1. It is not always easy to decide whether information is “environmental information”. This quick guide should help you decide. For more detailed guidance on the EIRs go to our website http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/Law/FOISA-EIRsGuidance/Briefings.aspx

2. The full text of the EIRs, including the full text of Regulation 2, can be viewed at www.hmso.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/ssi2004/20040520.htm.

Environmental information definition

3. The definition of “environmental information” can be found within Regulation 2 of the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004 (the EIRs). The definition is broad, and includes information which relates to:

   (i) The state of elements of the environment – such as air, water, soil, land, landscape and natural sites, biological diversity and genetically modified organisms – and it includes any interaction between them;

   (ii) The state of human health and safety, conditions of human life, the food chain, cultural sites and built structures, which are, or are likely to be, affected by the state of elements of the environment or any interaction between them;

   (iii) Any factor such as substances, energy, noise, radiation or waste, including radioactive waste, emissions discharges and other releases affecting, or likely to affect, the state of the elements of the environment or any interaction between them;

   (iv) Measures and activities affecting, likely to affect, or intended to protect the state of the elements of the environment or any interaction between them. This includes administrative measures, policies, legislation, plans, programmes and environmental agreements;

   (v) Reports on the implementation of environmental legislation;

   (vi) Cost benefits and other economic analyses used in environmental decision making.
EIRS or FOISA: flowchart

FOISA and EIRs
Dealing with written requests for environmental information

Why FOISA s1 applies

- s1 of FOISA applies as the definition of information in s73 encompasses environmental information and s39(2) is not an absolute exemption.

Environmental information? - then EIRs must be applied

- Environmental information must be dealt with under EIRs. If s39(2) is not claimed then it should also be dealt with under FOISA.

Written request received

FOISA s1 applies

Is the information requested 'environmental information' as defined in EIRs?

Yes

- Claim s39(2) FOISA

- Respond under EIRs

- Respond to request under FOISA

No

- Do not Claim s39(2) FOISA

- Respond to request under both FOISA and EIRs

Application to SIC

What if no detriment by applying FOISA?

- SIC must determine requests for environmental information under EIRs even where there is no detriment to the applicant if dealt with under FOISA

S39(2) submission

- SIC will seek submissions from authority where he considers that the information is environmental. Authority can claim s39(2) in a submission.

SIC must determine whether information is environmental or not

Environmental

- If Public Authority accepts information is environmental and claims s39

- SIC acknowledges exempt under s39(2) and determines under EIRs

Not Environmental

- If Public Authority does not accept information is environmental and/or s39 not claimed

- SIC determines under both EIRs and FOISA

- SIC determines under FOISA

EIRs vs FOISA?

- Where information should be disclosed under EIRs or FOISA, it cannot be withheld under the other regime
EIRs requests: key points

4. Whenever requested information falls within the definition of environmental information contained within regulation 2 of the EIRs, it must be processed in accordance with the EIRs. Where only part of any requested information falls within this definition, that part of the information must be processed in accordance with the EIRs.

5. An authority must disclose all the information it holds that falls within the scope of a request for environmental information. Information can only be withheld where non-disclosure is expressly permitted by law (e.g. by the EIRs).

6. Requests for environmental information must be processed in accordance with the EIRs regardless of whether or not the requester makes reference to the EIRs in the request.

7. Whenever a request for environmental information is made in writing, the authority must also process the request under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA). This is because FOISA requires that all written requests for information received by authorities are processed in accordance with the FOISA legislation.

8. In most cases, the processing of a request for environmental information under FOISA will involve only the simple application of the exemption under section 39(2) of FOISA. Section 39(2) sets out that information is exempt where that information falls within the scope of the EIRs. Section 39(2) is subject to the public interest test, but the Commissioner’s view is that because a separate regime exists for the consideration of requests for environmental information, the public interest will normally lie in the exemption being upheld. Following the application of section 39(2), the authority should go on to consider the request fully under the EIRs.

9. If an authority is unsure whether the information requested is environmental, it should respond to all of the request under both FOISA and the EIRs, applying any relevant EIR exceptions and FOISA exemptions (other than section 39(2)), if information is to be withheld. Should the Commissioner subsequently receive a formal application in relation to the case, the first stage of the investigation will involve an assessment of whether the requested information falls within the definition of environmental information.

10. Where a request for environmental information is made verbally only, there will be no requirement to deal with that request under FOISA. In order for a request under FOISA to be valid, it must be in writing or in some other recordable format. In cases where only a verbal request is received, the request can be processed under the EIRs alone.

Contact us

Scottish Information Commissioner
Kinburn Castle
Doubledykes Road
St Andrews, Fife
KY16 9DS

t  01334 464610
f   01334 464611
enquiries@itspublicknowledge.info

www.itspublicknowledge.info
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