



## 2023 Annual Report

### Freedom of Information Office

The purpose of this Annual Report for 2023 is to meet Maynooth University's obligation under the Government's FOI Code of Practice to provide an overview of the University's performance under the Freedom of Information Act 2014. The following topics are included in the report:

- Summary of performance of 2023
- Key Achievements
- Risks
- Ongoing improvements to implement in 2024.

The main objective of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 is to foster and develop a culture of openness, transparency and accountability in Public Bodies.

#### **The University's obligations**

The Act is designed to provide a right of access to information held by Public Bodies to the greatest extent possible. However, the Act, by making certain exemptions, seeks to achieve a balance between the right of access on the one hand, and on the other, the right to privacy and in some cases the public interest in maintaining confidentiality.

The majority of FOI requests related to the areas of Human Resources, and Finance, followed by Governance, Registry and Research. In all, 20 Departments and Business Units across the University were involved in FOI requests during 2023.

#### **What we do**

*'The Freedom of Information Officer is responsible for ensuring that the University meets its legal obligations under the Act, and assists students, staff and the general public in exercising their rights under the Act.'*

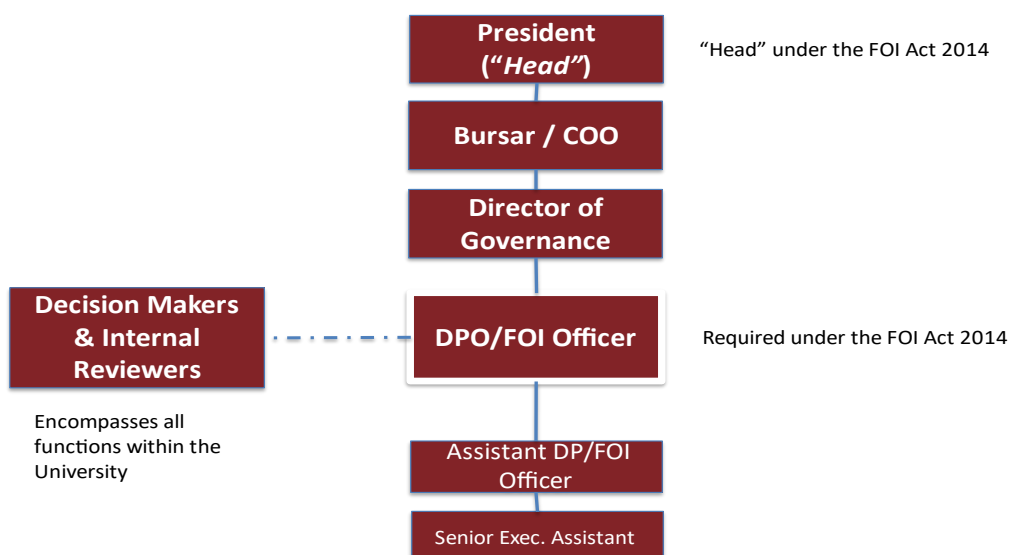
Maynooth University Freedom of Information Office sits within the Governance Directorate and is legally responsible for ensuring the University's compliance with the Freedom of Information Act 2014.

The FOI Office supports MU's management of its responsibilities in respect of freedom of information and is responsible for assisting staff, students and members of the public in exercising their rights under the legislation.

### Who we are: Staffing & Department Structure

There are 3 full-time staff members in the FOI Office. These staff play a dual role as the Office also looking after the University's Data Protection function. Staff are appropriately trained in FOI and attend meetings and networking events in order to stay up to date with FOI developments and best practices. The staffing of the Office is kept under review.

#### Organisational Structure



#### The responsibilities of the Office include:

- Handling Freedom of Information Requests in line with legislation;
- Monitoring University compliance with the legislation;
- Provision of legislative specific training to the University community;
- Updating, further development and implementation of relevant procedures and guidelines;
- Engaging with the Office of the Information Commissioner (OIC).

- Developing resources and tools for use by the University community in managing compliance with relevant regulatory requirements and to support transparency and openness in the University's use of data and information.

The Office works on a balance of reactive and proactive work, utilising FOI access requests and queries as an opportunity for upskilling, process improvement and improved quality and compliance.

A number of new governance and oversight measures were put in place in 2023 to centralise information recording, efficiently manage deadlines and improve compliance with statutory timelines.

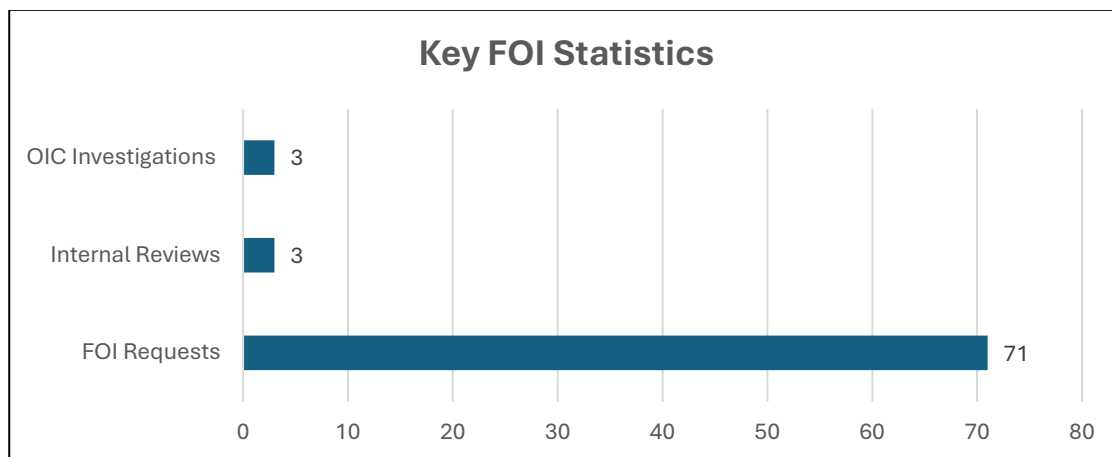
Template wording, Schedules of Records, introduction of Search and Retrieval Fees, and a Confirmation of Search for Records Form were introduced to improve compliance with legal obligations.

In addition, the Office conducted Public Interest Tests where required by legislation.

## 2023 Key Achievements

- **Strengthened relationships** with HR, IT, Communications & Marketing, Finance, and Research areas to develop processes and awareness to improve responses to FOI requests and improve compliance with the University's obligations under the FOI Act.
- **Introduction and upgrade** of logs and registers **to improve compliance** with our obligations under FOI legislation, improve efficiencies in our ways of working and create a professional impression of the function.
- Conducting **Public Interest Tests** improved the quality and compliance of information provided to FOI requesters.
- Development of FOI content for MU FOI **webpages**.
- Created the **Implementation Plan for FOI** in line with the University Strategic plan 2023 – 2028.
- Attended the Higher Education FOI Officers Network Day in UCD on 11 May 2023.

## Overview of Key Statistics for 2023.



Further more detailed information is available on the FOI Disclosure Log on the University Website.

### 2023 Challenges & Key Risks

- **Challenge:** The ability of the FOI Office to adapt to conflicting priorities and meet regulatory obligations given the current staffing levels.
- **Challenge:** Conflicting demands on finite resources in all Departments and Business Units across the University results in deprioritisation of FOI requests and process improvements in record management and retention.
- **Risk:** The need to strengthen understanding of the obligations under the FOI Act with respect to record management and retention and access to records.
- **Risk:** managing ongoing regulatory activities related to the OIC investigation of appeals to responses of FOI requests.

### Our Focus and Priorities for 2024

- Procure and implement new compliance software platform. The FOI Officer is leading the procurement of a software solution that will provide a comprehensive management solution to assist in operationalising compliance with handling FOI Requests, preparation of statistics and Disclosure Logs and facilitating staff training for FOI.
- Improved compliance with statutory requirements.
- Continue Webpage improvements.
- Initiate a review of the FOI function for completion in 2024.
- Standardisation and centralisation of logging of FOI requests.
- Enhanced staff training to increase awareness of record management, retention and responding to FOI requests.

- Create opportunities for general awareness raising about FOI.
- Publish an annual report on FOI function and activities.
- Commence Business Continuity Plan for FOI function.
- Continue to improve communication channels.

### **Links and Useful Information**

- [FOI Act 2014](#)
- [Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, CPU](#)
- [FOI Code of Practice](#)
- [Office of the Information Commissioner \(OIC\)](#)
- [OIC Annual Report 2023](#)
- [Maynooth University FOI Page](#)
- [MU Disclosure Logs](#)
- [foi@mu.ie](mailto:foi@mu.ie)