

GUIDE TO FINDING OFFICIAL INFORMATION

Documents, records and files held by public bodies belong to the people.

By accessing official records, we can see for ourselves what is being done with public money and how decisions are made in our name.

This guide outlines some of the key sources of official information that you may find useful, and also some 'tools' you can use to discover and analyse official records.

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WHAT IT IS

What is official information?

Official information comprises documents, files and records that are held by government or public bodies or agencies. There are many different types of official information. Sources of official information include:

- Reports, policy documents or statements from government departments or public bodies like the Health Service Executive and local authorities (county and city councils).
- Official circulars from government departments and public bodies which provide information, guidance, rules, and/or background information on policy or procedural matters.
- Records and statistics from data-collection bodies, including meteorological records, crime figures, tourist information, traffic data, census statistics and election results.
- Spending figures including the budgets of individual government departments or public agencies.
- Laws, comprising Acts of the Oireachtas, and statutory instruments including regulations, bye-laws and other types of secondary legislation.
- Annual reports of public bodies and agencies, which must legally report on their activities to a government department or the Oireachtas.
- Proceedings of the Houses of the Oireachtas, including debates and hearings of committees and parliamentary questions.
- Official correspondence and minutes of meetings of government departments, public bodies and agencies.
- Historical material from government departments, held by the National Archives.



Accessing official information about yourself

If you want to access official information that is about you personally, you may find the [Toolkit Guide to Freedom of Information](#) useful.

Why look for official information?

By accessing official information, we can better understand what national policy is on any given issue, as well as the evidence and reasoning behind policies. It also helps us understand how public money is spent and allows analysts and experts to track trends and carry out analysis.

On a daily basis, lots of official information is released, interpreted and disseminated by many different organisations and individuals.

These include Ministers and public officials, the media, civil society organisations and public representatives – TDs, Senators and councillors.

Access to accurate and timely official information is also essential to ensure that oversight bodies and civil society groups can monitor the activities and policies of public bodies.

The release of official information can sometimes lead to significant public debate and even shifts in government policy.

For example, the publication of official figures of the numbers of people on public hospital waiting lists can lead to the allocation of more public funds to tackle the issue.



Sensitive, personal and private information

Some information that public bodies hold is sensitive because it is about individuals or relates to national security or ongoing criminal investigations. There are data protection laws in place to protect personal privacy and commercial confidentiality so that certain types of information cannot be accessed inappropriately.

HOW IT WORKS

Key sources of official information

Public bodies routinely release different types of information, including reports, statistics, minutes of meetings, or press releases.

The amount and type of information and data released by public bodies varies, with some routinely providing much more than others.

There are a variety of websites, databases and archives that hold official information that groups or individuals could find useful when conducting research or analysis or preparing a campaign for policy change.

Listed below are some key sources for official information in relation to issues of national interest such as public policy and laws, as well as national statistics and surveys.

Laws and parliamentary activities

Irish Statute Book

What it is: The [Irish Statute Book](#) is a searchable electronic database of Acts of the Oireachtas and Statutory Instruments dating back to 1922. Acts of the Oireachtas are laws. They are referred to as primary legislation. Statutory instruments are a form of delegated or secondary legislation, which means that, unlike Acts, they are not enacted by the Oireachtas. Instead, they are enacted by Ministers, public bodies or agencies. There are five types of statutory instrument: orders, regulations, rules, bye-laws and schemes.

Useful for: Legal research, including reading and downloading Acts and Statutory Instruments. Some Acts are commenced, or brought into force, in stages. The site can help you to establish whether an Act has been brought into force in total or just in part. It also lists and provides links to any [secondary legislation](#) (statutory

instruments) made under an original Act, as well as any legalisation that has amended an original Act.

Iris Oifigiúil – the official gazette

What it is: The State's official gazette, *Iris Oifigiúil*, is published twice a week, in hard copy and online. The gazette carries notices of when Ministers use their powers to issue statutory instruments, such as regulations to bring in to force particular sections of laws (Acts of the Oireachtas) or to give effect to EU Regulations. It also announces appointments to public offices and boards of state bodies.

Four times a year, *Iris Oifigiúil* publishes lists of tax defaulters and information on settlements made by tax defaulters with the Revenue Commissioners. These lists of names often generate media coverage, particularly if well-known figures are named as tax defaulters. The gazette is free to read online. Printed copies can be purchased from the Government Publications Office, 52 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2.

Useful for: Keeping an eye on how EU law (Regulations) is being implemented in Ireland and when particular sections of Acts have been brought into force.

Oireachtas website

What it is: Everything that is said in the course of the formal business of the Houses of the Oireachtas (Dáil, Seanad and Committees) is available online. The [official Oireachtas website](#) contains an archive of every debate in the history of the State.

The written record of parliamentary debates is put online within 24 hours. An official [report of committee meetings](#) is published within a week, or sooner. Replies to [parliamentary questions](#) tabled by TDs for written response by Ministers are published at the end of each day's Dáil proceedings.

The Oireachtas website posts the changing text of draft legislation, in pdf format, as it passes through the five formal stages of Oireachtas approval. Oireachtas business is also televised and can be streamed live via the internet.

The [Oireachtas Library and Research Service](#) produces research and infographics for TDs and Senators which is also often of general interest. It also publishes detailed briefing papers on topical issues as part of its regular [Spotlight series](#). Topics covered in the past include renewable energy, higher education and mortgage arrears.

The Library and Research Service also produces a [weekly list of 'documents laid'](#) before the Houses of the Oireachtas the previous week. They include things like annual reports from statutory agencies, secondary legislation, known as 'statutory instruments' and declarations of private interests by TDs, Senators and others.

Useful for:

- Tracking the passage of a Bill through the Houses of the Oireachtas.
- Monitoring the performances of individuals TDs or Senators by finding what issues they speak on, and what stances they take, either in committee or the floor of either House.
- Understanding government policy through the 'official record' of opinions and perspectives.
- Researching statements by Ministers and the Taoiseach in parliamentary debates or written Parliamentary Questions.

KildareStreet.com

What it is: The website KildareStreet.com is a searchable archive of everything that has been said in the lower house of parliament, Dáil Éireann, as well as all written parliamentary questions, since January 2004. It also contains the official record of the upper chamber, the Seanad, since September 2002, and all committee meetings since September 2012.

The site contains information on the performances of individual TDs or Senators, including the number of times they have spoken in debates and their main topics of interest. It also details TDs' and Senators' declarations of interests and how these change over time. KildareStreet.com is not a State-run website – instead it reuses data published by the official Oireachtas website, www.oireachtas.ie

Useful for: The site has a particularly efficient search function. You can also set up personalised email alerts for key words, names or phrases.

National statistics

Central Statistics Office

What it is: The Central Statistics Office (CSO) collects, compiles, extracts and disseminates statistical information relating to economic, social, and other activities in the State. It is also responsible for coordinating the official statistics of other public authorities. Its statistics cover many aspects of life, from crime and health figures to statistics relating to the economy, the labour market and the environment. It also publishes Census results.

Useful for: Analysis of trends in Irish society and the economy. The CSO website has links to published reports and statistical databases. It also houses Statbank the CSO's full database where you can create your own tables of data. [A tutorial video](#) explains how this works.

Eurostat

What it is: Eurostat is the European Commission's statistical agency. Its detailed database provides standardised statistics at European level that enable comparisons between countries and regions.

For example, Eurostat publishes statistical data on how much each of the individual European Union countries spend on public services. These are categorised under ten standardised headings of general expenditure, called the Classification of the Functions of Government (COFOG). These are: general public services; defence; public order and safety; economic affairs; environmental protection; housing and community amenities; health; recreation, culture and religion; education; and social protection.

Useful for: Comparative research, in particular to inform policy analysis or advocacy. You can select the datasets you need to create your own tables.

A drawback of using Eurostat's COFOG figures is that there is a time lag in the data of several years. For example, in 2015, the most up to date comparable figures on public spending in EU countries was for 2012.

General information

Citizens Information

What it is: Citizensinformation.ie is a public service information website, run by the Citizens Information Board. It contains clearly written and detailed official information on many aspects of public rights, entitlements and benefits. It covers topics including consumer affairs, education and training, employment, environment, government, housing, justice, money and tax, social welfare, travel and recreation.

Useful for: A very reliable starting point for general research on a wide range of topics, with links to further information and resources.

Government Press Offices

What it is: Press offices of all government departments and state agencies routinely publish plans, strategies, speeches, press releases, statistics and other information. The official website www.gov.ie has links to the websites of all government websites and online services.

Useful for: Updates on work of public bodies, department officials and Ministers. Many websites have sections dedicated to ongoing consultations on policy or legislative proposals.

MerrionStreet.ie

What it is: The Irish government news service platform, MerrionStreet.ie, provides news updates on selected government activities. All government department press releases are also available on the site.

MerrionStreet.ie provides the official government account of events, albeit in the style and language of a standard news bulletin. It is produced by a team based in Government Buildings in Merrion Street in Dublin. This is the where the Taoiseach's office is located, and where the Cabinet holds its weekly meetings.

Useful for: Maintaining an overview of work of departments and the government's public relations priorities.

Historical records

The National Archives

What it is: The National Archives of Ireland contains official historical records chiefly from government departments, the courts and specific state agencies. Records are transferred to the National Archives for preservation when they are thirty years old.

As well as preserving and indexing these documents, the National Archives makes them available for public inspection. The website of the National Archives has an online catalogue of descriptions of archive material. Generally the records themselves cannot be viewed online. The archive has a reading room which members of the public can visit to read the hard copy records.

Useful for: Primary research for understanding political, economic and social forces that have shaped Government policy, and the arguments made for legislation and policy that may remain current.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

How to get official information

You can look for official information through searching the internet and also through visiting public or university libraries. You may find some of the sources listed in the How It Works section of this guide useful.

You can also directly contact a public body to ask for information – most public bodies have information offices to handle such requests.

If you are unable to get the information you seek simply by asking for it, or if you are having trouble even finding out whether it even exists, there are other tools you can use.

Tools for getting official information

Two useful tools for getting official information are:

- Freedom of Information (FOI) requests
- Parliamentary Question (PQs)

This section of the guide explains how FOI and PQs work, and the main differences between the two tools.

Making a Freedom of Information request

Anyone can make a request for records held by public bodies (with some exceptions), under the Freedom of Information Act 2014. This law also requires public bodies to proactively publish information about their main activities, budgets, and policies.

Our [Toolkit Guide to Freedom of Information](#) includes a step-by-step guide to making an FOI request. The main thing to remember about FOI is that it gives you a right to access official records, where they exist. This is not the same thing as a right to ask a question.

Asking Parliamentary Questions - PQs

TDs can help you to get questions answered in parliament, by the Taoiseach or a Minister. This could be on an issue that you bring to them as a constituent, or an issue which they consider merits national attention.

The lower house of parliament, Dáil Éireann, sets aside time each sitting day (Tuesday to Thursday) for the Taoiseach and Ministers to reply to PQs about issues related to current events and the Ministers' departments or areas of responsibility.

Parliamentary Questions come in both oral and written formats. Replies to oral questions are delivered verbally on the floor of the lower House of the Oireachtas, the Dáil. Replies to written questions are published daily on the official [Oireachtas website](#).

Written PQs in particular can be a useful tool if you are conducting research on a matter of public interest or importance. They can be a way get information or statistics that are not readily accessible except from government departments, or may have enhanced importance if they are published by them.

FOI or PQs - which tool to use?

While both FOI and PQs might produce the information you seek, they are useful in different ways. The main difference between them is that a Freedom of Information request gives you access to official records. These can be personal records about you as an individual, like hospital files, or non-personal records to do with policies or public services.

A single FOI request can provide you with access to large volume of documentation. This route might therefore be most appropriate when you require detailed first hand data or information.

The main advantage of PQs on the other hand is that they are an efficient way to get an answer to a specific question from a government department via the Minister responsible for that department. As questions asked in parliament have to be processed quickly by civil servants, they can be good way to get specific information within a short time-frame.

Anyone can make an FOI request. But members of the public cannot submit a parliamentary question – only TDs can do this, but many will do so on others' behalf.



Parliamentary questions – only when Dáil is in session

One key advantage of FOI over PQs is that FOI requests can be made whether the Dáil is sitting or not. PQs are not answered when the Dáil is not in session, including during holiday periods.

The Dáil and Seanad are generally in session from the end of January to the end of March; from the end of April to the end of June; and from early October until mid-December.

Neither house sits on Mondays, while Friday sittings are infrequent. Parliamentary questions can never be asked in the Seanad.

Four types of parliamentary questions

There are four types of parliamentary questions, which are answered by the Taoiseach and Ministers:

- Leaders' Questions
- Oral Questions
- Priority Questions
- Written Questions

Leaders' Questions

The Taoiseach answers questions on the floor of the Dáil on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. These are called Leaders' Questions because they come from the leaders of the main opposition political parties. If the Taoiseach is not available, a member of the cabinet is nominated to take his or her place on the day. The questions and replies must be brief – no longer than three minutes. There is also an opportunity for an even briefer follow-up

question and subsequent reply. Leaders' questions are usually highly topical, focusing on the pressing political issues of the day. For this reason, they are often covered by the media.

Oral questions

Ministers answer oral questions in the Dáil less frequently than the Taoiseach. This operates on the basis of a rota system, with each Minister generally answering oral questions once a month. Any TD can submit oral questions, although they are limited to two questions each to the Minister whose turn it is to take questions. TDs must submit their questions in writing five working days in advance of the relevant Minister's scheduled appearance.

Once a Minister answers a particular question, he or she can then be further questioned by the TD who asked the original question, as well as other TDs. Around ten oral questions are answered each day.

Priority questions

Priority questions are a sub-category of oral questions for Ministers. They are the questions that are at the top of the list to be answered. Up to five oral questions are given priority at each question session, which means they are answered first. This usually guarantees that they will be answered.

Priority questions can be asked only by Opposition spokespersons, and they are distributed according to the size of the Opposition party or grouping. If Ministers do not get around to answering all the oral questions submitted to them within the time allocated, then, at the request of the TDs who tabled the questions, they may instead give follow-up written replies.

Alternatively, questions can be **held over** to the next oral questions session with that Minister. However, there is no guarantee that all the left-over questions will be reached at the next question time.

Written questions

Every TD can put unlimited numbers of written PQs to Ministers any day of the week. They must be answered within three working days, but only when the Dáil is sitting. Answers to written PQs are prepared by civil servants in government departments or public agencies that come under those departments. Written question replies are not debated or read out in the Dáil. Instead, they are published in the formal daily record of the Dáil in the [debates section](#) of the Oireachtas website.

Pros and cons of different types of PQs

Parliamentary questions can be used to get information, to raise an issue or keep it in the public eye, or bring a matter to the attention of politicians, Ministers and civil servants. Journalists sometimes write news stories based on the answers to PQs.

Because of the process for oral questions outlined above, it is harder to get an oral question answered. However, sometimes it is worth the effort as an oral question can have a greater impact with the Minister responding to it, and also in the media who report on daily Dáil proceedings.

The key advantage of oral questions is that they give well-briefed TDs an opportunity to discuss issues and tease out details with Ministers, and to get additional information by asking supplementary questions.

This can be an effective way to highlight issues or shortcomings in existing policies or laws, and to push for answers or commitments to take certain actions

The main downside of oral questions is that each Minister's turn on the rota only comes around about once a month. If your question is urgent and time sensitive, then a written question might be more effective.

Written questions can result in more detailed answers than oral questions. They can also be tabled with fewer restrictions, and must be answered within three sitting days.

This makes them particularly useful if you need to get information quickly and other channels have not worked. It is important that questions are very carefully drafted to make it clear precisely what information is sought. With written questions, unlike how oral questions work, there is no opportunity for the questioner to ask supplementary questions on the spot. You can of course ask a TD to submit follow up questions.

Parliamentary questions, whether oral or written, are considered formally to be part of the official record of Dáil debates. Ministers (and department officials who draft the replies to PQs) are very conscious of this. If Ministers mislead the Dáil over matters of fact, they will face severe criticisms from opposition deputies and commentators.

Using PQs and FOI together

PQs and FOI requests can be used either separately, or at the same time, to get official information.

For example, a Minister might make reference in a reply to a parliamentary question to an internal document or report which you could then ask to see using Freedom of Information.



Parliamentary questions for campaigning

For groups seeking change, parliamentary questions are not just a useful source of information. Oral questions in particular can also be used as part of an advocacy campaign to raise issues directly with a Minister in an official forum where other politicians and journalists are present.

*It can also be useful sometimes to be able to cite what a Minister has told the Dáil in reply to an oral or written **parliamentary question**.*

Tips for asking a TD to submit a PQ

- A PQ must relate directly to an area of a Minister's responsibility, so it is important when drafting a question to find out which department is responsible for that area.
- It is important when composing PQs that you want a TD to submit for you to use very precise language so that officials preparing the answers are clear what information is sought. This will help ensure that the answers you receive are useful and unambiguous.
- Generally a TD can advise you on the eligibility of a question and the best way to formulate it. The more succinct and specific it is the better.
- If you want to get statistical information, it is useful to request it "in tabular format".

- If you succeed in getting an oral question asked by a TD, it is very important to provide accurate and relevant background information to the TD posing the question. This will allow the TD to follow up with the Minister by asking supplementary questions, which may lead to more information.



Online publication of parliamentary questions

All parliamentary questions and replies are published in the Dáil debates section of the Oireachtas website – there is usually a time lag of several days following the day of the question oral reply.

However a TD usually gets a written reply on the day it is listed for reply. In 2013, a total of 50,926 PQs were processed.

More information about [Parliamentary Questions](#)

PEOPLE'S STORIES

Searching for information on Ireland's banking crisis

At the height of Ireland's financial crisis in late 2010, a written exchange took place between the then Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan and the European Central Bank president Jean-Claude Trichet.

Within weeks, the Irish government had formally applied to the EU and the International Monetary Fund for a €86bn 'bail-out.' This led to an official agreement which ended Ireland's economic sovereignty and resulted in years of austerity.

Here, journalist and seasoned FOI user Gavin Sheridan explains how a BBC interview with Mr Lenihan prompted him to go on a three year quest to get a hold of the 'secret' Trichet letter through official channels.

Looking for the Trichet letter

"It goes back to the late Brian Lenihan's interview on BBC radio in 2011. Lenihan referred to a letter that he had received from Trichet in November 2010. I listened at the time and I thought it was interesting but my mind didn't start turning to how to get the letter until later that year.

In December 2011 I sent off two FOI requests – one to the Department of Finance and one to the ECB directly. I said I'd like all the communication in the month of November 2010 between Lenihan and Trichet.

I was really just trying to understand what had happened and how the country got to the position of the bail-out, and whether the ECB had overstepped the mark in dictating to the government. In the BBC interview, Lenihan made the point that Ireland was bounced into the bail-out and I thought it would be important to see what the letter said, both as a journalist and a citizen.

The ECB responded relatively quickly and released some communication but not the letter I wanted. I appealed internally and the request was again refused.

At the same time I was dealing with the Irish Department for Finance who also refused to release the letter. After an internal review was also unsuccessful, I appealed to the Office of the Information Commissioner, who found that the Department of Finance was legally correct to refuse to release the letter.

Appealing to the EU Ombudsman

"My final step was to go to the European Ombudsman to make a complaint about the ECB for maladministration – refusal to release information is one of the grounds for making a complaint to the Ombudsman.

In April 2014 the European Ombudsman agreed with the ECB that disclosing the letter at the time I requested it would have jeopardised the interests of Ireland and its financial sector.

But, as more than three years had passed, she said to the ECB: 'I can't order to you to release this letter but it would be good for transparency if you did'.

The ECB said: 'no we are not releasing it, but we will keep it under review'. At that stage, I had exhausted all my remedies in both Ireland and the EU.

The letter is published

"Then, a few months later, on the one year anniversary of Ireland exiting the bail-out, in November 2014, the Trichet letter was leaked to The Irish Times. It was also published the next day by the ECB, along with a new Frequently Asked Questions section on the issue.

I was happy that the letter was at last published. From the beginning to the end it took over three years to get to see it, but it would not have been released if there had not been pressure. Irish people now have a little bit more information about the decision-making leading up to the bailout in 2010.

I think the publicity around the letter helped publicise the idea that information is valuable and citizens have a right to know certain things while decisions are still in progress.

Advice to others seeking to find official information

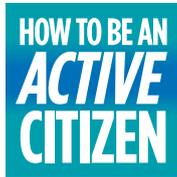
"It requires a certain amount of research to understand bureaucracy at a fundamental level.

Then you can start forming your questions and asking for information – I don't think you can fully understand things unless you ask for records.

You should always keep expectations low because it takes time and perseverance. But you don't know until you ask and you shouldn't be intimidated by refusals or legal problems. Not taking no for an answer is a good approach – and being unafraid to ask for help."

Listen to our podcasts

For more information on topics covered in the Toolkit guides, you can listen to our six-part podcast series – How to be an Active Citizen. These educational programmes aim to help listeners become active citizens in their own lives. The series was broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 Extra in May/June 2016. The podcasts are available on www.tasc.ie/activecitizen



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