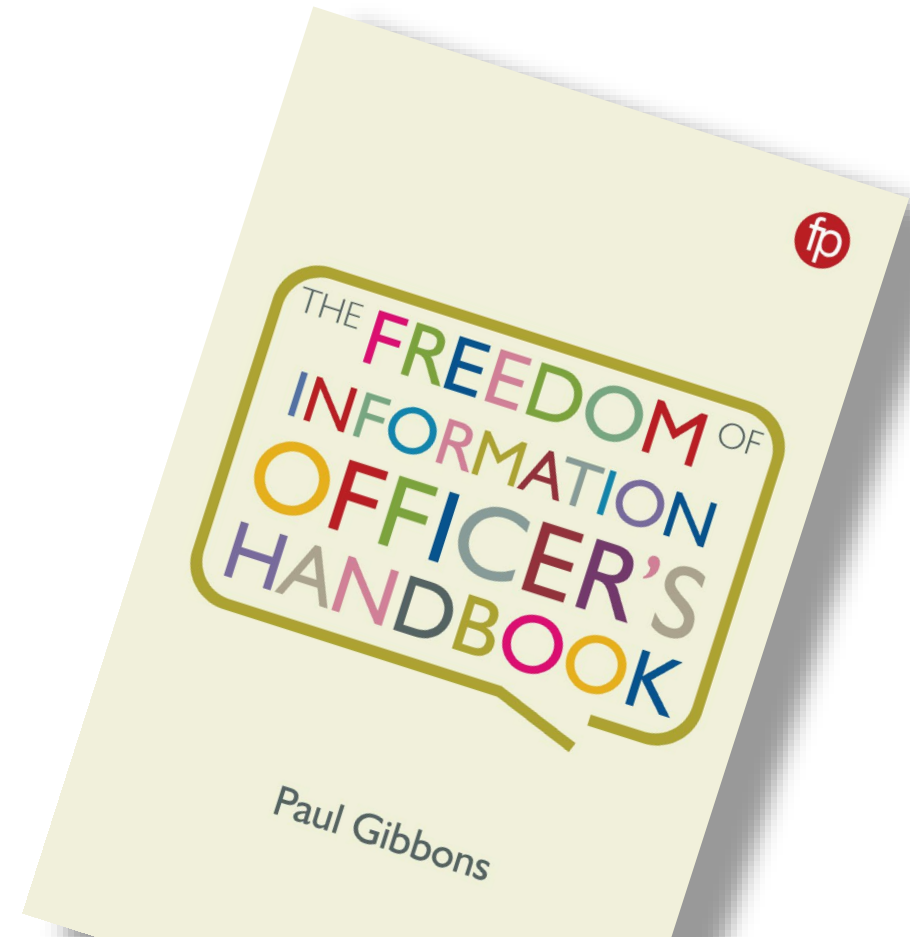
www.foiman.com



[@foimanuk](https://twitter.com/foimanuk)



paul@foiman.com



30% Discount
Quote FOIBLOG30 when
ordering from
facetpublishing.co.uk