

Agencies moving faster on OIA

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Chief Ombudsman Peter Boshier has welcomed new figures showing government agencies are moving faster on Official Information Act requests and responses.

The State Services Commission (SSC) and the Office of the Ombudsman today published the latest data on agency OIA performance.

The SSC data shows that in 2016/17, agencies answered ninety-three percent of OIA requests within legislative timeframes.

This is an increase of 5.4 percentage points on the previous year, and means that 39,000 out of nearly 42,000 OIA requests were answered on time.

Peter Boshier said timeliness was a big focus for his Office, as when a person receives the official information they've asked for can be critical. The OIA requires an agency to respond within 20 working days of receiving a request, unless they need an extension because of the amount of work involved.

'There's still some way to go, with wide variance among agencies, but I'm encouraged by the progress', Peter Boshier said.

'State Services Commissioner Peter Hughes and I have both stated our commitment to seeing the OIA work as it's supposed to for New Zealanders, providing the means for citizens to access official information', Peter Boshier said.

'I believe the publication of this data is encouraging agencies to self review and lift their game'.

This is the second release of OIA data by the SSC and OOTO, and releases will continue every six months.

'The OIA is central to our open democracy. It gives people access to information about the decisions that affect their lives, and it builds trust and engagement with government. My Office will continue to work proactively with agencies to encourage an overall lift in OIA performance', Peter Boshier said.

While the SSC data focuses on the number of OIA requests and timeliness of responses, the Ombudsman data concerns complaints received and outcomes. Key points from the Ombudsman's data are summarised below.

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Ombudsman's data on complaints received: <http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz/resources-and-publications/oia-complaints-data>

SSC data on OIA requests and responses: <http://www.ssc.govt.nz/official-information-act-statistics>

Questions and answers on the Ombudsman's OIA data

What's the data about?

The data released by the Office of the Ombudsman concerns OIA complaints and complaint resolution from January to June 2017.

Spreadsheet One shows complaints received by the Office, including:

- the Minister or agency involved
- the nature of the complaint
- whether the complainant was an individual, the media, a political party or another organisation

Spreadsheet Two shows details about complaints completed by the Office. It includes the information above, as well as:

- whether the Ombudsman's Final Opinion upheld the agency's or Minister's decision
- if not, what the Minister or agency did wrong (such as refusing a request that should not be refused)
- the remedies achieved as a result of the Ombudsman's involvement.

How do the different agencies compare?

- The data doesn't enable a direct comparison among agencies, as complaints data on its own doesn't give the full picture. The number of complaints one agency receives may be a very small proportion of its total number of OIA requests.
- The purpose of the data is to provide information on the overall number and type of complaints received by the Ombudsman, and the outcome of an investigation. This will be useful for showing trends over time, and we encourage agencies to use the data for self-review purposes.

What are most complaints about?

- Most complaints concerned the refusal in full of an official information request: the Office received 178 of these complaints in the first six months of 2017.
- We received 139 complaints about refusal in part of an official information request, and 108 about a delay in a decision on a request.
- Other complaints concerned things such as an incomplete response or a decision to charge for information.

Who makes the most complaints?

- The latest data shows individual citizens made the largest number of OIA complaints: 412 in the first six months of 2017.
- Next are media, with 114 complaints; 34 complaints came from political research units, and 26 from special interest groups.
- Other complainant groups include trade unions, MPs, and local authorities.