

Cuts should help FOI

✘ A survey conducted by Holyrood Magazine and the Scottish Information Commissioner, has found that nearly three quarters of those asked expect the general public to make more use of their right to information under freedom of information (FOI) laws as spending cuts take effect in Scotland.

The survey polled public authority officials, legal advisers, civil society groups and other FOI specialists prior to Holyrood's 8th Annual Freedom of Information Conference, being held yesterday in Edinburgh. It also found that the majority felt that the case for FOI was unaffected by the economic downturn, with 21% believing the case for FOI is strengthened by the current economic problems, as members of the public want to see that public authorities are spending money wisely.

In spite of this, however, 64% of those questioned expected their organisation to have fewer resources for FOI over the coming years.

Kevin Dunion, Scottish Information Commissioner, said

"As public authorities face up to difficult decisions about where to spend and where to cut, there is a recognition that the public will want to know why certain tough choices have been made, and how the services they rely on are going to be affected."

"The task for all of us is to ensure that the FOI regime continues to deliver on the public's right to know, despite the cutbacks. We have to draw upon good practice developed over the past 6 years to ensure requests are dealt with efficiently and with least demand upon public authorities' resources."

It is certainly the experience of others that the economic

downturn both encourages FOI requests and also fosters an attitude among the public that they need to know where every penny has gone.

In her 2008 annual report, Irish Information Commissioner, Emily O'Reilly said:-“One of the by-products of the financial downturn has been a sharp increase in public demand for transparency and accountability particularly within public service and financial institutions. As the public see the financial gains of the past decade slipping away there is a demand to know how the turnabout took place and how various public and private institutions behaved both during the boom and after it .”

Almost every day FOI uncovers a story of some note and today is no exception. The story of Newham Council spending untold sums on their offices is currently in the news and you can read it [here](#).

Holyrood's [8th Annual Holyrood FOI Conference](#) was taking place yesterday at The Sheraton Hotel in Edinburgh.

Photo by Ashley Coombes