MP expense scandal proves trigger for Fol request rise

English councils have been hit with a 20% rise in Freedom of Information (FoI) requests, according to a survey on the impact of the legislation on the sector (see analysis, opposite). The research from University College London’s Constitution Unit estimates that some 45,099 additional requests were lodged in 2009 compared with 2008, making an annual total of 164,508 (see figures, right). The figure is based on a survey of information officers at English local authorities and builds on the 2008 figure of 118,508, itself a 48% rise on the previous year.

Researchers at UCL have been tracking the effects of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests, which are treated as FoIs for the purposes of the survey since their introduction in 2005. Responses were received from about two-thirds of English authorities, with the parliamentary expenses scandal highlighted as a primary reason for increased interest and awareness of FoIs. The recession was also cited as a driver for spending-related information. Ben Worthy, lead researcher at UCL, said it was too early to say whether the slowing of the rate of increase may represent the start of a levelling off of demand for FoIs. “It’s still a significant increase, but just not as high as it was last year,” he said (see comment, below).

“IT may be because Fol requests have reached satiation point, or because local authorities are publishing more information now,” Mirza Ahmad, corporate director of governance at Birmingham City Council, said he was surprised the rate of increase was down, but pointed to other factors. “What the figures don’t tell us is the level of complexity of questions,” he said.

“Our experience is that there is a majority in the market and that people are asking more focussed questions.”

The number of Freedom of Information Act (FoI) requests continues to rocket, University College London’s latest survey of the legislation’s impact on local government sheds some light on new trends.

As the number of Freedom of Information Act (FoI) requests continues to rocket, University College London’s latest survey of the legislation’s impact on local government sheds some light on new trends. Potential factors reducing the time it takes to compile information for individual responses, but that don’t necessarily mean requests are getting their answers more quickly. The FolA 2009 and local government in 2009: The experience of local authorities in England shows councils took an average of 8.9 staff hours answering individual Fol requests in 2009, a significant reduction on the previous year’s average of 11.6. That increase is responsible for a disproportionately small increase in the estimated cost to councils.

One big event did, however, shade the 2009 findings. The MPs’ expenses scandal led to a wave of requests for government information relating to the salaries and expenses of local officials and politicians. Many officials who spoke to us felt that the scandal had damaged public perceptions of all politicians at whatever level and of whatever party. This may account for the fact that fewer officials now feel Fol is improved relations with the public. The common concerns of those FoIs officers are services and misuse. Resources are not rising to meet request numbers and many officers have spoken to us concerned they are now at capacity with as many requests as it is possible to handle. There is also a feeling that Fol is being ‘misused’, not technically but in a way that is against the spirit of the act. This can come in many forms. It can mean use by journalists to trawl for large amounts of Information or by businesses to gain competitive advantage. It can also mean individuals persisting a grievance. A particularly interesting finding is that so few officials feel Fol is helping local members of the public. It is by no means all relevant. Officers continue to feel that Fol has improved transparency and accountability of local authorities. A growing number of officers also seem to feel that Fol has improved record management within their organisations. Our findings give us an overview of what is happening, but one of the difficulties with looking at local government is the sheer variety of approaches and attitudes.

Local government in England is already open, and Fol has improved that, but some authorities are more open than others. Exactly how open each individual authority is may depend on many factors, and the attitudes of senior officials and politicians towards Fol within each area is crucial. Interestingly, size of local government service is often perceived to have a bearing. The next big question for us is how the publication of all spending over £502 will influence Fol. Will it lead to fewer requests, given that nearly a third of all requests relate to finance? Or will it lead to more as users ask for more background and ‘why’ figures? There is an armchair of armchair auditors waiting to pronounce on Fol's role in the local government landscape. We hope the 2010 survey will tell us.