

THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLTON

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

HANDLING REQUESTS : A guide for all staff

1. Rights to information

From 1 January 2005 the Freedom of Information Act provides members of the public with new rights of access to recorded information held by public authorities, including Universities. These rights are, however, subject to a range of exemptions that aim to preserve confidentiality or to serve the public interest and allow the University to withhold information.

The Act gives applicants two new rights:-

- to be told whether it holds information of the description specified in the request and, if that is the case,
- to have the information communicated to them, subject to specific exemptions.

The intention is to promote greater openness and accountability and serve the public interest with a move to increased transparency in how organisations operate and carry out their responsibilities.

2. Summary

- Enquiries and requests for information are to be managed locally.
- Most enquiries and requests should be easily dealt with.
- All staff should be aware of our new duties.
- Ask, if it's not clear how to respond: consult with colleagues, your line manager or the Registrar.
- Familiarise yourself with the University's Publication Scheme.
- Further detailed guidance is available from the University website and Registrar.
- Any requests received from journalists are to be referred to the Registrar in the first instance.

3. Duties of the University

The Freedom of Information (Fol) Act requires the University to:

- Respond to a valid, written request for information within 20 working days. This includes letter, fax and e-mail. Requests can be addressed to any member of staff.
- Produce and regularly review a Publication Scheme. The University of Bolton's Publication Scheme is available at <http://www.bolton.ac.uk/freedom>
- Endeavour to provide the information requested in the format requested.
- Provide advice and assistance to enquirers and applicants. We may need to seek clarification of the information requested but will not ask why the information is required.
- Take proper consideration of the grounds for refusing to disclose the information, including exemptions.
- Explain a refusal to supply information in writing, informing the applicant of our complaints procedure and their subsequent right to complain to the Information Commissioner.

4. Procedure for handling requests for information (for all staff)

Summary:

Most requests for information will reflect the normal business of the University and will be easily satisfied by providing the documents or web-links already prepared for such purposes (for example, leaflets and prospectuses). In dealing with these, there is no need to add to the administrative burden. Most requests should be dealt with locally by each School, Department or Unit. However, requests received from journalists should be referred to the Registrar in the first instance (please see the Freedom of Information flowchart for action).

If the request falls outside your normal remit and the information cannot or should not be supplied, please seek advice from your line manager, Contracts and Compliance Officer or the Registrar.

4.1 Potential applicants including personal visitors and telephone callers should be:

- Provided with suitable guidance to help them identify the information required.
- Advised to consult The University of Bolton's website and Publication Scheme if appropriate.
- Advised to put their request in writing if it cannot be dealt with immediately.

4.2 Written requests for information

- A valid request must include the applicant's name, contact address and clearly state the information required.

- If the information required is to be found on our website, via our Publication Scheme, or is available from elsewhere, the applicant should be directed to the information source. Once so directed, the enquiry is closed.
- The Publication Scheme is a reference tool or catalogue guiding the public to information the University has prepared for public consumption.
- If not otherwise available, you must decide if release is straightforward and can be supplied free of charge (an “easy” request). If so, collect and supply the information requested and file the request.
- If it is not an “easy” request, please consult your line manager, Contracts and Compliance Officer or the Registrar. Further procedures and guides are available covering complex requests. (See Handling Requests : a management guide)
- It is advised that requests are date stamped on receipt (we have 20 working days to respond to each request).
- The processing of requests for personal information is governed by the Data Protection Act and the University’s Data Protection Policy and should be forwarded to the relevant School, Department or Unit.
- It may be necessary to assess whether to charge a fee. Please refer to our “Guide to Charging Fees (Freedom of Information)”.
- If appropriate, forward the request to the most appropriate School, Department or Unit. Reply to the applicant informing them that their enquiry has been forwarded to a more appropriate source.

5. Further guidance

This is one of a suite of policies, procedures and guides produced in response to the Freedom of Information Act and codes of practice.

“Freedom of Information Procedure – Handling Requests: a management guide” will provide the next level of detailed guidance on the management of requests.

In addition, advice and guidance is available from the University website and training can be arranged through the University’s Staff Development Unit.