



NIOGN Factsheet - Access to Information

Access to information is essential to the spirit and practice of open government.

Freedom of Information

Right to information legislation (RTI), also referred to as freedom of information or access to information laws, establishes a general presumption that all information held by government should be accessible and sets out the mechanisms by which it can be accessed.

The Case for Access to Information

The case for ensuring access to information is that it supports good governance, effective and efficient public administration, compliance with laws and regulations, efforts to combat corruption and greater government transparency and participation in decision-making.

International Human Rights Treaties

The right to information is protected through the guarantees of freedom of expression found in the main international human rights treaties. This has been recognised by international human rights tribunals (Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights) and leading international authorities (including all four special mandates on freedom of expression at the UN, OAS, OSCE and African Commission on Human and People's Rights, and the Inter-American Juridical Committee) as well as the UN Human Rights Committee.

Legislation: The Freedom of Information Act

Under the Freedom of Information Act and the Environmental Information Regulations you have a right to request any recorded information held by a public authority, such as a government department, local council or state school. Environmental information requests can also be made to certain non-public bodies carrying out a public function.

You can ask for any information you think a public authority may hold. The right only covers recorded information which includes information held on computers, in emails and in printed or handwritten documents as well as images, video and audio recordings. You should identify the information you want as clearly as possible. And your request can be in the form of a question, rather than a request for specific documents. But the authority does not have to answer your question if this would mean creating new information or giving an opinion or judgment that is not already recorded.

Maximum Disclosure

Some information may not be given to you because it is exempt, for example because it would unfairly reveal personal details about somebody else. But a key principle of Right to Information is that of 'maximum disclosure'. Information should only be withheld from the public where absolutely necessary to prevent harm to a legitimate interest and where there is no overriding public interest in knowing the information.

Transparency as knowledge

The open source ecology is made up of a wide range of opens – open farm technology, open source software, open hardware, open networks, open money, open small business technology, and open patents – to name just a few. And the Open-source community insists that the open availability of information will produce more knowledge and greater progress. They suggest that: sharing, not secrecy is the means by which we create wealth. This is the wealth of networks, the wealth of



knowledge: it's a revolutionary wealth that can work for all of humanity. The claim is that 'truth at any cost lowers all other costs'

Information Literacy

People in communities need training & support to make effective use of digital information – from basic internet skills to analytical understanding of open data. Communities need to be aware of the tools, have access to them and know how to use them. Effective use of digital requires digital literacy, but to get involved in democracy in an effective way, we need information & political literacy too

What are the challenges around access to information in Northern Ireland?

- *Information flows are controlled, restricted & managed.*
 - *There is a lack of transparency around political party donations.*
 - *There is an attack on FOI.*
 - *Information literacy is a low priority.*
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