

Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) FOI project

Short Summary

The members of the AGMA Data Protection (DP) and Freedom of Information (FOI) group work together to develop a common and consistent approach to the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act across Greater Manchester.

The authorities have jointly funded the post of FOI and DP coordinator to organise this activity. Different combinations of group members work on specific projects, the results of which are shared with the group as a whole.

The AGMA district secretaries have regular meetings about the implementation of FOI, and there is also a group of practitioners from each authority, chaired by the FOI coordinator, which meets to discuss questions and problems, and to work on a series of projects. With the FOI coordinator attending both groups, there is a bridge between the two and a clear mandate for work to be taken on and completed.

The FOI coordinator is based at Oldham Council, but visits all of the member authorities to attend internal FOI and DP meetings, sub-group meetings and to give advice on specific issues.

Aims / Objectives:

- to ensure that all of the Greater Manchester Authorities are prepared for the introduction of access rights under the Freedom of Information Act from January 2005
- to develop a common approach when preparing for the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act
- wherever possible, to develop and implement the same tools and standards for dealing with FOI requests so that people requesting information from any council in Greater Manchester receive a consistent response
- to increase the value of staff working on FOI issues by pooling their time and developing projects jointly
- where local circumstances or practicality prevents a single approach from being adopted, to test the strengths and weaknesses of approaches developed at member authority
- to provide support and advice to all members of AGMA who are working on implementing FOI

Results / Outcomes:

- consistent levels of awareness about FOI
- individual and large-scale training procedures and events for staff
- a common approach to, and consistent procedures for, the processing of applications under FOI, and any subsequent appeals or complaints
- a common approach to charging fees

- by amending an existing product with the assistance of the vendor, development of an FOI training package with particular relevance to AGMA councils
- a package of documents to deal with contractual issues (including an FOI information leaflet for contractors, and a standard FOI clause for contracts)
- guidance on the FOI exemptions and 'public interest test' tailored for both front-line staff and decision-makers
- encouraging authorities share the outcomes of work which has been completed inside one council (FOI forms in Bury, contracts in Stockport, or FOI guidance in Wigan) to all members

Measures used to assess the level of achievement

It is difficult to fully assess the overall impact of the project because the FOI Act has not yet been implemented. The effectiveness of measures like a charging procedure cannot be assessed. However, working together has ensured that most aspects of the Department of Constitutional Affairs FOI Action Plan have been or are being met across the ten authorities.

As an early indication of achievement, the project assisted all of the authorities involved to secure approval of their FOI Publication Scheme by the Information Commissioner, and a number have secured further approval following review of their scheme facilitated by the FOI coordinator.

Financial costs

Each authority has contributed towards the post of FOI coordinator. Beyond that, it is impossible to calculate the cost because each member has given the staff time and other resources necessary to make the project work, but the advantages to the authority of giving staff time jointly are likely to be an overall time and resources saving.

Human resources

As well as the FOI coordinator and a recently-appointed Records Management Coordinator employed on a similar basis, each authority has members of staff who work either full or part-time on FOI issues. In addition, specialist advice from legal officers, procurement staff, audit and other specialists is provided by the authorities.

What makes it work, in the authority's view

- clear responsibility on the FOI coordinator to ensure that work is carried out, and each authority meets its targets
- clear decision-making from the District Secretaries, marking out areas where a common approach is deemed necessary or valuable
- willingness by all members to work on projects which benefit the rest of the group as well as the individual authority

Evaluation or assessment of impact of work in the community

The biggest impact on individuals will be when full access rights under Freedom of Information Act are implemented in January 2005. Only when members of the public are making requests and receiving responses will it be clear whether our preparations have been sufficient and the success or otherwise of the project will become apparent. However, the AGMA will have considered problems and requirements in advance, and pooled resources to deal with them.