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Introduction

Information is a vital tool in the delivery of effective policing. Gathering, examining, extrapolating and acting on information is a fundamental process within policing across the globe.

Constant improvement of information management practices is a challenge for all organisations. However because of the key role information plays in the work of the Metropolitan Police Service, we decided from the outset of our preparations for the introduction of the Freedom Of Information Act that we would view the Act as an opportunity to review and improve how we handle and manage the large amount of information we hold across the organisation.

At the time the Act was passed, many discussions were held in various fora on what the impacts would be for police forces across the United Kingdom. At that time, many police forces were preparing themselves to receive a wide range of enquiries – and, given the size and scope of the Met, we knew we needed to be ready for a substantial number of these enquiries to come our way.

While we were committed to meeting our responsibilities under the Act regard to fulfilling FOIA requests, we firmly believed this obligation had to be balanced with - and could not supersede, the essential duty we have to deliver effective policing services to people in London.

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We felt the key to achieving this necessary balance was to develop a thorough understanding of how similar legislation had affected the operations of law enforcement organisations in other countries and our team set about undertaking desk-based research and visits to other agencies.

Looking further a field

Our research made it clear we would need to undertake thorough planning to support the number of potential requests the legislation could generate.

For example, in America, the FBI explained to us that they had under-estimated the impact of its Freedom Of Information Act on their workload initially. Originally, the FBI had 15 people managing requests; today they have a team of around 230 people managing and responding to information requests. At their peak, 640 FBI staff - including agents, removed for short periods from operational duties - were dedicated to eliminating the backlog of information requests.

It became clear from our research that the greater openness and engagement we sought through the FOIA could only be achieved if the management of requests and the proactive publication of information moved beyond a central core of practitioners and was integrated into the normal business practices of the Met.

We do operate a central management function in our Public Access Office. Opened in November 2004 this office currently employs 19 civilian staff who manage our overall approach to responding FOIA requests and the resolution of complex information requests requiring co-ordination between different functions within the Met and with

other public authorities. The Office continues to manage requests for subject access made under the Data Protection Act.

Spreading responsibility and ownership

However, given the breadth of our organisation it was also essential there was a wide distribution of skills available across the Met to ensure the system was resilient to manage a large number of requests.

In developing our approach we looked integrate the management of information requests into the normal business practices of the Met. To achieve this goal and create the necessary resilience and flexibility, we set about establishing a 100-strong network of Information Managers, trained to manage simple information requests relating to the work of their business units. These managers are also responsible for ensuring there is sustainable improvement in all aspects of their business unit's information management.

A challenge we faced in setting up this system was to sustain the balance of meeting FOIA responsibilities and delivering policing services. We wanted to ensure that, as far as was possible, police officers were not drawn into processing requests.

Consequently the majority of people managing information requests are drawn from our police support staff. However involving senior police officers and police staff was part of a strategy for broader organisational ownership of the FOIA, in support of greater openness.

Also fundamental to the delivery of our response was the development of a bespoke IT system to manage requests. MetRIC [Met Requests for Information and Correspondence], a Lotus Notes-based system, was developed and implemented. This system allows requests received anywhere in the organisation, to be scanned, recorded and processed either in local business units or, in appropriate cases, within the central Public Access Office. The system also provides a full audit trail of decision-making and allows us to learn quickly what is being requested and then publish it proactively.

As with many public bodies, we have tried to pre-empt information requests by publishing information through our Publication Scheme. To date 950 documents have been published and this is increasing at a rate of 75 documents per month, of which the vast majority has not been published previously. By March 2005, we were already recording around 16,000 hits and 7,000 downloads each week on our Publication Scheme. These figures are an increase on the nearly 9,600 hits and 6,500 downloads recorded in November 2004.

Experiences

So what have been the results of our preparations?

Since 1 January we have received over 12000 FOIA requests. Despite it still being early days for the Act, we are noticing some trends.

For instance, requests are increasing in complexity particularly where 'professional' users of the legislation, such as journalists, researchers and academics, are

generating the requests. This group is also making more frequent use of the legislation.

More recently we have seen a marked trend towards the use of the FOIA to explore local policing issues across the Boroughs in London. Since January, we have also witnessed a growth of approximately 15 percent in the use of the subject access provisions under the Data Protection Act since January.

While the Act could be viewed as a "challenge" or "additional work", we believe the release of information is resulting in greater understanding of the challenging work being undertaken in the Met on behalf of people in London. For us the information shared through the FOIA is very much part of working together with individuals, communities and organisations to make London safer.

References

Metropolitan Police Service publication scheme. Available at:

<http://www.met.police.uk/foi/>

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