

Freedom of Information Process Review

An assessment of effort, costs and enhancement opportunities

Spring 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project context, objectives and approach

Context

In British Columbia, the Freedom of Information (FOI) request process is actively used by individuals or organizations seeking access to Government records. The process is facilitated through a centralized team within the Ministry of Citizens' Services (known as Information Access Operations, or IAO) that supports all Government ministries in processing and responding to FOI requests. Historically, this process has been very active, with FOI request volumes ranging between 8,000 to 10,000 annually between 2011/2012 and 2017/2018.

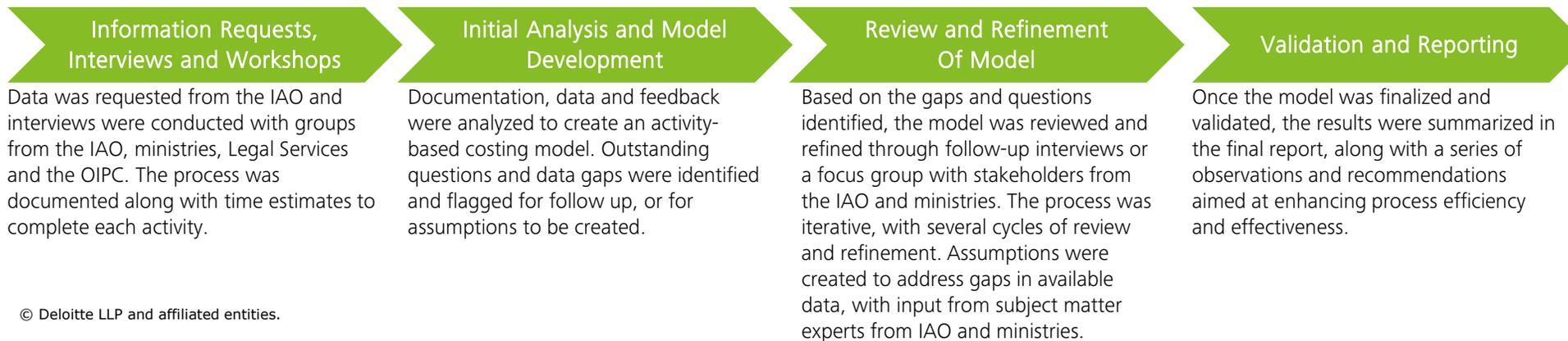
In the 2018/2019 fiscal year, request volumes increased significantly, and by mid-year had surpassed all prior years for the same time period. Further, the complexity of requests also increased during this time. This led to growing FOI workloads and operational pressures within the IAO and across Government Ministries as they worked to process these requests within legally mandated timeframes defined in the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA).

Objectives

As a result of the increased volume and complexity of requests, the Province initiated a project to assess current-state FOI processes within core Government, to determine the effort and costs associated with these processes and to identify opportunities to improve and streamline them. The objective was to identify mechanisms to address the operational pressures being experienced while supporting staff in meeting legislated timelines.

Approach

A four-phased approach was used to gather the information required to document current-state FOI process:



Data Gathering

As FOI processes are active across all ministries, it was necessary to engage a wide range of stakeholders through various processes to capture information regarding the effort and costs involved.

Interviews

- Multiple teams within Information Access Operations
- FOI Coordinators and process subject matter experts in 11 different ministries
- A total of 10 Deputy Ministers and Ministers
- Representatives from Legal Services
- Representatives from the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner

Workshops

- Cross-ministry advisory team comprised of FOI subject matter experts
- Ministry or sector FOI teams

Surveys

- Distributed to FOI coordinators in 22 targeted ministry program areas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key cost drivers identified

Overview

As part of this analysis, each step in the FOI process was documented and analyzed, and for each step the key drivers of effort and cost were identified. These included both external drivers that most commonly increase the effort and cost of responding to a request, as well as key steps in the FOI process that typically involve the greatest effort. These external and internal cost drivers are described below.

Cost Drivers

1. Applicant requests that are unspecific, unclear or too broad – these requests typically require significant effort by both the IAO and ministry staff to follow up, clarify the request, and where needed, support ongoing dialogue between the requestor and the staff responding to the request.
2. Number of organizations involved in a request – many of the steps in the FOI process are repeated for each ministry, division or branch involved in a request. As more organizations are engaged in a request, the total effort and cost increases proportionally.
3. Developing disclosure recommendations for a complex harms assessment – harms assessments are required for all requests to provide the context necessary to determine what information should be considered for redaction (based on exceptions defined in FIPPA). Complex harms assessments increase the effort associated with the preparation, review and approval of FOI packages.
4. Large volumes of records received from ministry group(s) – where requests result in large volumes of records generated by each organization involved, the harms assessment, review and approval times increase proportionally.
5. Variable records management practices – search time is typically greater in organizations with limited or inconsistent records management processes.
6. High duplicate record volumes – in an FOI package, each page of every responsive record must be reviewed prior to release. In packages with significant volumes of duplicates or near-duplicates, review time increases proportionally in order to confirm that the harms assessment is thorough and redactions are applied consistently and appropriately.
7. Multi-staged ministry review cycles – as organizational structures vary across ministries, some organizations have more extensive engagement in the review cycle, which can lead to an increase in effort and cost at this step in the process.
8. E-mailing large record files internally or to applicants – due to size limits for email attachments, large FOI packages must be distributed across multiple files and emailed separately. This step introduces additional processing time for senders and recipients.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Costs associated with FOI processes for core Government

Overview

Over the past two years, the Province of British Columbia has observed increasing numbers of FOI requests, with fiscal 2018/19 projected to be up to 18% higher than the previous year. An activity-based costing approach was used to develop an estimate of the combined effort and costs associated with processing FOI requests by IAO and BC Government ministries. The following summarizes the approach taken, key assumptions and limitations.

FOI-related Costs

From start-to-finish, the FOI process can involve up to 14 steps, delivered between the IAO and ministries responding to a “General Request” (requests for records of a non-personal nature) and up to 11 steps for “Personal Requests” (requests from individuals accessing their personal information held by BC Government ministries). These steps are distributed between the IAO (which provides centralized coordination, analysis and support activities) and ministries, which respond to the request.

As the IAO is a centralized organization processing thousands of FOI requests annually, the approach to each IAO step is relatively consistent and regularly monitored. For IAO-related steps, it was therefore possible to use activity-based costing to develop detailed effort estimates and to attribute direct and indirect costs to these processes. As FOI processes across Government ministries are highly variable, it was necessary to augment the activity-based costing approach with several assumptions in order to arrive at estimated costs for ministry-related processes and create an aggregated total for FOI-related activities for all of Government. The estimated total costs of FOI processes were therefore developed as a range to account for this variability and for the recent changes in the nature and scope of requests (this range also accounts for variability in salary ranges of the resources contributing to the direct labour costs).

Total estimated costs (see sidebar) are comprised of direct labour costs (estimated through activity-based costing), direct legal services costs and indirect costs (e.g. management, training, software licenses, facilities costs, etc.). The total costs captured represent the level of effort from the IAO and ministries in responding to FOI requests, certain proactive disclosure activities performed for frequently requested records and indirect costs that support the process. The costs for Legal Services represent the support provided to the IAO and Ministries with respect to an inquiry with the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC). The total cost does not include OIPC’s cost to respond to inquiries.

Total Direct & Indirect Costs (per year)

Direct Costs: \$19.5M – \$28.4M

Indirect Costs*: \$2.9M - \$4.3M

Legal Services**: \$450K

Total - \$23M - \$33M

**Indirect costs include: management overhead, training and IT licensing costs*

*** Fixed cost obtained from FY17/18 actuals*

\$28M – Total Median Cost

\$3,000 – Average Cost Per Request

Total Cost per Request Type

 **General Requests**
\$13.5M-\$22.3M

 **Personal Requests**
\$9M-\$10.4M

Legal Services**: \$450K

Total - \$23M - \$33M

*** Fixed cost obtained from FY17/18 actuals*



INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The report is presented in sections that proceed in the following order

Executive Summary	Concise overview of the report's contents.	P. 4-6
Introduction	Provides context, background and objectives for the report, as well as information on the history of FOI in BC.	P. 7-12
Approach and Methodology	Outlines the approach to gathering and analyzing data, addressing variability of FOI processes within Government and calculating the total cost to Government for administering all FOI processes.	P. 13-18
FOI Process Overview	Offers detailed descriptions of the types of FOI requests and all steps involved in each process, as well as explaining the assumptions used for estimating costs.	P. 19-23
Current State Findings	Explains the calculated total cost to Government for administering the FOI process, as well as a breakdown of the costs for each process step.	P. 24-27
Observations and Recommendations	Recommendations to improve the overall efficiency and security of the FOI process, based on qualitative information gathered.	P. 28-39
Jurisdictional Scan	A review of approaches from other jurisdictions to costing FOI request processes.	P. 40-43

INTRODUCTION

As a pillar of a well functioning modern democracy, transparency of information between Government and citizens can strengthen the trust between Government institutions and the public.

In the Province of British Columbia, Government transparency is in part supported through the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA). FIPPA is the legislative tool that enables the public to request and obtain records from BC public bodies. The BC Government's approach to meeting its obligations under FIPPA includes regular, proactive disclosures as well as formalized processes and accountabilities to support responses to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from a range of stakeholders. An FOI request occurs when a member(s) of the public seek(s) records from the BC Government that are not currently available in the public domain. Note that while transparency is supported through FIPPA, the BC Government also has several other resources and programs to provide open information and data to the public, with the intent of FOI requests being used as a last option for records not otherwise available.

The obligation of a public body under FIPPA is to disclose all Government records that are responsive to FOI requests, except in instances where FIPPA requires or permits exceptions to disclosure. Therefore, two key components of the FOI process include identifying responsive records and the analysis to protect information and make disclosure recommendations (such exceptions are described in Part 2 of FIPPA).

FOI requests are eligible for fees—however the fees are not intended to be a cost recovery mechanism. Fees can be charged if the effort to search and gather records exceeds three hours. The BC Government received \$50K-\$60K in fees for fiscal 2017/18, which accounts for approximately 0.2% of the total cost to the BC Government of responding to FOI requests.



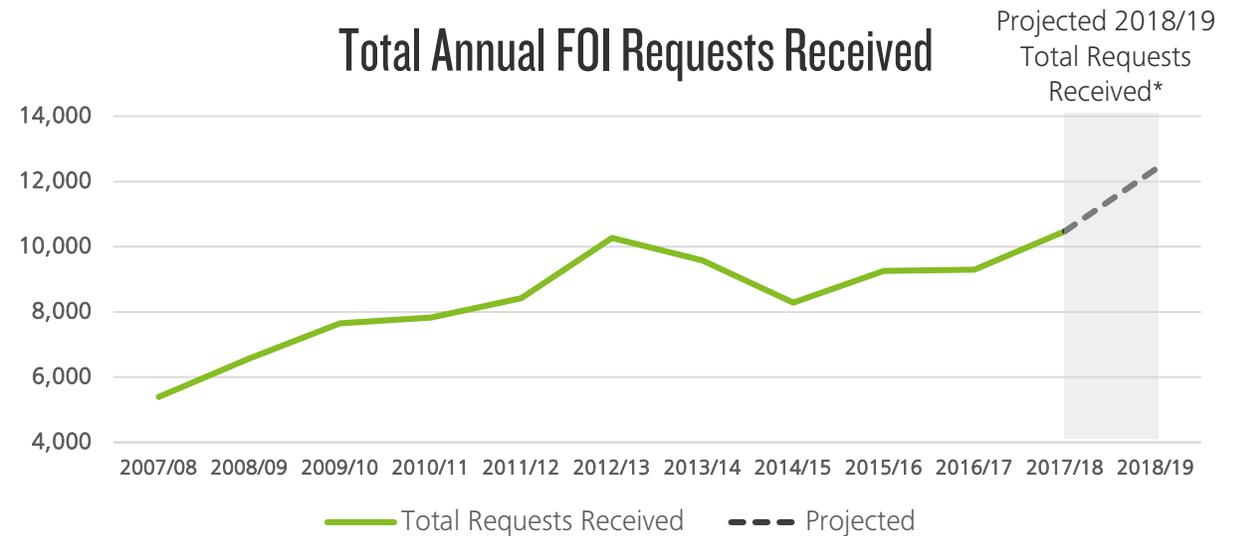
CONTEXT FOR THE FOI REVIEW

Understanding the impact of increased annual FOI requests received by the BC Government

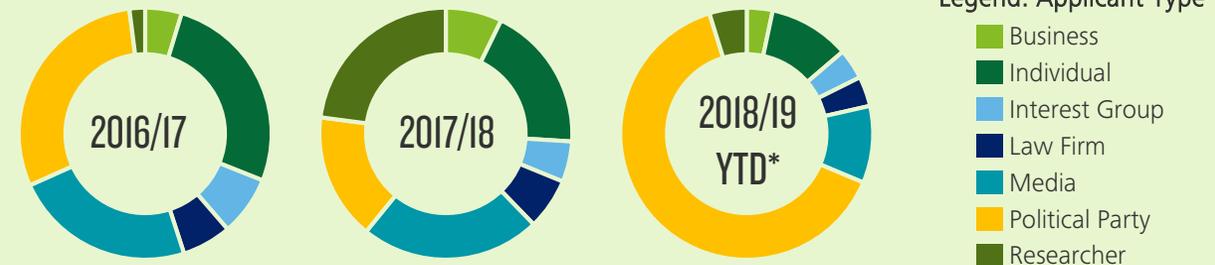
The FOI process in BC is actively utilized, with the province’s core Government receiving between 8,000-10,000 requests per year since 2011/2012. As illustrated in the adjacent figure, over the past 10 years, the volume of requests received by the BC Government has moved upward over time. In the current fiscal year of 2018/19, General FOI Requests to date have surpassed all prior totals for the same period since FIPPA was brought into force in 1993. If this trend is extended to the end of this fiscal year, total request volumes are anticipated to be 18% higher than any previous year. The increase has been led by an increase in General Requests from Political Party applicants, which account for 64% of all General Requests, year to date in 2018/19. The increase in volumes, when combined with the complexity of requests, has resulted in operational pressures with impacts felt across Government.

As a result of this increased volume, the Province engaged Deloitte to conduct an assessment of current state FOI processes within core Government to identify the total and per-request costs of the FOI process, as well as recommendations for process improvements. This included performing an assessment of costs and cost drivers in order to identify opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these processes.

Total Annual FOI Requests Received



General Requests Received by Applicant Type



The composition of General Requests by Applicant Type has evolved significantly over the past three years, with the largest increase observed for requests initiated by the “Political Party” applicant type.

*YTD Projected rate based on year to date actuals from August 31, 2018

OBJECTIVES OF THIS REVIEW

This document highlights findings and recommendations captured from a review of the FOI process to better understand the total cost of supporting and responding to FOI requests to the BC Government. The findings and recommendations are based on an activity-based costing approach that was leveraged to gain a detailed understanding of the underlying cost drivers for each step of the FOI process, as well as qualitative insights captured from interviews, surveys and one focus group.

The review aims to achieve the following review objectives:



Current State Review

Understand the total cost of responding to FOI requests through an activity-based costing methodology.



Observations and Recommendations

Capture insights and observations that could lead to recommendations for improvements in the FOI process.



Jurisdictional Comparison

Draw insights from comparable jurisdictions on FOI practices, as well as identify relevant costing studies of FOI processes.

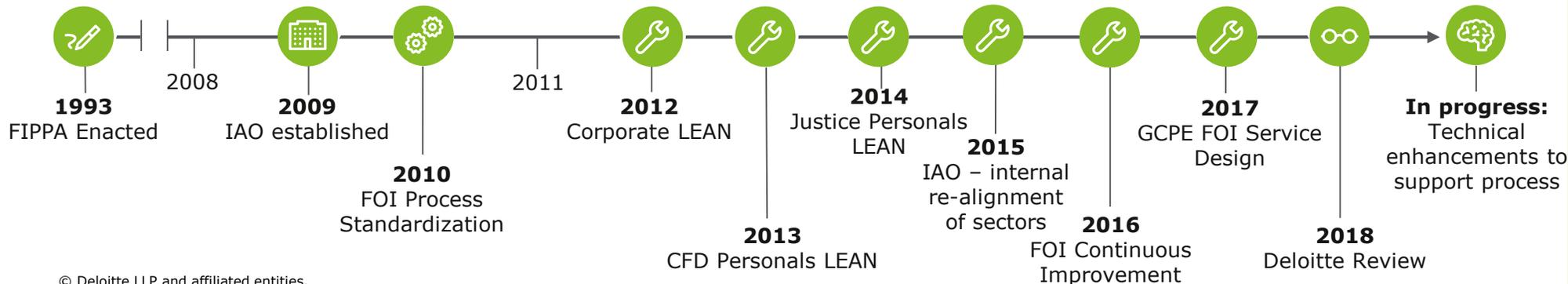
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The report’s findings and recommendations make reference to several key groups that provided input and data through the data gathering and analysis phases of the review. The following four groups play a regular role in supporting the FOI process and were actively engaged for the report:

- **Information Access Operation (IAO):** The IAO provides centralized FOI services to BC Government ministries. The IAO performs the intake of requests, acts as a point of contact to the public applicant throughout the process, analyzes records and makes disclosure recommendations, and supports ministries by providing clarification and input on application of FIPPA legislation. The IAO’s main system for tracking FOI requests is named ‘AXIS’.
- **Ministries:** BC Government ministries are responsible for searching for and providing relevant records in response to an applicant’s requests, providing IAO with harms assessments (i.e. guidance on any harm that might be caused by public release of records) and approval (or delegation of approval) of records for release.
- **Office of the Information Privacy Commissioner (OIPC):** As an independent office from Government, the OIPC provides independent oversight and enforcement of BC’s privacy and access laws. Inquiries pertaining to FOI requests and the process can be escalated to the OIPC for resolution.
- **Legal Services:** The BC Government’s internal Legal Services Branch supports the IAO and ministries on inquiries raised to the OIPC.

Hybrid Centralized FOI Delivery Model

FIPPA was enacted in 1993, and in 2009 the BC Government created the IAO branch that operates within the Ministry of Citizens’ Services’ Corporate Information and Records Management Office (CIRMO). Since its creation in 2009, the IAO has undertaken several initiatives aimed at improving the service it provides to the public and to ministries, and the efficiency with which it delivers centralized FOI services. Below is a summary of several such initiatives since the IAO was created.



Ministry Acronyms

The following are the ministry acronyms used within this report. Note that these are based on how the ministries are represented within AXIS, and may not follow naming conventions used in other Government publications.

AED	Advanced Education and Skills Training
AGR	Agriculture
MAG	Attorney General
CFD	Children and Family Development
CTZ	Citizens' Services
EDU	Education
EMP	Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources
MOE	Environment and Climate Change Strategy
FIN	Finance
FNR	Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development
HTH	Health
IRR	Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
JTT	Jobs, Trade and Technology
LBR	Labour
MHA	Mental Health and Addictions
MAH	Municipal Affairs and Housing
OOP	Office of the Premier
PSS	Public Safety and Solicitor General
MSD	Social Development and Poverty Reduction
TAC	Tourism, Arts and Culture
TRA	Transportation and Infrastructure

APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

Section Overview

In this section...



At a high level, we lay out the iterative approach taken to gather and analyze all data and information associated with the FOI request process, including:

- Gathering qualitative and quantitative data
- Developing assumptions
- Reviewing inputs and refining outputs



We discuss our approach to addressing variability in processes



We highlight the numerous outputs received from various groups across Government (IAO, Ministries, Legal Services, OIPC)



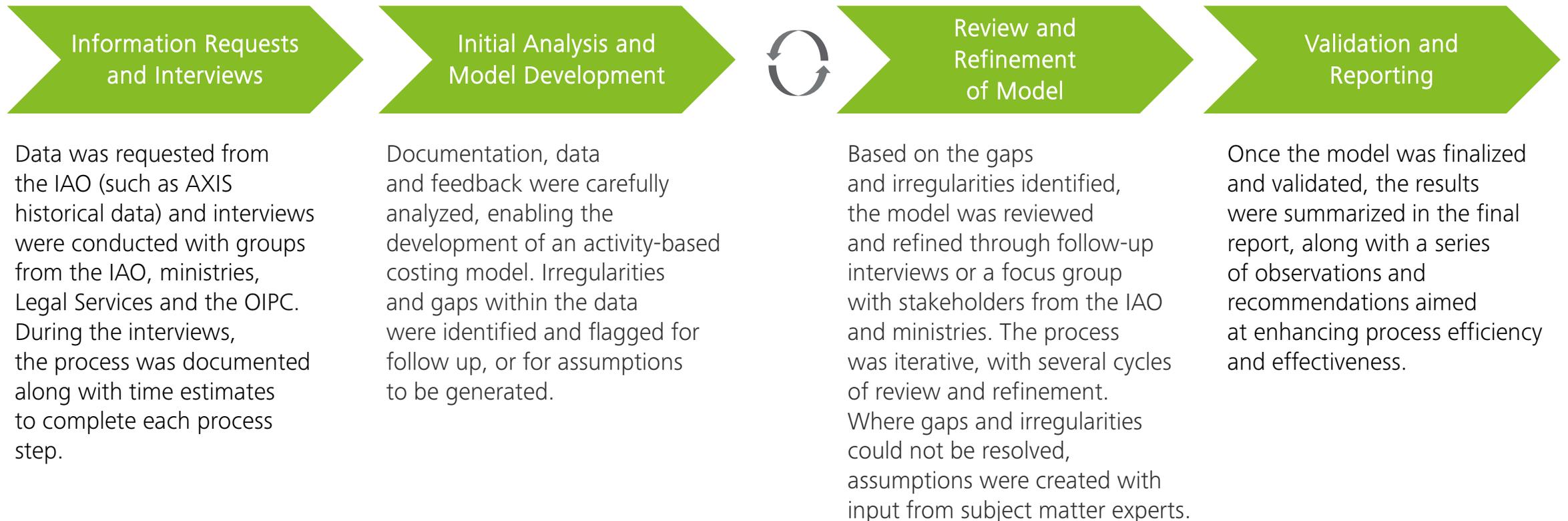
We outline our methodology for calculating total costs to Government for administering the FOI process

OVERVIEW OF COSTING APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Using an activity-based costing methodology to capture the total cost of responding to FOI requests and the details of the response process

FOI Review Costing Analysis Iterative Approach

Due to the cross-Government reach of the FOI request process, the substantial manual effort and the lack of a consistent end-to-end process for tracking and monitoring requests, it was necessary to take an iterative approach to data gathering, analysis and estimating costs to ensure that our findings and analyses were appropriate. The following diagram outlines the key steps in this iterative approach.



OVERVIEW OF COSTING APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

An activity-based costing approach was applied to estimate FOI process costs

Activity-based Costing

In order to identify cost drivers and total costs, an activity-based costing methodology was applied to capture the direct and indirect costs for FOI requests through interviews with key groups that support FOI requests across the BC Government. Due to significant variability in execution for certain process steps, and the fact that it was not possible to consult all parties involved, an average level of effort for standard activities was captured for the process steps that occur within ministries. In contrast, detailed activity estimates were obtained for processes performed by the IAO by using data tracked in AXIS.

Activity-based Costing Quantitative Analysis

To develop an understanding of the total cost to Government of responding to FOI requests, data gathering activities were divided based on types of costs, which include direct costs (the costs that are traceable to an individual request) and indirect costs (the costs incurred in providing the FOI service but are not traceable to individual requests).

- **Direct Costs:** The FOI request process is largely supported by labour performed by Government resources (i.e. staff time used searching for documents, reviewing and checking records, etc.). As a result, the direct labour inputs include gaining an understanding of key process activities, the average level of effort per process activity and the volume of requests. These inputs provide the necessary information to measure direct costs through the following equation:

$$\text{Process Step Time} \times \text{Annual Volume} \times \text{Resource Rate} = \text{Annual Direct Labour Cost}$$

- **Indirect Costs:** All other costs not directly traceable to individual FOI requests are applied through indirect overhead, such as management, training, technology licensing and support, etc. The indirect costs were retrieved from standard operating budget reports and any other relevant financial reports.

Qualitative Inputs and Observations

During the interviews with key resources actively engaged in supporting the FOI process, careful attention was also applied to capturing recommendations and opportunities for improvement, such as process and technology improvements. A broad group of stakeholders was selected to maximize qualitative input on the process. In addition to interviews, a jurisdictional scan was also performed to draw insights and best practices from comparable jurisdictions.

OVERVIEW OF COSTING APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Different approaches were used for estimating effort between the IAO and ministries

IAO Approach

The activity-based costing approach for the IAO entailed documenting the detailed processes for each group within the IAO and obtaining time estimates for each activity performed. Due to the range in complexity of requests, complexity tiers were used to classify the percentage of requests that are either easy, medium or difficult (as this is information not currently tracked or captured through the IAO's tracking system).

IAO processes themselves (regardless of the complexity of requests) are highly standardized. Requests are entered and tracked in the IAO's system, the status of requests is monitored and the IAO's services are delivered by staff that are completely dedicated to FOI. Due to the vast amount of available data on FOI requests processed by the IAO, and the consistency of these process steps, IAO activities were broken down into very detailed tasks, and assigned time estimates that varied with the complexity and nature of the requests.

Ministry Approach

The activity-based costing approach for ministries included documenting the FOI response process from the perspective of several ministries (and branches within ministries) to gain an understanding of how the process is generally applied. Capturing the variability in FOI request processes from each branch would not be feasible due to the vast number of branches that exist across Government. Through a focus group, surveys and follow-up interviews, an estimated range of effort involved in processing an average request, and associated time estimates were subsequently developed.

In contrast to the IAO, ministries (for General Requests) have FOI processes that differ quite significantly, with varying tracking processes used to manage and complete responses to requests. In addition, the level of experience for ministry staff with FOI processes varies significantly depending on who is involved in processing the requests, and ministry staff are very often focusing their work efforts on executing their primary functions (rather than focusing continuously on FOI requests). Unlike the IAO, where variations in complexity between requests could be addressed by breaking activities down to the ministry assigned and tasks performed, varying complexity within ministries was addressed by applying a range on either side of the average effort estimated per request.

STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED

A cross-section of stakeholders from across Government were engaged using several different formats

Information Access Operations (IAO)



Nine teams within the IAO were interviewed to obtain insights into the IAO's operating model and processes, and to obtain time estimates for centralized FOI activities.

Deputy Ministers and Ministers



Provided insights regarding the review and sign-off process and the level of effort involved. Qualitative feedback on strengths and improvement opportunities related to FOI processing were also identified.

Ministry FOI Coordinators



Provided an understanding of how ministries are structured to respond to FOI requests, as well as contributing process information and time estimates for coordinating FOI requests.

Ministry Surveys



Various ministry groups representing five ministries and 22 program areas and divisions provided estimates on the level of effort associated with searching for records, supporting consultations, providing fee estimates, conducting harms assessments and review/sign-off.

Other Agencies



Representatives from the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner and from Government Legal Services provided key insights regarding how their respective organizations support the FOI process.

Cross-ministry focus group



A focus group involving six ministries was created to review, refine and validate FOI processes and time estimates for each process step to form an average time estimate across Government.



DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

Data Gathered from Key Groups Engaged

To obtain inputs for the costing analysis, the key groups identified as regular actors in the FOI process were engaged. Information was captured through data requests, interviews and one focus group in order to obtain both qualitative and quantitative input for the costing exercise.

Key Groups:	IAO	Ministry	Legal Services	OIPC
Approach	Interview all IAO teams to capture activities performed for each type of request, and retrieve historical data from AXIS.	Interviews were conducted with select ministry groups to obtain a sample based on the types of requests and the roles of individuals supporting the process. Surveys were also used to obtain a broader sample of information for select process steps and groups. Finally, one focus group as well as follow-up interviews were conducted to validate findings and analysis.	An interview was held with the Legal Services Branch to understand its role in supporting the OIPC inquiry process.	An interview with the OIPC was conducted to understand how FOI inquiries are received by the OIPC as well as any factors that may influence timelines to process inquiries.
Data Gathered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process maps • Time estimates for each type of activity (based on complexity ranges) • Historical FOI request performance and volume data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process maps • Time estimates for process steps • Survey responses for assumptions and time estimates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of Legal Services support process • Annual cost of Legal Services support for FOI requests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of OIPC's role in receiving FOI inquiries (note that the OIPC process was not in scope)

FOI PROCESS OVERVIEW

Section Overview

In this section...

-  We provide a step-by-step overview of the FOI request process, broken out into the two types of requests:



General



Personal

-  We present our major assumptions on key elements of the costing process (e.g. salaries/benefits, overhead costs, Consultations, staff productivity, etc.)
-  We explain our two different approaches to dealing with variability in both IAO and ministry FOI processes

FOI PROCESS OVERVIEW

The end-to-end FOI process was captured to identify the total cost to Government of responding to FOI requests. The following section provides an overview of the process steps and estimates applied to help inform the costing model.

Types of FOI Requests

FOI requests are categorized into the following:



General Requests

General Requests are for records of a non-personal nature that could be released to the public. These types of requests can be related to any subject and can result in records produced in a number of different formats.



Personal Requests

Personal requests are made by individuals for their own personal records or information. While an individual may request their personal records from any ministry (e.g. a former employee requesting employment records), the vast majority of Personal Requests pertain to individuals requesting their records from three ministries (CFD, MSD and PSS).

Process Documentation

The detailed end-to-end process was documented for both General and Personal Requests. The following slides provide brief summaries for the high-level steps involved in responding to each type of request. Note that there is a high degree of variability in how the process is performed by ministries, and as a result the process steps may not always be executed in the order illustrated.

Each process step is also identified as either a step that applies to all requests or that applies to select requests (i.e. the process step only occurs for certain requests and under certain circumstances).

 Applies to All Requests

 Applies to Select Requests

Level of Confidence Estimate

FOI requests can be processed by a wide range of employees in each ministry. As it was not feasible to interview all public servants involved in these processes, estimates and assumptions were captured and validated through interviews, surveys and a focus group.

For each process step, the level of confidence in the estimates is classified into the following two levels:

- **Confident** – During the review there was sufficient data available to develop estimates that were validated by interviewees and workshop participants. These estimates were based on consistent, standardized and repeatable processes.
- **Possible Uncertainty** – Through interviews and the focus group, a wide range of time and effort estimates was provided. Assumptions were required to estimate average time frames for each process step. Assumptions were also required to apply these estimates to those ministries and program areas not engaged directly for input.

GENERAL REQUEST PROCESS OVERVIEW

The General Request process involves significant variability in the order and execution of process steps by ministries. While there is a high degree of confidence that the process steps performed by IAO are accurate, ministry process steps include a greater degree of uncertainty due to a larger number of assumptions required.

○ Applies to All Requests ● Applies to Select Requests

Process Step	Description	Level of Confidence in Estimate
○ Intake	The IAO Intake group verifies each request upon submission for completion and confirms alignment with legislation.	Confident - Interviewed all groups from the IAO that support all three process steps. Minor assumptions were applied for missing estimates.
● Cross Government Request	Cross ministry teams are formed for requests that are directed to more than four ministries to ensure consistency of interpretation and approach.	
○ Call for Records	Request assigned to an Analyst, who then requests records from the ministry FOI Coordinator or contact.	
○ Ministry Coordination of Request	The ministry coordinator verifies the request and sends the Call for Records to individuals/program areas required to search for records.	Possible Uncertainty - Estimates obtained through interviews and one focus group representing 10 ministries and were extrapolated to remaining ministries.
● Transfer Request	If the request was sent to the wrong ministry, the request will be transferred to the appropriate ministry.	Confident - IAO process steps and estimates captured in detail, with consistent responses from ministry groups.
● Fees	If locating and retrieving records exceeds three hours, a fee may be charged to the applicant.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with little to no variability and minor assumptions applied.
○ Gather Records	The ministry will package responsive records and develop a harms assessment, which will be sent to the IAO.	Possible Uncertainty - Variable estimates obtained through interviews and workshops. These represent 10 ministries and were extrapolated to remaining ministries.
● Consultation	If the records contain third party information, a Consultation will be initiated to receive input from the third party and to determine if the information should be disclosed.	Possible Uncertainty - Estimates for Consultations were variable and an average value was used.
● No Records	If the search for records results in no records being found, the applicant is informed and the request is closed.	
● Extension	If it is not possible to respond within the legislated timeline, a timeline Extension may be requested.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with little to no variability and minor assumptions applied.
○ Review Records	The IAO will review records and harms to protect information and make disclosure recommendations.	
○ Ministry Review & Sign-Off	The ministry will review disclosure recommendations and the package will be reviewed and signed off by the Deputy Minister (in certain cases the Deputy Minister delegates sign-off authority).	Possible Uncertainty - Estimates obtained through interviews, workshops and focus groups represent 10 ministries and were applied to remaining ministries.
○ Package & Release	The final records are packaged and sent to the applicant.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with few minor assumptions applied.
● Publication	Records will be released into the public domain unless exemptions apply.	

PERSONAL REQUEST PROCESS OVERVIEW

With the majority of Personal Requests being associated with three ministries, the level of consistency is high, with some possible uncertainty for those ministries not interviewed.

○ Applies to All Requests ● Applies to Select Requests

Process Step	Description	Level of Confidence in Estimate
○ Intake	The IAO Intake group verifies each request upon submission for completion and validity.	Confident - Interviewed all groups from the IAO that support the two first process steps. Minor assumptions were applied for missing estimates.
○ Call for Records	Request assigned to Analyst, who then requests records from the ministry FOI Coordinator or contact.	
○ Ministry Coordination of Request	The ministry coordinator verifies the request and sends the call for records to individuals/program areas required to search for records.	Possible Uncertainty – Estimates were obtained from CFD and PSS (which account for 71% of Personal Requests), and estimates were received from an additional survey sent to five ministries.
○ Gather Records	The ministry will package found records and develop a harms assessment, which will be sent to the IAO.	
● No Records	If the search for records results in no records being found, the applicant is informed and the request is closed.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with little to no minor assumptions applied.
● Scanning	The IAO will scan physical records and upload large PDFs.	
● Extension	If it is not possible to respond to the request within the legislated timeline, a timeline Extension may be requested.	
○ Review Records	The IAO will review records and harms to protect information where appropriate and make disclosure recommendations.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with little to no minor assumptions applied.
○ Ministry Review & Sign-Off	The ministry will review disclosure recommendations and the package will be reviewed and signed off by the Deputy Minister (in certain cases the Deputy Minister delegates sign-off authority).	Possible Uncertainty – Estimates were obtained from CFD and PSS (which account for 71% of Personal Requests), and estimates were received from an additional survey sent to five ministries.
○ Package & Release	The final records are packaged and sent to the applicant.	Confident - Process steps and estimates captured in detail with few minor assumptions applied.

MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS APPLIED TO FOI COSTING MODEL

In the absence of interviewing all resources that actively support the FOI process, assumptions were applied to estimate the costs for groups that were not interviewed. The list below summarizes the most significant assumptions applied to the costing model that have material impacts on estimated costs.

Assumptions

Salaries – The hourly rates used in the direct labour cost equation are based on positions identified in interviews and salaries retrieved from the BC Salary look up tool.¹

Compensation – An additional 26% was added to the hourly rate to cover additional compensation and benefits, which was calculated based on IAO FY17/18 budget actuals.

Productivity – To account for unproductive time associated with supporting the FOI process, a productivity rate of 73% was applied. The figure is based on 5.5 hours of productive time for a 7.5 hour workday (examples of 'non-productive' activities include some meetings, training, vacations, professional development, transit, etc.).

Consultations – Consultations are not tracked in the same manner that requests are tracked. The following rate of Consultation estimates are applied as a percentage of FOI request volumes, which is based on input and feedback of ministry and IAO interviewees: Easy: 10% - Average: 25% - Hard: 50%

Indirect Cost - Management Overhead, Office Overhead, IT and Training were obtained from the IAO FY17/18 budget and applied through an hourly loading rate of 15%. The same rate of 15% is applied for ministries, as there is insufficient information available to establish estimates for ministries.

Program Area and Division Multiplier – Once a request is received by the ministry FOI coordinator, it is then sent to multiple program areas or divisions to gather records. Based on feedback from six ministry groups, the average number of program areas to which a request is sent is **three**.

Ministry Time Estimates – To account for the ministries not interviewed or consulted, the time estimates for ministry FOI processes obtained from the 11 FOI coordinator interviews, 22 survey responses and ministry workshop have been weighted and averaged, and then used to calculate processing costs for the missing ministries.

¹ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/careers-myhr/all-employees/pay-benefits/salaries/salarylookuptool>

CURRENT STATE FINDINGS



Section Overview

In this section...



We provide ranges of estimates for the following:

- Total cost to Government for the overall FOI request process
- The proportion of the total cost to Government associated with the IAO and the proportion associated with Government ministries
- Cost of each process step across Government (for both Personal and General Requests)

TOTAL COST TO THE BC GOVERNMENT OF RESPONDING TO FOI REQUESTS

The total cost range is based on FY2017/18 FOI request volumes and data

Summary

The total median cost of \$28M represents all direct and indirect ministry and IAO costs related to responding to FOI requests, as well as associated Legal Services costs. The average cost per request of \$3,000 is based on the median total cost divided by the total number of closed General and Personal Requests in FY2017/18.

While these figures estimate the cost of the FOI process at a macro level, it is important to take into consideration the various inputs that introduce variability into the process, and therefore create a wide range of possible costs. The wide range in costs is a representation of the significant degree of variability in the FOI process and range in salary bands for the resources performing the direct labour (note that the direct costs consist wholly of direct labour).

While variability is common throughout the process, the process steps associated with ministries responding to General Requests represent the greatest degree of variability in effort (up to 50%), which impacts the ability to further narrow the cost range for General Requests. The 50% variability for ministry processes for General Requests is a result of the variability in effort estimates, as General Requests touch upon all areas of core Government (i.e. can encompass any records created by ~30,000 employees or the systems that support them), whereas Personal Requests are more concentrated on specific ministries and program areas. This can be observed in the difference in cost ranges between General and Personal Requests, with Personal Requests not having nearly as much variability as General Requests.

Total Cost Summary

\$28M – Total Median Cost

\$23M – \$33M Cost Range

\$3,000 – Average Cost Per Request

Total FOI Process Cost Range

Direct Costs: **\$19.5M – \$28.4M**

Indirect Costs*: **\$2.9M - \$4.3M**

Legal Services**: **\$450K**

Total - \$23M - \$33M

** Indirect costs include: management overhead, training and IT licensing costs*

*** Fixed cost obtained from FY17/18 actuals*

General vs Personal Request Cost

General: \$13.5M - \$22.3M

Personal: \$9M - \$10.4M

Legal Services**: **\$450K**

*** Fixed cost obtained from FY17/18 actuals*

KEY COST DRIVERS

The Records Gathering, Review Records and Ministry Review and Sign-off process steps are the most significant cost drivers for both General and Personal Requests.

Understanding the cost drivers tied to an activity can help to refine the process to mitigate or account for unnecessary or unwanted costs. For the FOI review, cost drivers with a material impact on costs were identified for each process step. While several cost drivers may be unique to an activity or a process step, there are several cost drivers that were identified as common across several process steps.

Common and Key Cost Drivers Identified

Applicant

Cost drivers resulting from applicant inputs and requests to the FOI process:

- Applicant requests for information already available in the public domain
- Applicant requests that are not specific, unclear or too broad, requiring further input from the applicant during intake
- Mailing physical records to applicant

Records Management

Cost drivers resulting from existing records management practices:

- Increased search time caused by inconsistent ministry documentation and records management practices
- Number of ministry groups required to search for records per request
- Screening for duplicate records to determine responsiveness (for requests where duplicate screening applies)

Volume / Complexity

Cost drivers resulting from a combination of high volume and complexity:

- Ongoing coordination support from IAO to ministries
- Analysis to protect information and make disclosure recommendations for a complex harms assessment
- Large volumes of records received from ministry group(s)

Additional Process Steps

Cost driver resulting from process steps with several actors and duplication of efforts:

- Multi-staged ministry review cycles

Technology Limitations

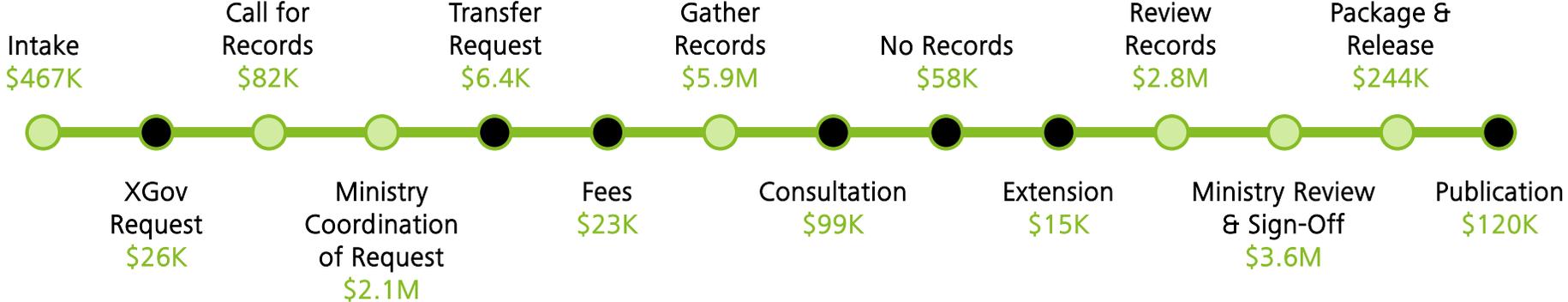
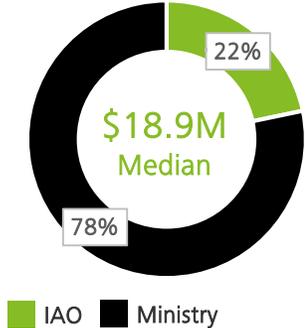
Cost drivers resulting from technology limitations:

- E-mailing large record files internally or to applicant
- Slow IAO upload and download speed for large files and documents

MEDIAN DIRECT COST OVERVIEW BY REQUEST TYPE

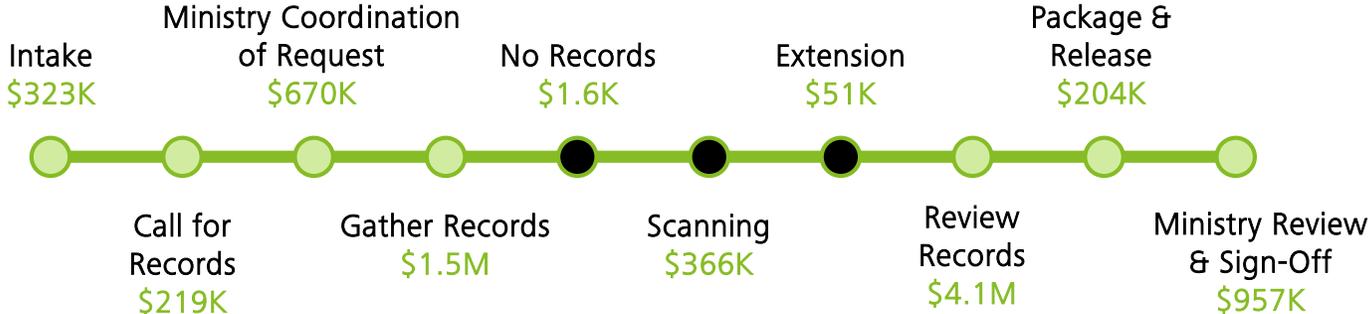
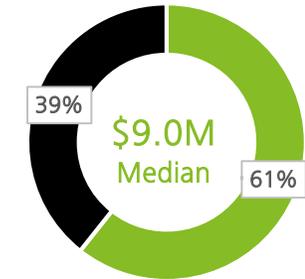
General Requests

General Requests can involve numerous ministries and branches across Government and may include various forms of records (e.g. from briefing notes to e-mails to handwritten notes). One of the most significant cost drivers is responding to requests that are very vague, broad or that require extensive research, resulting in significant increases in time and complexity as well as a strain on operational resources. This reinforces the importance of the IAO's role in appropriately consulting the applicant during the Intake stage. Below, the total annual cost per step is illustrated.



Personal Requests

Personal Requests, unlike General Requests, are largely targeted towards three ministries (Ministry of Children and Family Development, Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, and Public Safety and Solicitor General) and have high request volumes and low variability in the types of requests received. The most significant cost driver is the IAO's role in accurately and consistently making disclosure recommendations on large sets of records for a single request.



Note: The median costs displayed for both General and Personal Requests include only direct costs.



OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OVERVIEW

Capturing Observations through Interviews and Data Analysis

Capturing insights and observations on opportunities for improvement was one of the core objectives of the review. The following section outlines these opportunities for consideration by the IAO and ministries to improve the FOI service experience, reduce costs and enhance privacy and security aspects of the process.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations have been grouped into **Policy and Process** and **Technology**.



Technology Recommendations

- Leverage AI for identification of duplicate records
- Automate information population for electronic forms and e-mails
- Leverage Natural Language Processing AI for identification of sensitive information in records
- Implement a secure file transfer service
- Improve IAO network download and upload speed
- Implement an end-to-end FOI Request Workflow across ministries and the IAO
- Adopt a ministry FOI request tracking system



Policy and Process Recommendations

- More consistent records management processes across ministries
- Fixed fees for requests less than 20 hours of effort
- Reduce points of shipment of records for CFD Personal Requests

Observation Summary Format

Each summary of observations and recommendations listed in this section is presented in the following format:

Recommendation Title	Process Steps	
<p>Observation:</p> <p><i>Description of observation from qualitative and/or quantitative analysis of the challenge or opportunity area.</i></p> <p>Impact:</p> <p><i>Overview of impact to operational performance, security, costs and/or requestor experience.</i></p> <p>Recommendation:</p> <p><i>High-level description of the recommended approach and/or solution to resolve the issue or improve the delivery of FOI requests.</i></p>	General	Personal
	Step ...	Step ...
	Step ...	Step ...
	List of implicated process steps per type of request	
	<p>Status: [status of recommendation]</p> <p><i>Summary of the current status of the recommendation.</i></p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION

Duplicate Records

Identification of duplicate records	Process Steps	
<p>Observation:</p> <p>As FOI requests are typically processed by multiple individuals, it is not uncommon for FOI packages to contain a high number of duplicate records. For example, emails requested from multiple individuals will often result in numerous duplicated email chains being provided. Similarly, requests for a specific document may result in the same document being gathered and processed by multiple people. As the number of exact duplicates increases, there is a direct, proportional impact on most of the steps within the FOI process (e.g., harms assessment, review, ministry review and sign-off, etc.). This also creates a risk of inconsistent processing and severing due to human error given the volume of records that can be involved.</p> <p>Impact:</p> <p>Searching for duplicates in large files involving several thousands of pages can significantly increase the time involved in several of the process steps (for both the ministries and the IAO). This also introduces inefficiencies into the overall request process and heightens the potential for inconsistent application of disclosure recommendations. Further, the review of exact duplicates provides no additional value to the requestor.</p> <p>Recommendation:</p> <p>Numerous eDiscovery, analysis and classification technologies exist that employ natural language processing and machine learning to quickly identify duplicate records within a single document or across multiple documents. This includes exact duplicates, near-duplicates (i.e., draft versions of files) and duplicate emails (contained within multiple email threads of the same conversation from different recipients). These tools are typically used in litigation to enable the efficient gathering and processing of large volumes of records, and can reduce processing time significantly (depending on the number of duplicates detected). These tools could also be applied in an FOI context and support a “pre-processing” step whereby large volumes of responsive records are first analyzed for duplicates prior to undergoing detailed reviews by the IAO or ministries. IAO and ministry Analysts would have the opportunity to evaluate the duplicates identified before removing them from the package. Once removed, there would be a significant savings in terms of effort and cost, which could result in additional capacity to enable the Government to respond to increasing FOI volumes, process requests more quickly and/or further enhance services provided to FOI requestors.</p>	General	Personal
	Gather Records	Gather Records
Review Records	Review Records	
	<p>Status: Under Investigation</p> <p>The IAO is currently investigating tools to assist in identification of duplicates.</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Automation of Manual Tasks

Information population for forms and e-mails	Process Steps	
<p>Observation: Throughout the IAO intake and review process, there are many process steps that require taking information from one source system and entering it into another system (e.g., taking the information from the FOI request online form and populating it into the AXIS file). These highly manual processes are consistent and repeatable, and do not require subject matter expertise from IAO team members to complete.</p> <p>Impact: A substantial amount of staff time is spent on these relatively low-value activities, at the expense of value-added activities that require specialized skills and training.</p> <p>Recommendation: Robotic Process Automation (RPA) is commonly deployed by organizations seeking to automate standardized, repeatable tasks in order to free up specialized resources for higher-value activities. The activity of populating information into standard forms and records can be automated. While IAO staff time would still be required for review and Quality Assurance purposes, it would not be necessary for staff to actually complete these tasks themselves. Process steps that could potentially be automated include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • creating an AXIS file from the FOI request online form (Intake); • creating the acknowledgement letter (Intake); • approval forms and sign-off slips (Review and Sign-off); • sending a no records response to the applicant (No Records Response); • sending a documentation extension to the applicant (Extension); and, • creating child files in AXIS for cross Government request (Cross Government Requests). 	General	Personal
	Intake	Intake
	No Records Response	No Records Response
	Extension	Extension
	Min. Review & Sign-Off	Min. Review & Sign-Off
	Cross Gov. Request	
	<p>Status: Under Investigation The IAO is currently investigating opportunities to automate certain manual tasks in order to enable FOI Analysts to focus on high-value activities.</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Identification of Sensitive Information

Identification of sensitive information in records	Process Steps	
<p>Observation: Disclosure recommendations for records are guided by harms assessments, which describe the context behind the record and may indicate the type(s) of information that should be considered for severing, based on exceptions defined in FIPPA. In some cases, the type of information that should be severed from an FOI package has a known structure (e.g., Social Insurance Numbers, credit card numbers, etc.), and in others, more advanced knowledge of the subject matter and context are required.</p> <p>Impact: Searching for sensitive information in large FOI packages comprised of hundreds or thousands of pages is very time consuming for staff. In large documents, it can also become challenging to ensure consistency in the identification and severing process using only manual methods.</p> <p>Recommendation: Tools are currently available that can more efficiently and consistently identify known categories of sensitive information. These tools can be used to automatically scan a document and annotate certain types of sensitive information for review and action. This can include sensitive information with known structures and formats. It can also involve the Analyst identifying information for redaction based on specialized knowledge of the subject matter or relevant context (and based on exceptions defined in FIPPA) and these redactions being replicated throughout large, complex documents in an automated manner. While a staff member would ultimately need to accept or reject the recommendations of the tool, this type of technology could significantly reduce staff effort and also improve the consistency of severing related to these types of information.</p>	General	Personal
	Review Records	Review Records
	<p>Status: Under Investigation The IAO is currently investigating tools to assist in search and identification of sensitive information.</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Secure File Transfer

Secure file transfer	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: Electronic records are currently transferred between ministries and the IAO, and from the IAO to the applicant, through e-mail. Using e-mail to transfer files creates challenges as there is a limit to the size of files that can be sent via Government email accounts. When this limit is exceeded, files that have been merged into a single PDF must be split into several smaller PDFs and sent separately. Further, large files distributed to a number of recipients via email also results in significant replication of these files in multiple inboxes and outboxes, thereby increasing email storage requirements. Large files sent via email can also result in recipients reaching their inbox file size limit, and thus prevent them from sending any future emails until their inboxes are cleared.</p> <p>Impact: The constraints associated with email can introduce additional effort for sending, receiving and processing large FOI packages. Further, due to these constraints, staff may use less secure methods of transferring files that create unnecessary security risks.</p> <p>Recommendation: A secure, well-governed file transfer service would allow the transfer of large files more efficiently, eliminate manual effort related to integrating and disaggregating large files, reduce email storage requirements and costs, and would also reduce risks associated with the use of alternative, less secure file transferring methods. There are numerous intuitive, secure file transfer applications available that could address these challenges without introducing significant changes to existing FOI processes.</p>	<p>Review Records</p> <p>Package & Release</p>	<p>Review Records</p> <p>Package & Release</p>
	<p>Status: In-progress The IAO is currently considering options to adopt a secure file transfer service.</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Network Performance

Improve IAO network download and upload speed	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: Records gathered by the ministries are consolidated by ministry FOI Coordinators into a single PDF document (in some cases multiple PDFs depending on the file size) and sent to IAO. IAO uploads the file(s) to AXIS, and the file(s) are retrieved from AXIS by IAO staff to complete the remaining steps in the process. Through interviews, it was noted that large files that exceed 1GB in size can take up to three hours to download and upload to/from AXIS, for every point in the process in which a file is retrieved or uploaded.</p> <p>Impact: While IAO staff can complete other tasks during the upload/download process, this delay interrupts (and extends) the workflow for individual requests with large files, and also results in IAO team members continually monitoring upload/download status. Given the thousands of requests processed by the IAO, this can introduce significant inefficiencies into the FOI response process.</p> <p>Recommendation: Engage technical support to determine the cause of these network issues and, where possible, remediate them to support faster file transfer speeds.</p>	Review Records	Review Records
	Package & Release	Package & Release
	<p>Status: Under Investigation The IAO is currently working with IT Services to identify the root cause of this issue.</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Case Management and Workflow

FOI request end-to-end workflow	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: FOI requests are passed within the IAO, and from the IAO to the ministries, via e-mail. Email inboxes serve as “queues” for pending requests at key steps in the process, and while many of the inboxes are centralized to provide access to multiple individuals, they still require a resource to manually monitor the inbox and retrieve each request. For ministries with high request volumes, there is often an additional manual step to assign the request to a resource based on a review of current request workload distribution.</p>	Intake	Intake
	Call for Records	Call for Records
	Validate Request	Validate Request
<p>Impact: Requests often remain in staff inboxes for extended periods until accessed for the next processing step, extending processing time.</p>		
<p>Recommendation: With a more formalized workflow process, cases can be assigned directly to resources based on availability and capacity, reducing the potential downtime between process steps.</p>	<p>Status: Not Started</p>	

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATION (CONTINUED)

Case Management and Workflow

Tools for improving FOI process consistency within ministries	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: Ministries all track the progress of FOI requests independently and using various tools (including Excel, Outlook, OneNote or other applications).</p> <p>Impact: A variety of methods for tracking requests increases the risk of human error, causes administrative inefficiencies and creates potential for inconsistent reporting across ministries.</p> <p>Recommendation: Ministries could benefit from common set of tracking tools to allow for a greater consistency of processes, tracking requests and reporting within ministries. One option would be for the IAO to publish a common set of tracking tools to enable consistent monitoring, tracking and reporting across all ministries. The option also exists to implement a common, Government-wide system with case management functionality to track and report on FOI requests. While this would enable more consistent tracking of effort, costs and request progress, the benefits of such a system would likely not be sufficient to justify the effort and costs associated with implementation and maintenance.</p>	Validate Request	Validate Request
	Records Gathering	Records Gathering
	Min. Review & Sign-Off	Min. Review & Sign-Off
	Status: Not Started	

RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Continue to Drive Adoption of Effective Records Management Practices Across Ministries to Support More Efficient FOI Processes

More consistent records management practices across BC Government ministries	Process Steps	
<p>Observation: Through the interview and focus group process it was noted that records management processes vary from person-to-person and from ministry to ministry.</p>	General	Personal
<p>Impact: The absence of consistent records management practices limits the Government’s ability to respond to FOI requests in a timely manner, results in additional effort (and subsequently greater costs) to search for records, increases risks of inappropriate destruction of records that should be retained, and also heightens risks of inappropriate disclosure of records due to inappropriate classification.</p> <p>Recommendation: Ministries could benefit from assigning responsibility for records management to a senior leader within their respective organizations (e.g. the ministry Chief Information Officer). This person could be responsible for ensuring the head of the public body is meeting their obligations under the Information Management Act, for raising awareness of existing corporate records policies, practices and tools and for conducting information management practice reviews.</p>	Records Gathering	Records Gathering
	<p>Status: Opportunity Identified CIRMO to assess feasibility and approach in 2019.</p>	

FEE POLICY AND PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

Fixed fees for requests

Fixed fees for requests less than 20 hours of effort	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: A significant amount of IAO effort is incurred through conversations with requestors debating the applicability of fees and the scope of requests. The value of the effort incurred on these back-and-forth activities (and subsequent internal discussions and reviews) is substantially less than what is recovered in fees (note that the current fee schedule indicates that the first three hours of recovering and gathering documents are free, and any additional effort will be charged at a rate of \$30 per hour).</p> <p>Impact: The low value back-and-forth conversations with requestors (and internal work to determine eligibility for fees and fee amounts) with requestors consumes a substantial amount of IAO and ministry time.</p> <p>Recommendation: The fee estimate process could potentially be simplified in order to reduce the time involved. The IAO could implement a fixed rate fee for different ranges of hours (i.e. a fixed fee for level of effort greater than three hours but less than 10, and a higher fixed fee for requests within 10 to 19 hours of efforts). As the vast majority of FOI requests that are given fee estimates require less than 20 hours of estimated effort, this could reduce the amount of detailed estimation work done for the majority of requests. However, estimates believed to be in excess of 19 hours can continue to apply a more detailed estimation process. It should be noted that this recommendation requires additional analysis for feasibility as the rules for fee estimates are defined in legislation.</p>	<div data-bbox="1987 471 2216 556" style="background-color: #92d050; border: 1px solid #000; border-radius: 5px; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;">Fees</div>	
	<p>Status: Not Started</p>	

PHYSICAL RECORDS SHIPPING PROCESS RECOMMENDATION

Reduce Points of Shipment for CFD Personal Physical Records

Reduce points of shipment for CFD personal physical records	Process Steps	
	General	Personal
<p>Observation: Prior to delivery to the IAO scanning team, CFD records are first retrieved from their respective storage locations and shipped to the in-house CFD scanning team. This team scans CFD records for 20+ Government groups, but not for the IAO. The CFD scanning team reviews the records and ensures that all records have been shipped. Once all of the records have been received, they are then shipped to the IAO. This process creates some unnecessary shipping activity between these two groups.</p> <p>Impact: Documents being shipped back and forth a number of times adds costs and heightens the risk of information loss. It is important to note that no instances of document loss were noted; however, eliminating this additional shipping step could reduce the risks of these types of incidents in the future.</p> <p>Recommendation: The IAO and CFD scanning teams should explore a collaborative scanning arrangement that would eliminate the need to ship records physically between CFD offices and IAO office (and back again).</p>		<div data-bbox="2229 478 2433 549" style="background-color: #92d050; border: 1px solid #92d050; border-radius: 5px; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">Scanning</div>
	<p>Status: Opportunity Identified This has been flagged by both the IAO and CFD teams and is under investigation.</p>	



Jurisdictional Comparison

Costing Approaches Across Jurisdictions

Overview

It is generally agreed that costing the FOI process is a very challenging task and fraught with a large degree of variability (i.e. Scotland reported a time range per request of 15 minutes to 125 hours and 15 minutes). However, compared to the average level of effort required to respond to FOI requests in BC (38 hours and 17 minutes), there are several FOI costing studies that conclude a lower level of effort per request for their respective jurisdictions. When attempting to make such comparisons, it is important to note that the context behind each review may result in incomparable findings.

The challenge of comparing cost estimates across jurisdictions

Different FOI costing methodologies

Each jurisdiction takes a different approach to costing their respective FOI processes: the Canadian Government performed a high level comparative analysis of changing FOI costs over a period of time, the Scottish and UK Governments tracked the amount of time staff worked on FOI during a given period of time, and the Australian Government calculated costs based on estimates of the process that were provided by their staff. While there are some similarities with the activity-based costing approach undertaken in BC, each approach captures different elements of the process and yields different results. By building the activity-based costing model from the ground up, we were able to test and validate our estimates with BC Government staff to ensure information was being appropriately interpreted and used correctly for calculations (it is important to note that we discovered a significant amount of time and effort between process steps that would have otherwise have been missed without detailed validation).

Variability in the FOI response process

At a high level, the FOI response processes described in the UK and Australia are very similar to the process in BC. Without detailed information of the processes, a true comparison cannot be conducted. However, the UK analysis indicates that the *Logging the requests and case administration* process step takes 25 minutes to complete, and at a high level appears to be comparable to the BC *Intake* step, which takes approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. In this process step, the BC IAO staff perform a number of tasks that could not be performed within 25 minutes, such as verifying and validating requests, searching for similar prior requests and routine Government releases, sending an acknowledgement letter to the applicant, and working with the applicant to narrow the request's scope (to ensure an effective response to the applicant's request).

Times have changed and so too have the types of FOI requests

A growing trend in BC are FOI requests for communications (e-mails) between one or more individuals or groups within the BC Government. These requests are often broad and result in a significant level of effort from both the IAO and ministries in records gathering and disclosure recommendations. Due to the changing nature of FOI requests, and the impact of these types of requests on the effort required to process them, it is challenging to make a true comparison to other FOI costing reviews that date back 9 to 18 years from today.

A Closer Look at FOI in Other Jurisdictions

The following observations from comparable jurisdictions illustrate various approaches in responding to increases in demand or to improving timelines

United States

The US Government aims to improve **timeliness** and **reduce backlogs** in a digital age by demanding that agencies:

- Post any record that is anticipated to be of interest online
- Launch electronic information reading rooms to provide easy access to information
- Proactively publish raw data electronically for public inspection
- Implement FOI training programs and best practices workshops
- Submit annual reports on performance in processing requests
- Adopt modern technology

United Kingdom

UK public agencies that process FOI requests have encountered challenges in:

- Responding to requests in a timely manner
- Complying with proactive publication obligations
- Navigating through a burdensome appeal process

The Government is dedicated to improving the timeliness and efficiency of FOI administrative processes by:

- Revising the Freedom of Information Code of Practice
- Updating outdated guidelines to clarify authorities' obligations in properly handling information and requests
- Defining new fundamental principles for information disclosure

FOI Jurisdiction Selection Criteria:

- Comparable democratic institutions
- Confronted similar challenges with increases in request volumes and complexity
- Adopted innovative approaches to improving service delivery and response times

Ireland

Following a history of **restrictive** access to Government information, Ireland **restored** and **extended** the FOI Act in 2014 to all public bodies. Some recent **reform** measures include:

- Abolishing fees for FOI requests
- Launching online services for the public to submit applications for review
- Publishing a suite of guidance notes to standardize administrative processes
- Implementing a new records management system to facilitate the automation of routine tasks

A Closer Look at FOI in Other Jurisdictions (continued)

The following jurisdictions have adopted various approaches in improving their ability to respond to FOI requests

Sweden

The country with the world's oldest FOI legislation, Sweden has strengthened its commitment to facilitate open public discourse by:

- Permitting all users to access to official documents without the need to present their identities or reasons for requests under constitutional law
- Providing citizens the right to re-use public information

Sweden is gradually transitioning towards eGovernment by:

- Investing in the development of mobile eServices
- Releasing data through digital channels
- Launching online platforms to make all Government aid and health-related information publicly available

New Zealand

New Zealand has extended the scope of the Official Information Act by:

- Encouraging the proactive release of information
- Strengthening staff compliance with streamlined internal policies
- Developing a standardized model of data collection across agencies

New Zealand strives to improve accountability and transparency in Government by:

- Releasing case studies and statistics on the performance of public service departments in handling requests
- Publishing a comprehensive suite of guidance and resources for requestors and agencies

Norway

Norway has established itself as a leader in ensuring convenient internet access to official information by:

- Developing an electronic document and record management system
- Requiring agencies to register documents according to a defined set of mandatory metadata
- Transferring public sector information to a digital repository for re-use
- Maintaining a central online access portal that enables users to gain direct access to Government records free of charge
- Improving the security of electronic public records
- Devising new strategies to consolidate larger amounts of data from Government agencies

Australia

The Federal Government has pursued open Government policies by:

- Eliminating general application fees for information requests
- Revising the structure of the main statutory agency responsible for overseeing FOI procedures through transferring its functions to other departments

However, insufficient funding, an increase in the number of requests and restructuring disruptions have resulted in authorities:

- Extending the target period for processing applications
- Referring more cases back to agencies for consideration
- Exercising statutory discretion to reduce the number of applications eligible for review