

Your guide to...

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS

View the full toolkit at kit.riveractionuk.com

This guide offers an overview of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental, explaining how to use them effectively in campaigns, crafting compelling requests, and accessing helpful resources.

WHAT IS A FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST?

An FOI request is a formal inquiry that allows you to obtain specific information, data, or documents held by these organisations. This falls under the [Freedom of Information Act 2000](#), which grants you the legal right to access public information held by government departments and public bodies. You can exercise this right by submitting a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to any public authority.

An Environmental Information Request (EIR) is a specific form of an FOI request, which is for requesting environmental data specifically (e.g., sewage spills or pollution reports). This falls under separate legislation - the [Environmental Information Regulations 2004](#). EIR's provide similar rights to access as FOI requests, but have slightly different rules and provisions, such as allowing verbal requests instead of requiring written ones. You can find out more about FOI and EIR requests, and the differences between them, on [Ofwat's website here](#).

WHY USE AN FOI?

The 'right to know' is a valuable tool for river campaigners. By accessing important information, it helps to expose harmful practices and hold those responsible for the state of our waterways accountable.

It can provide you with valuable material to inform your campaign and raise awareness, offering concrete evidence that can't be ignored. This information can be used to mobilise the public, attract media interest, and pressure polluters.

There are plenty of great examples of river groups using FOIs as campaigning tools. Nicola Cutcher, a member of the Friends of the River Wye, used an FOI request to uncover gaps in the EA's inspection of poultry farms in her area. She found that no inspections were being carried out on smaller, non permitted farms, despite significant concerns about pollution from these areas.

Nicola shared her findings on social media, gaining widespread attention and sparking an outcry over the EA lack of regulation. You can read [Nicola's X thread here](#) to learn more.

HOW TO MAKE AN FOI REQUEST

You can request information from any public authority in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and UK-wide public authorities based in Scotland. This includes government departments, publicly owned companies, and private companies that have public responsibilities - such as water companies.

However, before making a request, check if the organisation has already published the information on their website. This is sometimes known as a 'disclosure log'. You can search for published responses to FOI requests [here](#).

You can also email or call the organisation to check if the information is already published or for similar FOI responses. While accessing public information is your right, keep in mind that processing requests costs time and money, so they should be carefully considered. .

FOI and EIR requests are both made in writing (typically via email). To request information from the environment agency, email: national.requests@environment-agency.gov.uk

To request information from the Water Services Regulation Authority, **Ofwat**, email:

- foi@ofwat.gov.uk

To send an FOI request to a water company, you can find the relevant contact details and information on their website. For example:

- **Thames Water:** eir.requests@thameswater.co.uk
- **United Utilities:** EIRrequests@uuplc.co.uk
- **Yorkshire Water:** eir@yorkshirewater.co.uk

Under law, FOI requests will receive responses within 20 working days, though complex EIRs can take up to 40 days.

YOUR FOI REQUEST NEEDS TO CONTAIN...

- ✔ **A subject line**
- ✔ **Your name**
- ✔ **A contact address**
- ✔ **A description of the information you want**

You can find an [example/template of an FOI here](#).

TOPS TIPS

- ✔ **Keep it clear and simple:**
Write your request in plain language and focus on exactly what you need to avoid confusion.
- ✔ **Avoid requesting too much data:**
Large or overly complex requests can lead to delays or even refusals on the grounds of cost or difficulty.
- ✔ **Use the correct EIR rubric at the top of the request:**
Specify what regulations your request falls under.
- ✔ **Set a timeline for response:**
By law, public authorities must respond to FOI requests within **20 working days**. Under the EIR, this timeline can be extended to **40 working days** if the request is complex. Include a clear note in your request referencing this statutory deadline to encourage timely compliance.