

Freedom of Information Annual Report 2020

Volume (Figs 1.1 and 1.2)

SOAS received a total of 224 FOI requests in 2020. This is a decrease of 48 (18%) on 2019. Of the 224 requests received, a total of 216 were actionable (could be processed). Of the remaining 8, all were closed where the requester did not respond to our requests for clarification. It should be noted that 3 requests received in 2020 remain unanswered at the end of the first quarter of 2021.

Fig 1.1 shows the requests received in quarters 1 and 4 are broadly in line with the number of requests we would expect to receive in these periods. Quarters 2 and 3 show a steep decline in the number of requests received in comparison to the previous two years. It is reasonable to suspect that the sharp drop in requests received in the middle of the year was caused by the sudden impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the focus of the media, other organisations and the public directed towards coping with its impact.

Timeliness (Fig 2)

87% of requests were answered within the statutory 20 working day timeframe, a 7% rise since the previous year. Our annual compliance rate is improving but still falls short of the ICO's expectation of 90%.

Outcomes (Figs 3.1 and 3.2)

Of the 216 actionable requests we received, in 47% of cases we provided information in full, while 11% of requests were withheld in full. At least some information was provided to applicants in 65% of cases. In 2020, the number of requests we answered in full, and the number of requests we answered in part, each dropped by around 10%, while we fully withheld 4% more requests than in 2019. One explanation for the decline in the number of responses disclosing information could be the increased reliance on information in the public domain; commercial sensitivity; prevention of crime; and effective conduct of public affairs exemptions, which are more likely to result in non-disclosure than exemptions which were more commonly relied upon in 2019, such as the exemption for third party personal data. See figure 3.2 for the detail.

Under the FOI Act, the School can only withhold information that falls within the scope of exemptions detailed within the Act.

The most heavily engaged exemption was section 40, relating to personal data. Primarily this was engaged when personal data about third parties was included in the response to the request (including where low numbers might reveal the identities of individuals). The exemption was engaged in 10% of all requests.

The other most commonly engaged exemptions were: where the cost of complying would exceed the 18-hour limit proscribed in the Act; where the information was already reasonably accessible to the public; where the information was scheduled for publication in the future; and where disclosure would prejudice the commercial interests of SOAS or another party. Each of these exemptions were engaged in approximately 5% of all requests.

SOAS extended the 20-working day deadline to consider the Public Interest Test on two occasions; on both occasions the information was withheld.

Applicants (Figs 4.1 and 4.2)

Members of the public are still by far the most represented group making up 44% of applicants in 2020, which is consistent with 2019's figures. The second and third most common category of requester are journalists and commercial organisations respectively. This is consistent with 2019, and the proportion of requests received from these groups is also consistent across the last two years.

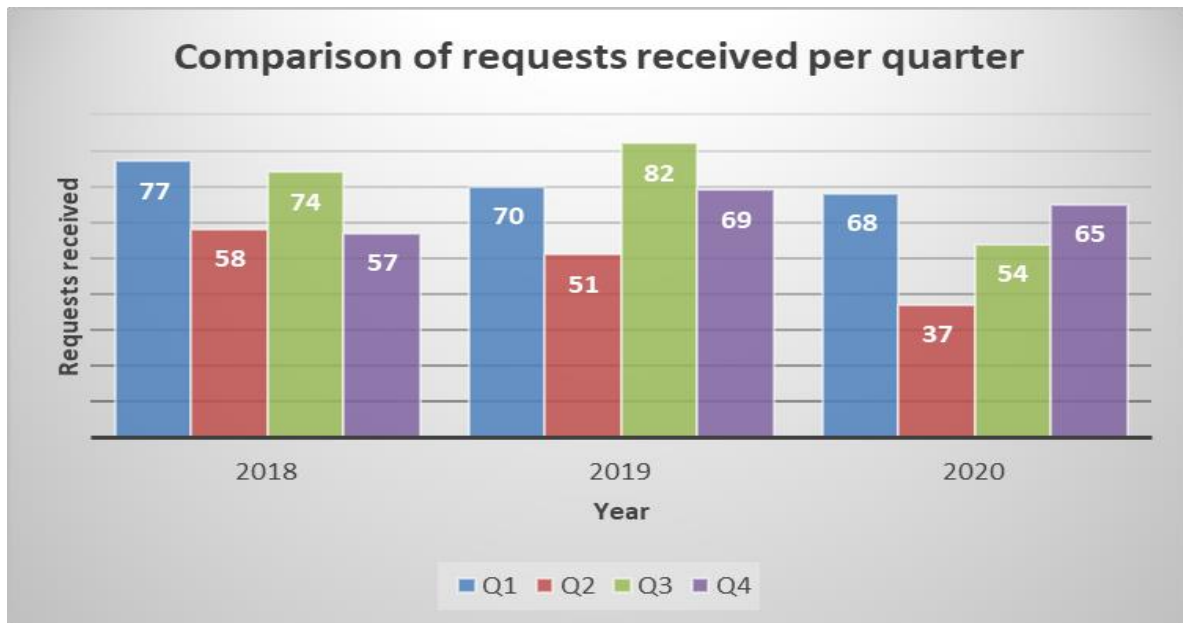
As with previous years, around one quarter of all requests received focused on student issues and numbers, which remained the most popular subject of FOI requests. This year, however, HR and staffing requests, teaching and assessment requests and IT provision requests were evenly proportioned as the next most popular subjects of FOIs. The public interest in SOAS's response to the pandemic and new arrangements it was putting in place for online assessment and home working were clear in the increased popularity of these types of enquiry.

Internal Reviews and ICO Cases

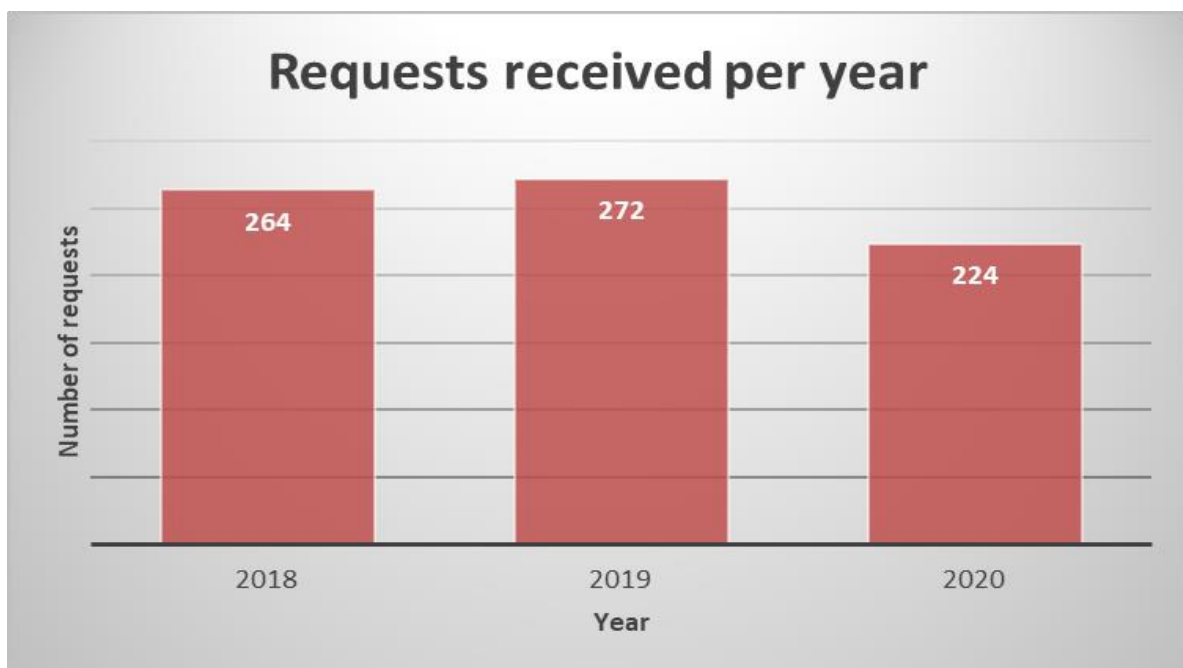
One FOI response was subject to an internal review, which overruled the original response (the information was disclosed). SOAS was not notified of any complaints made by requesters to the ICO in 2020. Similarly, SOAS did not receive any feedback or complaints about our Publication Scheme.

1. How many requests did we receive?

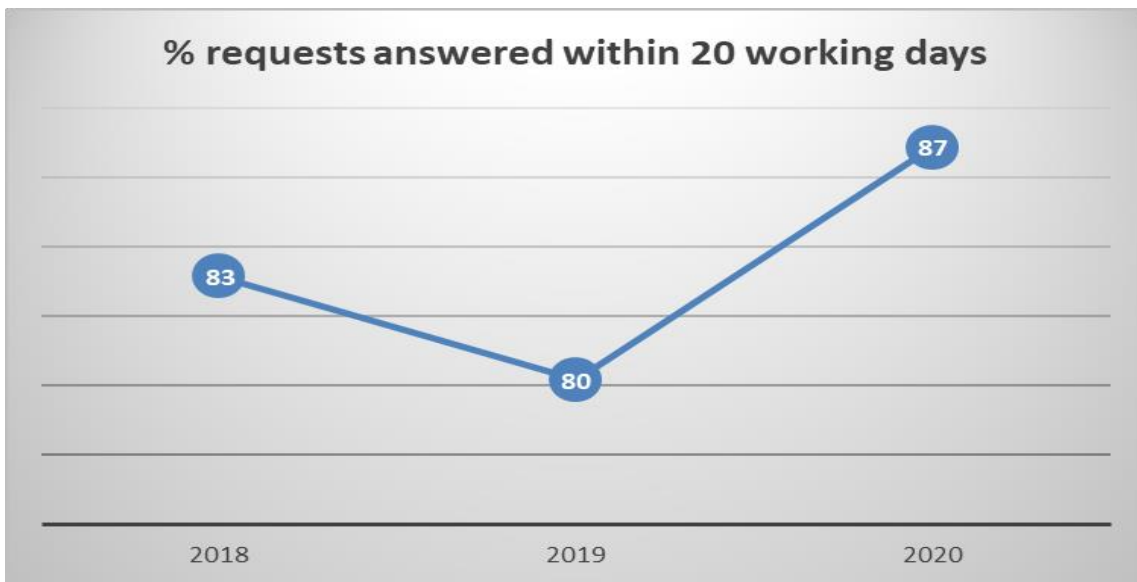
1.1 Requests received each quarter 2018-2020



1.2 Total volume of FOI requests received 2018-2020

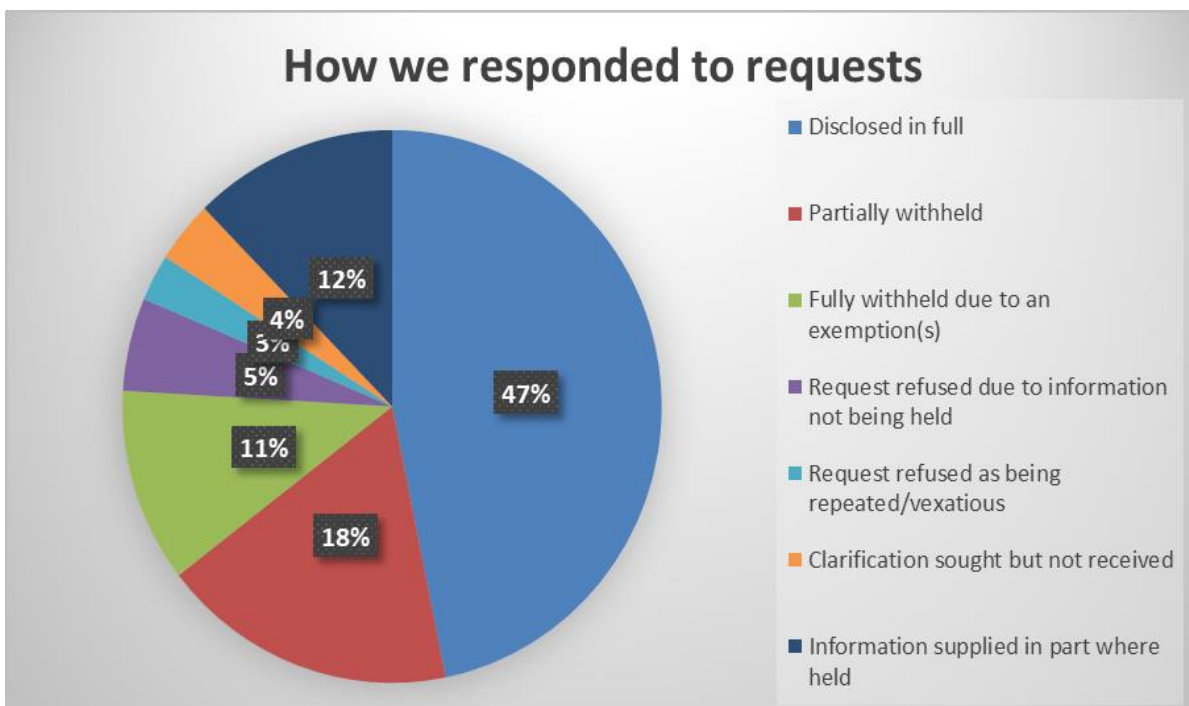


2. What proportion of requests did we answer on time?

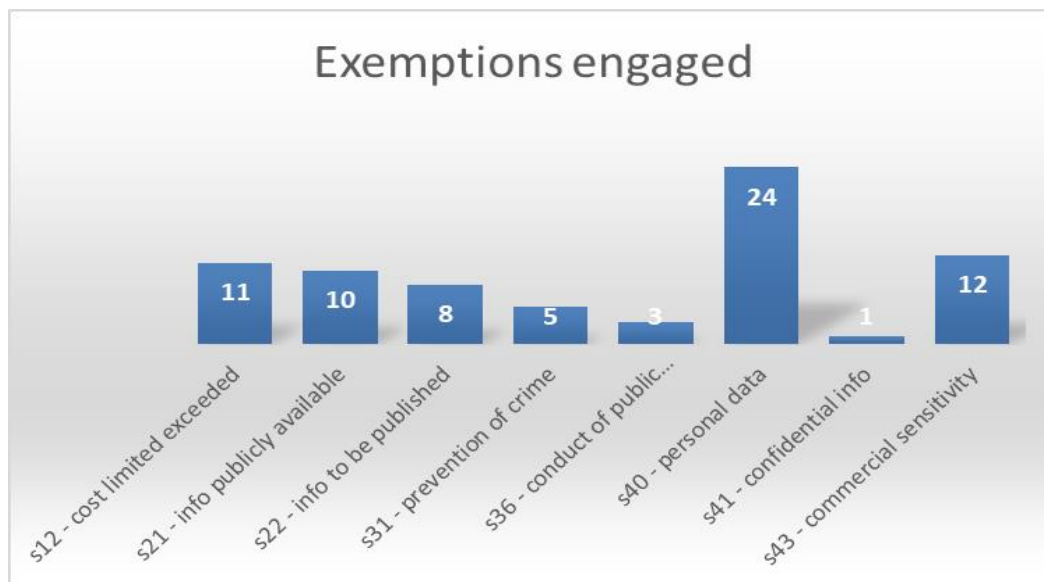


3. How we responded to FOIs

3.1 The types of response we issued

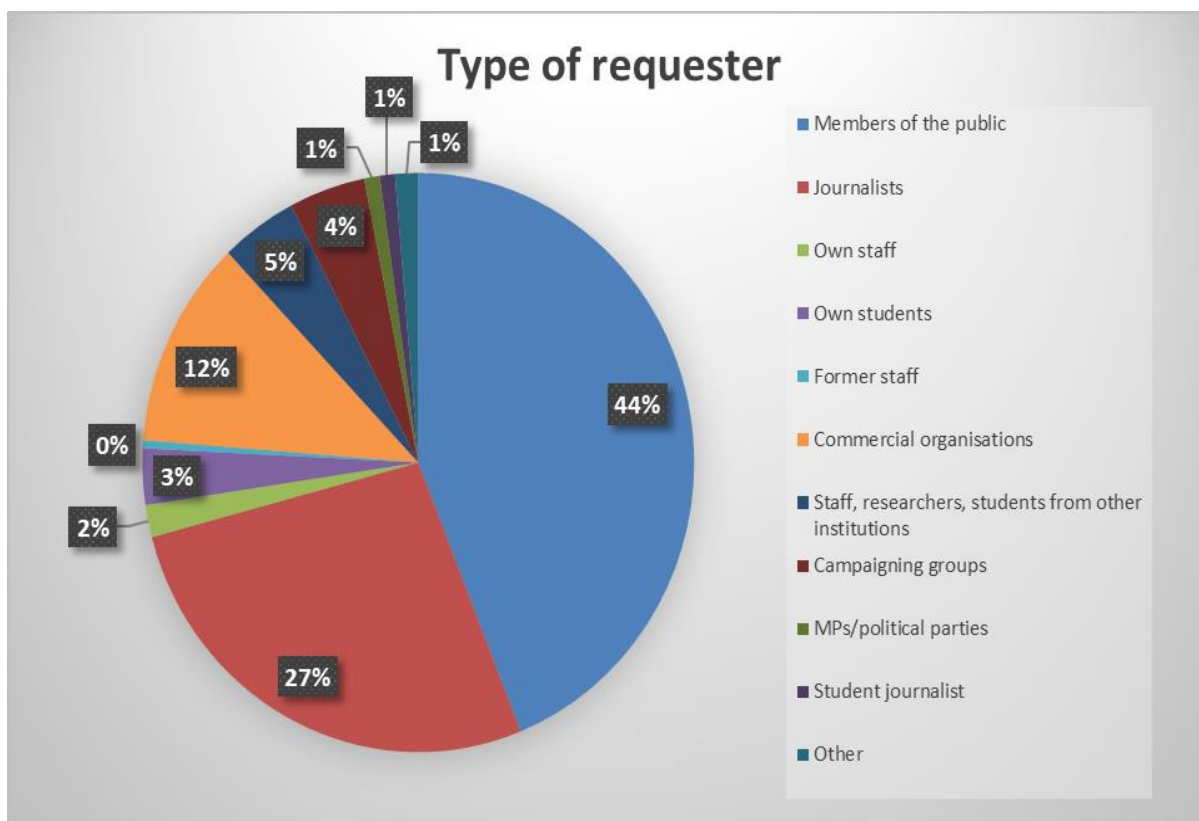


3.2 Number of times exemptions were engaged



4. Who asked for information, and what did they ask for?

4.1 Requester backgrounds



4.2 Subject area of requests

