

Day 4 – Thursday, 29 November 2007
Parallel Sessions – Session 3C 11.00am-12.30pm

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Presentation Title: Measure of success for FOI

1 Introduction

This is the first systematic study of the objectives, benefits and consequences of FOI ever undertaken. The study's main aim is to ask: Are the objectives of the UK FOI Act being achieved?

2 The Objectives of FOI

We have identified six main objectives of FOI:

Greater transparency. Defined as greater openness and availability of government information.

Increased accountability. Has FOIA strengthened or weakened ministerial accountability to Parliament?

Better public understanding of government decision making.

More effective public participation in the political process.

Increased public trust and confidence in government. The difficulty is establishing a causal link when so many other factors affect public trust

Better quality of government decision making. This is particularly difficult to evaluate. We will ask officials for their views, and evidence to back their views.

3 How to measure success against those objectives

We are using four main research methods

Survey of FOI requesters. How to reach a representative sample? Government departments have been reluctant to allow us to approach their requesters. But the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Defence have now agreed to co-operate, and if that proves successful, we hope others may follow.

Interviews with government officials Here too departments have been reluctant to co-operate. The Ministry of Justice has agreed to write to Permanent Secretaries asking if they are willing to be interviewed.

Analysis of departments' websites The question we are trying to answer is, How much more information is being proactively published as a result of FOI?

Analysis of media stories based on FOI Over 1800 articles about FOI appeared in the UK national press in the first 12 months after FOIA came into force. We have analysed these articles in terms of their subject matter, department, tone etc.

4 Initial measures of success in the UK

Greater transparency. More information is being proactively published. But how much more? And how much as a result of FOI?

Increased accountability. FOI has strengthened ministerial accountability to Parliament, through MPs making FOI requests or using FOI media stories to obtain information and press ministers for explanations.

Better public understanding of government decision making. We haven't yet been able to ask FOI requesters. Some FOI media stories are trivial, but some aren't.

More effective public participation in the political process. We are not aware of such evidence, but we haven't yet been able to ask FOI requesters or officials or stakeholders.

Increased public trust and confidence in government. We haven't been able to ask FOI requesters. Our initial analysis of FOI stories in the press suggests that they are likely to decrease trust.