

Report to:	SMT
Report by:	Head of Policy and Information Joe Chapman, FOI Officer
Meeting Date:	3 February 2022
Subject/ Title: (and VC no)	Self-Assessment Toolkit assurance report (VC 163376)
Attached Papers (title and VC no)	none

Purpose of report

1. To provide assurance to the Senior Management Team (SMT) on the use and effectiveness of the Self-Assessment Toolkit for the period 01/01/21 to 31/12/21.

Recommendation and actions

2. I recommend that:
 - (i) SMT notes the contents of this report.
 - (ii) the SMT agree the publication arrangements set out in the final paragraph of this report.

Executive summary

3. This report provides summary data about the use and effectiveness of the Scottish Information Commissioner's Self-Assessment Toolkit.
4. The report shows that the number of unique views of the toolkit pages on the website was almost exactly the same in 2021 as in 2020 (although there are some slight variations in how many times each module was visited). Other data suggests there was an increased trend of users visiting more than one of the module pages at a time, and that unlike previous years, there were no particular months in which activity was unusually high or low.

Background

5. The Scottish Information Commissioner ('the Commissioner') has now published six modules of the Self-Assessment Toolkit:
 - (i) Module 1: Responding on time (published in October 2014)
 - (ii) Module 2: Searching for, locating and retrieving information (January 2015)
 - (iii) Module 3: Advice and assistance (June 2015)
 - (iv) Module 4: Publishing information (June 2017)
 - (v) Module 5: Conduct of reviews (December 2019)
 - (vi) Module 6: Monitoring and managing FOI performance (September 2020)
6. It is not anticipated that any further modules will be produced in the toolkit's current form. A planned internal review of modules 1 to 4, as well as the accompanying guidance and

templates, took place in March 2021. As well as formatting and layout updates, this review resulted in the merging of two separate guidance documents into a single guide, 'How to carry out an FOI self-assessment', designed to streamline the process of using the toolkit.

7. The toolkit also formed part of discussion workshops about the support provided by the Commissioner's office, held during the Centre for FOI Practitioners' Conference in August 2021. This was the first stage of a wider review - intended to include stakeholder input - of the toolkit, which had been anticipated to be part of any website development work undertaken in 2021-22. Timescales for the phase 1 new website project have been condensed however, and the self-assessment toolkits are not in scope. It is intended that a revised approach to self-assessment toolkits will be undertaken when (and if) a second phase of website work is undertaken.
8. FOI practitioners in Scottish public authorities are the target audience for the toolkit. The toolkit is regularly promoted through a range of channels, including: Twitter; the Open Update newsletter; our intervention activity; FOI network group meetings; engagement with new bodies subject to FOI law; and other conferences, meetings and events.
9. The Self-Assessment Toolkit approach has been influential in other jurisdictions. For example, the Policy and Information Team have advised and supported staff from the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in the development of their own toolkits. The first toolkit - on the subject of timeliness - was launched in 2020, and a second toolkit, focusing on the use of Section 12 of the UK FOI Act, was published in February 2021

Use of the self-assessment tools

10. We do not collect or hold information about public authorities' use of the toolkit. The following data from Google Analytics provides an indication of general interest in the materials. The modules are published on the Commissioner's website. We can track the number of visits to related website pages, but system limitations mean that we are unable to track downloads of documents or interaction with resources from those pages. For this reason, we provide individual modules within separate pages linked to the [introductory page](#).

Pageviews

11. The table below shows the numbers of unique pageviews for each page of the self-assessment toolkit section of the website in calendar years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021:

Unique pageviews	2018	2019	2020	2021
Toolkit introduction	687	1,128	791	820
Module 1: Responding on time	178	225	142	138
Module 2: Searching for, locating and retrieving information	81	101	68	76
Module 3: Advice and assistance	49	62	45	46
Module 4: Publishing information	96	256	66	83
Module 5: Conduct of reviews	n/a	2*	182	61
Module 6: Monitoring and managing FOI performance	n/a	n/a	13*	66
TOTAL	1,091	1,772	1,307	1,290

* Module was only available for a very limited period in the year

12. Unique pageviews are the number of sessions during which the page was viewed at least once. Repeated views of the same page in the same session (for example by navigating away and then back again) are not counted.
13. The data shows that the number of unique views of the toolkit pages on the website was almost exactly the same in 2021 as in 2020. The average per module is down, however, as this is calculated across six modules in 2021 rather than five in 2020 or four in earlier years.
14. As explained in the 2019 version of this report, the designation of RSLs is likely to have been a factor in the increased pageviews in that year. Last year's report noted that activity in 2020 was consistent with 2018 and earlier, despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, although the overall numbers were boosted by increased activity in January and December, coinciding with the toolkit being featured on Twitter and in the Open Update newsletter respectively.
15. By contrast, there were no specific months in 2021 in which activity was particularly high or low. The absence of any 'spikes' was compensated for by the number of unique views of the toolkit pages being consistently slightly above 2020 levels for most of the year - which is to be expected given the circumstances.
16. There are also some variations in how many times each module was viewed. Module 5 had received a very high level of interest at the start of 2020 when it was publicised as a new module. Module 6 did not see the same peak in activity after it was published in September 2020, although it is less specifically-focused than Module 5. Otherwise, Module 4 saw the biggest increase in unique pageviews, perhaps reflecting its particular relevance at this time.

Other analytics

17. In line with previous reports, the table below shows the average length of time spent on each page. This report also previously analysed a statistic called the 'bounce rate', but there were some technical issues with the data for this during the year, so this aspect has been omitted.

Avg. time on page	2019	2020	2021
Introduction	1:30	1:21	0:34
Module 1	3:13	2:35	1:11
Module 2	2:46	2:23	0:50
Module 3	1:59	2:24	1:28
Module 4	3:53	1:48	1:12
Module 5	6:17	3:37	0:57
Module 6	n/a	3:09	1:18

18. A similar technical issue with the analytics cannot be ruled as a factor in the significant downward trend in the figures above. There is no particular practical reason, for example in the layout or content of the pages, for users to be spending substantially less time on them.
19. However, analysis of total pageviews (as opposed to unique pageviews) - which include multiple visits to a page in a single session, and which were significantly higher in 2021 - alongside this data, suggests an increased trend of users visiting more than one of the module pages at a time. Users were therefore perhaps more often browsing the modules to see which were likely to be most useful, or to understand the content of the toolkit overall.

Effectiveness of the toolkits

20. The online Centre for FOI Practitioners' Conference in August 2021 included interactive discussions about current and potential future resources and support available to FOI staff from the Commissioner's office and elsewhere, which provided an opportunity for us to receive some feedback about the self-assessment toolkit.
21. In line with anecdotal evidence from interventions and FOI network groups cited in previous versions of this report, authorities that have used one or more of the toolkit modules have found them to be a useful resource which lead to positive change. This is reflected in recent interventions, where the requirement to carry out a self-assessment and produce and submit an action plan has been an important basis for subsequent FOI improvement work.
22. However, it's clear that many authorities do not have the time to devote to using them as a tool to monitor and improve their practice, and therefore rarely carry out a self-assessment voluntarily. Instead, it is usually only when we open an intervention that using the toolkit and producing an action plan becomes a priority for which capacity and resources are freed up.
23. In particular, the volume of guidance to be read, the repetition of information across modules and the format of the evidence grid - can lead to a perception of any module of the toolkit requiring significant time and attention to complete, and being difficult to work on remotely.
24. The streamlining of the toolkit guidance carried out as part of the internal review in 2020-21 may help towards overcoming this, but in a broader review it would be worth exploring the feasibility of simpler, more interactive web-based tools similar to those used by the ICO.
25. Nevertheless, the Self-Assessment Toolkit as a concept and a resource continues to play a valuable role in supporting the Commissioner's interventions and wider strategic aims to improve authority practice. It was recommended during the conference that we should remind authorities of the existence of the toolkit in the Open update newsletter.

Current actions

26. In addition to the internal review of modules 1-4 carried out in 2020-21 and following on from discussions at the Centre for FOI Practitioners' Conference, a broader review of the toolkit approach will be proposed as part of any future phase of the development of the Commissioner's new website.
27. We have ceased being a member of the ICO's working group for the development of their toolkits, but have offered to provide input and share lessons learned as and when required.

Risk impact

28. The Commissioner is the regulator of FOI in Scotland and has functions and duties to fulfil.
29. The toolkit, as a means of driving improvements in authority practice, is a mechanism used to ensure public authority compliance with FOI legislation and good practice, and supports mitigation of relevant strategic and operational risks.

Equalities impact

30. The format of the toolkit documents - PDF and Word, using tables - may present a potential impact in the context of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications)

Accessibility Regulations 2018 - particularly as all modules now fall within scope of those regulations by virtue of their publication date following the review in 2020-21.

31. Issues in general relating to PDFs and other documents created after 23 September 2018 hosted on the Commissioner's website is noted in the [accessibility statement](#). As noted in the statement, we are working to establish how our processes can change in future to address this and will also ensure information is available by other means wherever possible.
32. No other specific equalities impact has been identified in relation to the toolkits. Equalities issues are addressed in individual modules as appropriate - for example, Module 3 includes a focus on providing advice and assistance to people who need additional support.

Privacy impact

33. There is no direct privacy impact arising from this report.

Resources impact

34. Self-Assessment Toolkit activity is delivered within existing planned resources.

Operational/ strategic plan impact

35. Delivery and maintenance of the toolkit contributes to achievement of the Commissioner's strategic and operational plans, particularly in relation to improving authority performance, including the following strategic objectives as set out in the Strategic Plan 2020-2024:
 - (i) enable and support high standards of FOI policy and practice (Strategic Aim 2)
 - (ii) develop Scottish public sector culture and practice where the proactive disclosure of information is routine and valued (Strategic Aim 3)
 - (iii) influence and support the development and strengthening of Scottish FOI law and practice (Strategic Aim 4)

Records management impact (including any key documents actions)

36. No records management impacts arise from this report.

Consultation and Communication

37. This report will be published alongside the QSMTM minute.

Publication

38. I recommend that this committee report is **published in full**.