

Responses to information requests

Part of a department's work is taken up in responding to inquiries from politicians, journalists and the public. We have data on at least three of these sources: written parliamentary questions from MPs, replies to correspondence from MPs and peers, and freedom of information (Fol) requests.

Some departments face more pressure than others – DWP, for example, receives either the greatest or second-greatest number of requests across all three categories. Others (for example, the offices for Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland) receive relatively few requests for information or answers.

Some departments are much better than others at responding in a timely fashion: HO, for example, scores poorly on responses, while DH (on written questions and ministerial correspondence) and DWP (ministerial correspondence) score reasonably well despite a high demand.

About the data

Written parliamentary questions are a key tool for MPs and peers to obtain detailed information from or press for action by ministers and departments. There are two kinds: 'ordinary' questions (which should be answered within five sitting days, though the formal limit is 14) and 'named day' questions (an MP can specify the answer date, giving at least two days' notice and being limited to five questions a day). We combine both types in our analysis.

Sessional returns published after each parliamentary session give the total number of questions asked. Since 2009-10, the House of Commons Procedure Committee has published details of the numbers answered by each department and the timeliness of the responses (within five and 10 days for ordinary questions, on the day specified for named day questions). These are self-reported by departments, although a new electronic system was launched by data.parliament.uk in September 2014.¹

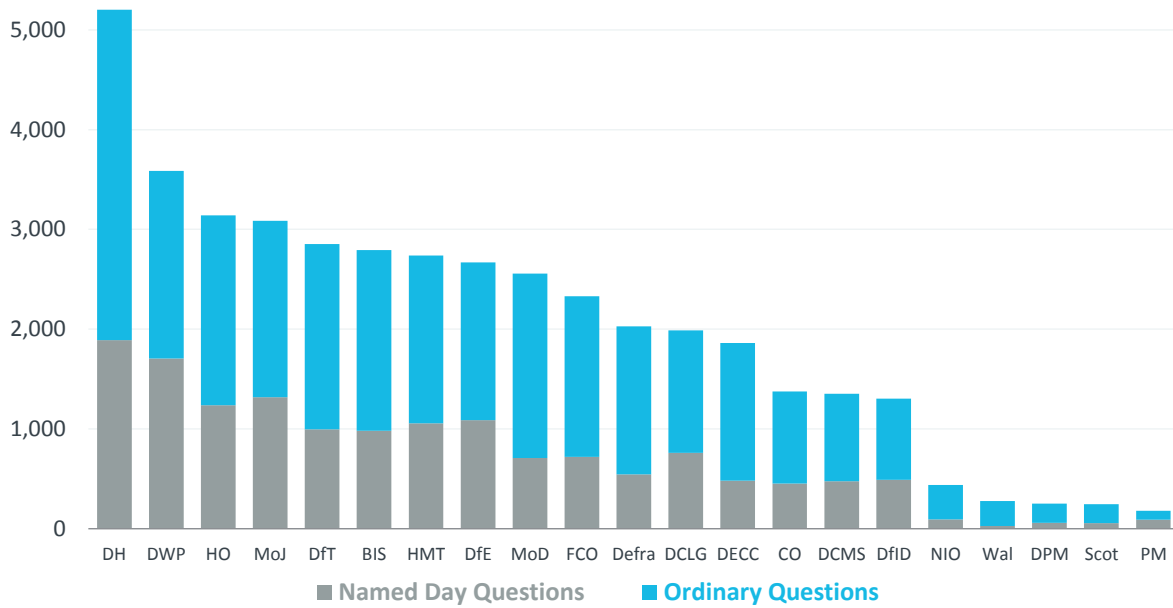
A report on rates of **ministerial correspondence** – 'the performance of departments and agencies on handling correspondence from members and peers' – is published annually as a written ministerial statement from the Cabinet Office (typically in May). Different departments and other bodies set different targets for response, and record the percentage of correspondence answered within that time. The total amount of correspondence is also recorded.²

Anyone can submit **FoI requests** to government bodies, asking for access to recorded information held by public bodies (including government departments). The Ministry of Justice publishes quarterly reports on the number of requests made to each department, the timeliness of their responses (within the statutory 20 working-day limit) and which requests have been refused and under what sections of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.³

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Parliamentary questions: DH receives the most, and answers nearly all of them on time

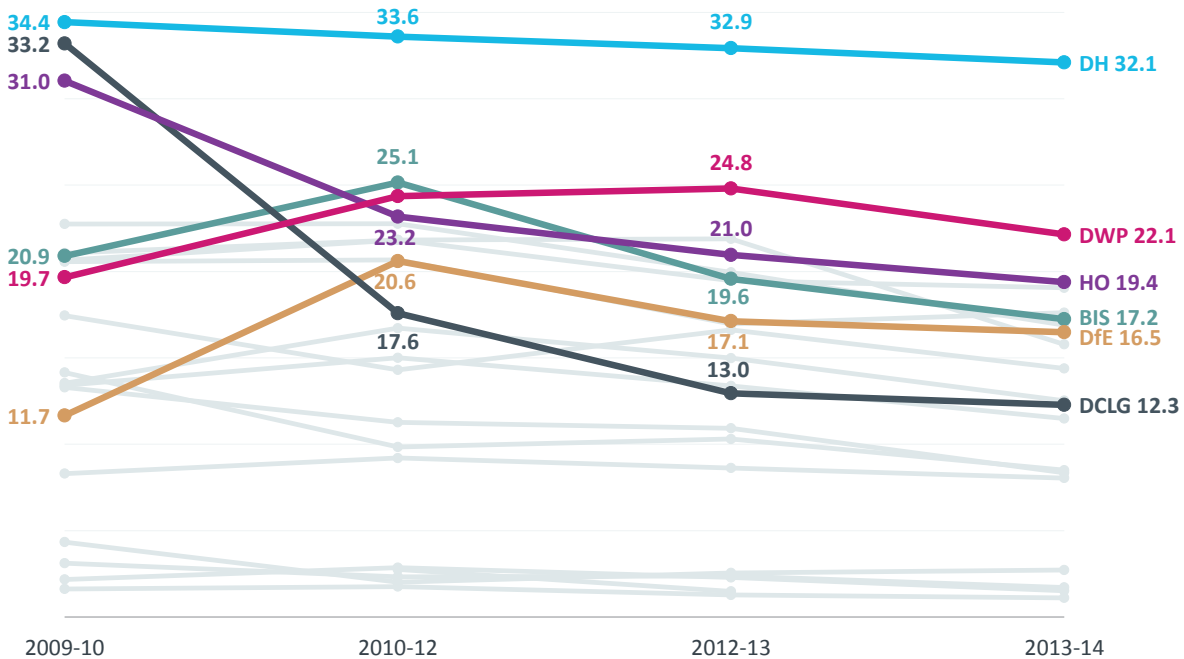
Figure 11.1: Written questions submitted to each department, 2013-14



Source: Institute for Government analysis of *Written Parliamentary question answering performance in 2013-14*, House of Commons Procedure Committee.

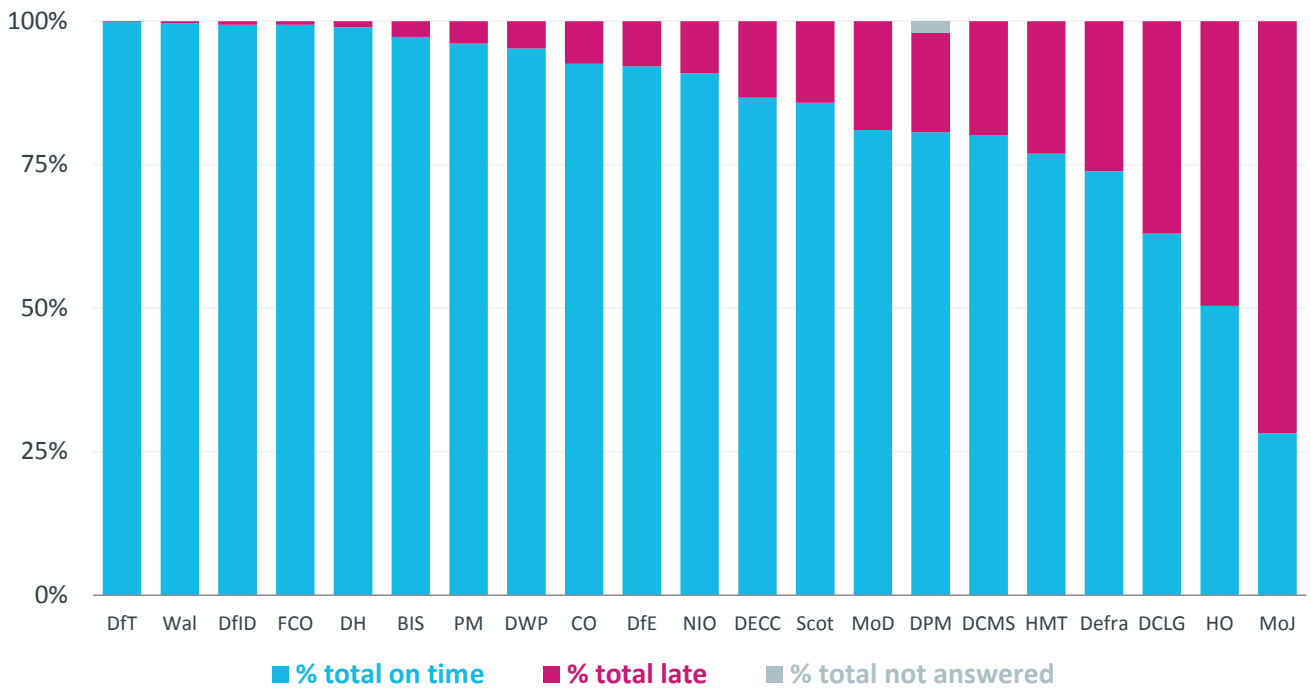
In 2013-14, DH received more than 5,000 questions in total, followed by DWP and the Home Office. DH has received more than 30 written questions per sitting day in every session since 2009-10. Departments tend to be consistent across sessions, although DCLG received nearly twice as many questions per sitting day in 2009-10 as in 2010-12, while DWP has had an increase since 2009-10 and HO has had a fall. Both BIS and DfE have fallen back from peaks in 2010-12.

Figure 11.2: Written questions submitted to each department by sitting day



Source: Institute for Government analysis of reports published by the House of Commons Procedure Committee.

Figure 11.3: Percentage of written questions answered on time, 2013-14



Source: Institute for Government analysis of *Written Parliamentary question answering performance in 2013-14*, House of Commons Procedure Committee. We have combined figures for named day questions (on the day specified) and ordinary questions (within five sitting days).

Only one department – MoJ – answered under 50% of the questions it received on time, with HO answering just over 50% on time. DfT answered the greatest percentage on time – all but six out of 2,854 questions.

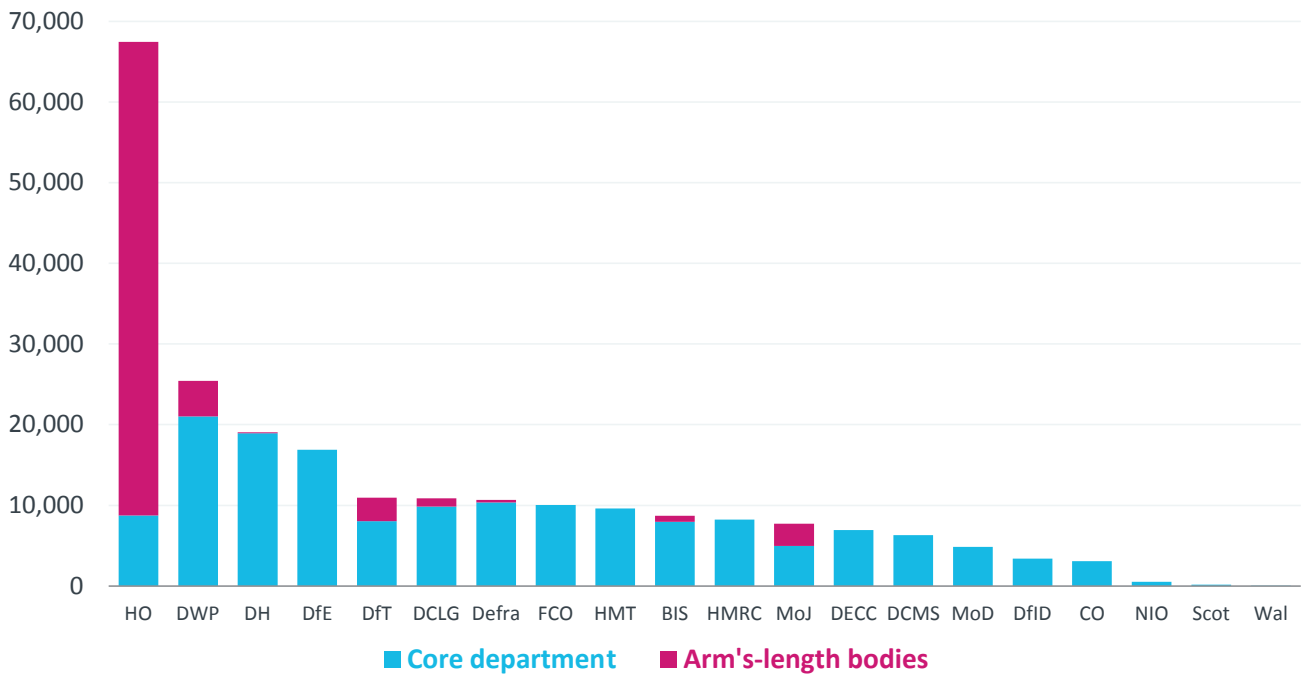
One 'department' – the Deputy Prime Minister – left some questions unanswered, compared to three in the 2012-13 session (the Prime Minister, Cabinet Office and Defra).

The majority of departments answered a greater percentage of questions on time in 2013-14 than in 2009-10 – only DCLG and MoJ answered a smaller percentage on time. Some – such as DECC, BIS and DWP – have seen a dramatic and sustained rise in performance. Others – DCLG and MoJ, the latter falling from 68% on time in 2012-13 to 28% in 2013-14 – have seen a continuous drop in performance over the last few years.

DfE's performance was a marked improvement on the three previous parliamentary sessions, when it had the lowest percentage of timely responses in each session.

Ministerial correspondence: visas, immigration and borders dominate

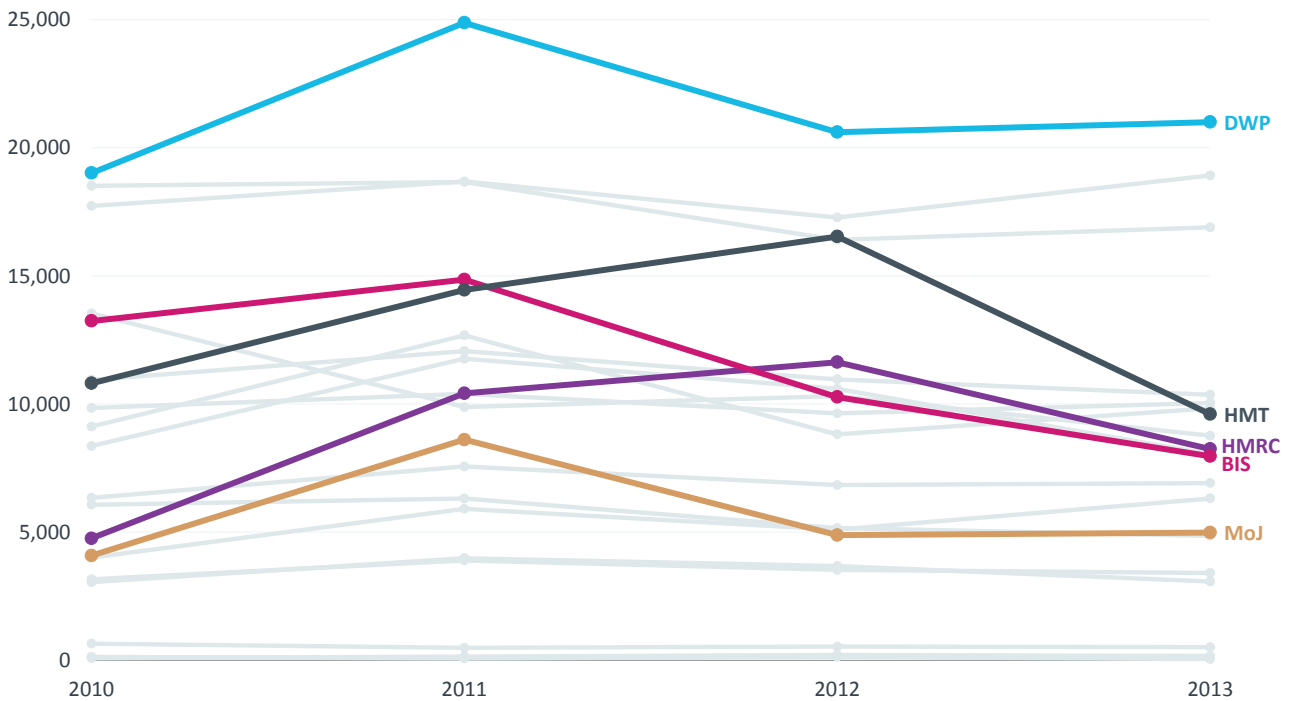
Figure 11.4: Volume of ministerial correspondence by department, 2013



Source: Institute for Government analysis of annual ministerial correspondence reports, 2014.

In the calendar year 2013, DWP received more pieces of correspondence than any other core department – just over 21,000. DH (18,918) and DfE (16,898) followed, clear of the next set of departments on around 10,000. The metaphorical postbags for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were by far the lightest. If we include the various other bodies of each department we see that the Home Office received by far the most correspondence. Most of this was to UK Visas and Immigration, Immigration Enforcement and Border Force, prompting 57,582 replies.

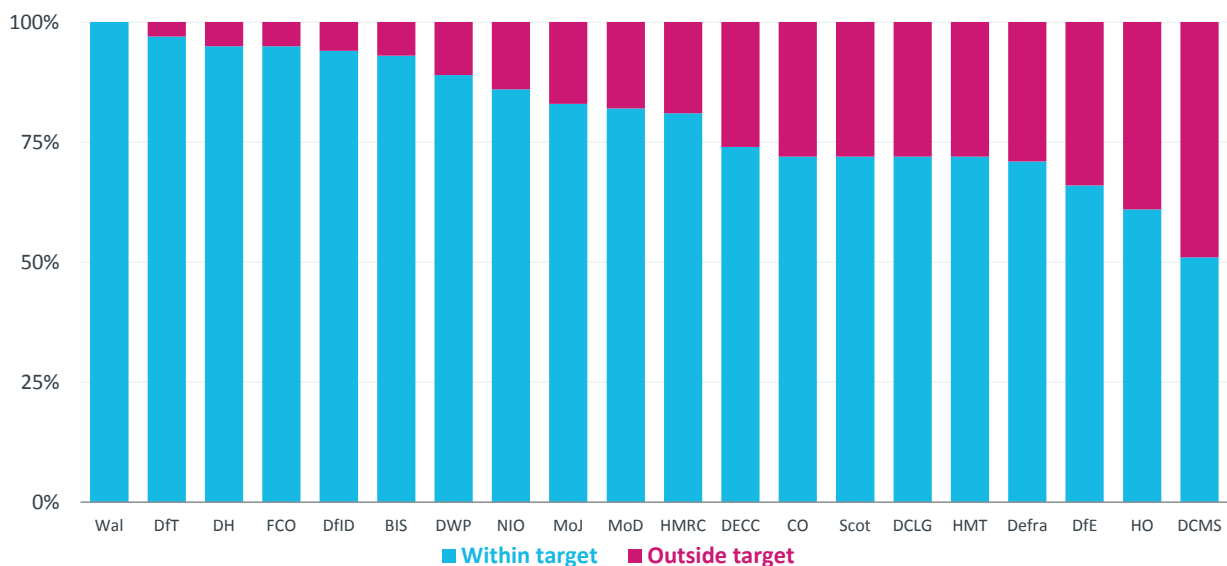
Figure 11.5: Volume of correspondence by department, 2010-13



Source: Institute for Government analysis of annual ministerial correspondence reports, 2011-14.

Returning to correspondence to main departments, from 2010 there were increases for DWP and MoJ (which doubled), perhaps due to coalition reforms in those areas; a decline for BIS (from more than 13,000 in 2010 to under 8,000 in 2013); and increases for HMT and HMRC, before a drop in 2013.

Figure 11.6: Percentage of correspondence answered within target, 2013

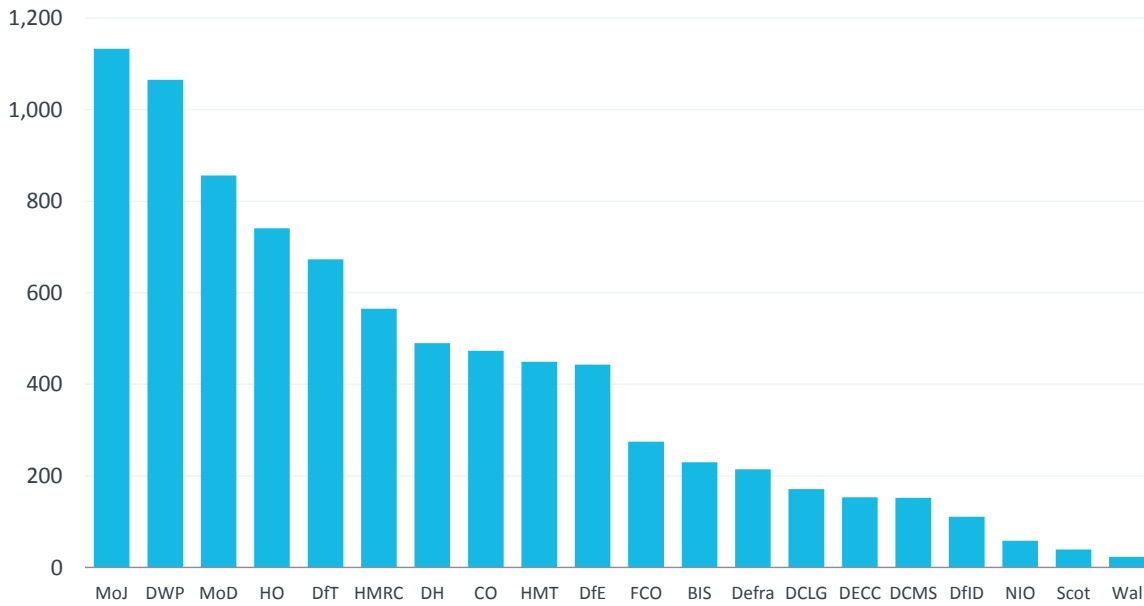


Source: Institute for Government analysis of annual ministerial correspondence reports, 2014.

DCMS answered just 51% of its correspondence on time. By contrast, DWP (89%) and DH (95%) were in the top half of the departmental league table despite having the most correspondence.

Freedom of Information: DWP and MoJ receive the most; HMRC, CO and MoJ withhold the most

Figure 11.7: FoI requests to departments, 2014 Q2

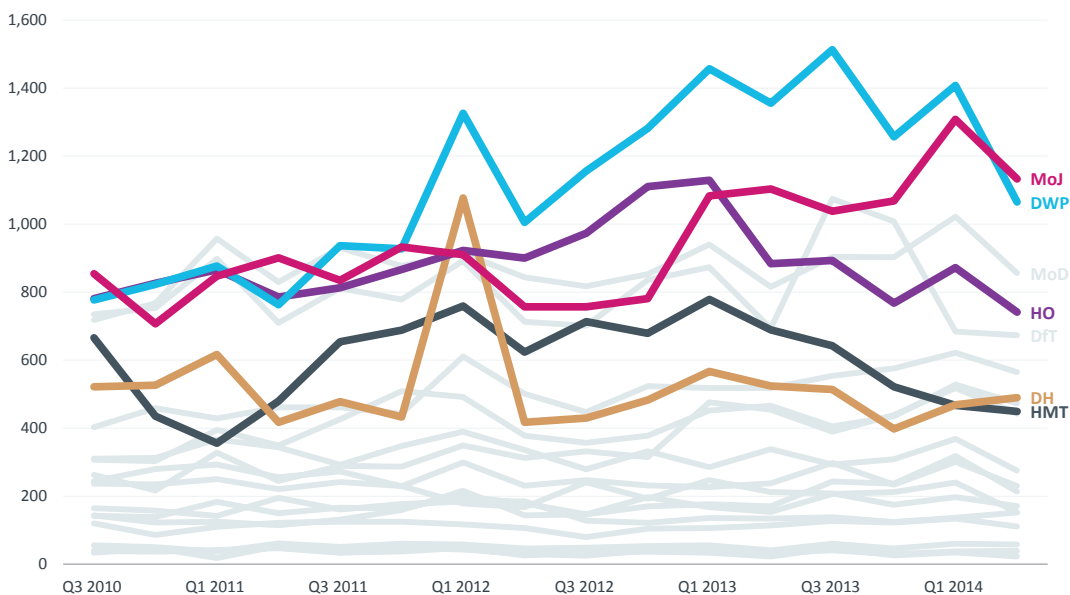


Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics.

MoJ received the most requests in 2014 Q2, closely followed by DWP. As we can see from the graph below, DWP went from one of a cluster of departments with the most requests to the clear frontrunner until a decline in the last quarter, while MoJ emerged from that cluster at the start of 2013. HO and HMT have seen declines in requests since early 2013. DWP and DH both saw a spike in requests in 2012 Q1, DH nearly trebling its previous number.

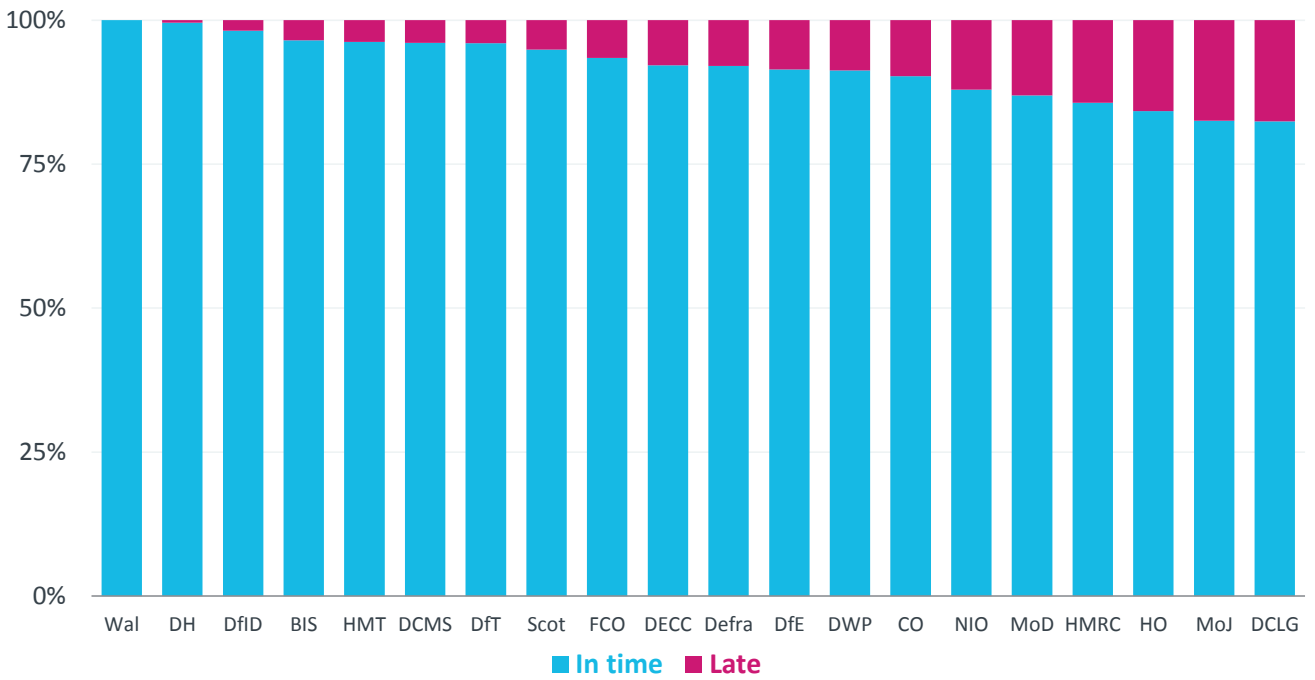
It is possible that the increases in requests for specific departments are due to major (and controversial) reforms in those departments. Many requests are submitted by individuals about themselves – for example, to check how something will affect them or the status of a claim.

Figure 11.8: FoI requests to departments, 2010 Q2 – 2014 Q2



Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics.

Figure 11.9: Timeliness of FoI responses, 2014 Q2



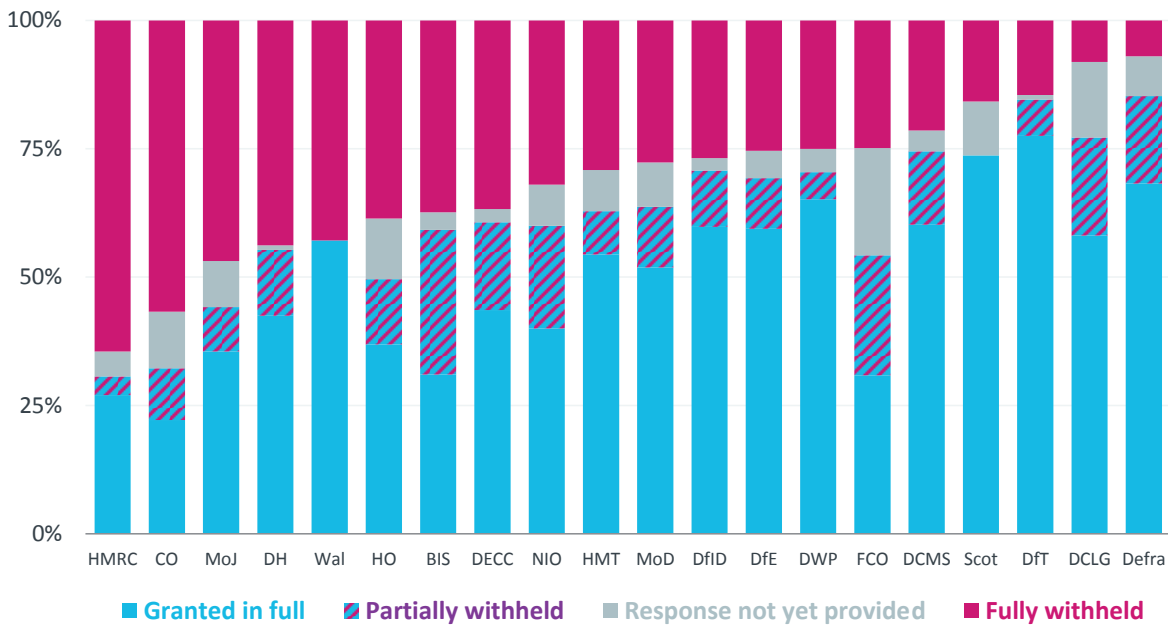
Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics.

Bodies subject to FoI requests are required to respond within 20 working days. The Wales Office responded to all of its 23 requests ‘in time’ in 2014 Q2, closely followed by DH (488 out of 490), while DCLG was the worst performer in early 2014 but still responded on time to 80% of requests.

There are measures other than a timely response that shine a light on how departments handle FoI requests. The number of complaints going to internal review and subsequent appeals to the Information Commissioner could indicate satisfaction with each department’s processes, for example, while the number of vetoes exercised by government to block a release can give some sense of how the overall system operates (only seven since 2005, according to other research).⁴

Perhaps the most useful measure is to look at the outcomes of FoI requests by department. There may, of course, be very good reasons why information cannot be released – there are many exemptions and exceptions under the Freedom of Information Act, and it may be the case that certain departments are more likely to hold information to which these apply.

Figure 11.10: Outcomes of resolvable FoI responses by department, 2014 Q2



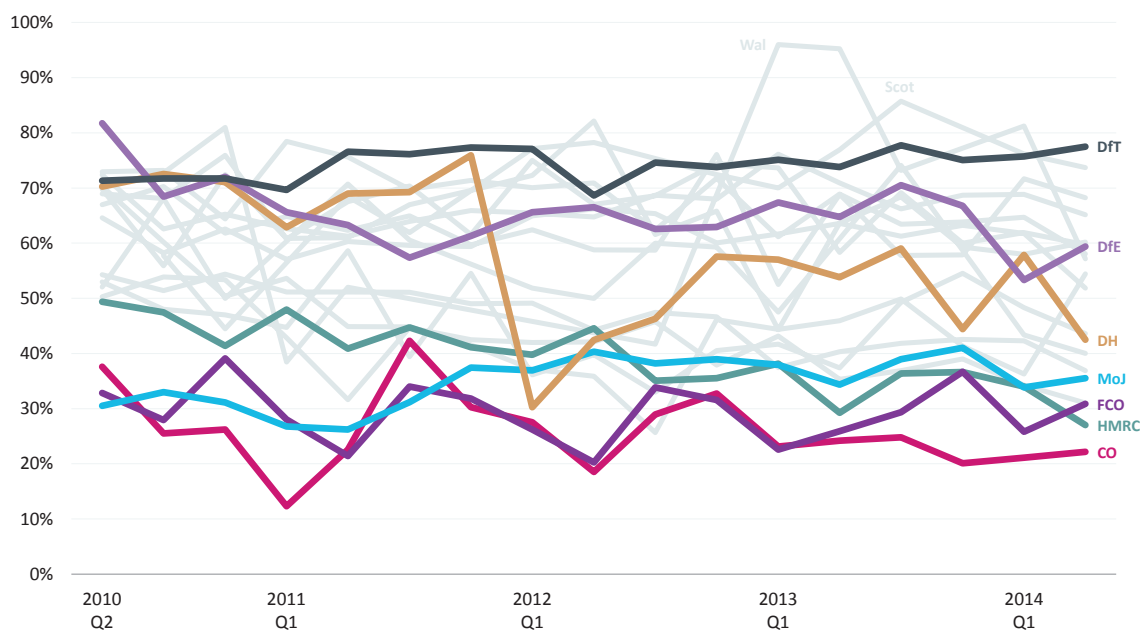
Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics. 'Resolvable' requests are those where a substantive response was possible (e.g. they exclude those where information was not held).

The departments responsible for the Government's transparency agenda (CO) and FoI policy (MoJ) are among those with the highest percentage of requests where the relevant information is fully withheld and not provided to the applicant at all.

Figures since 2010 show FCO has granted only a small number of requests in full, while DfT has consistently provided full responses.

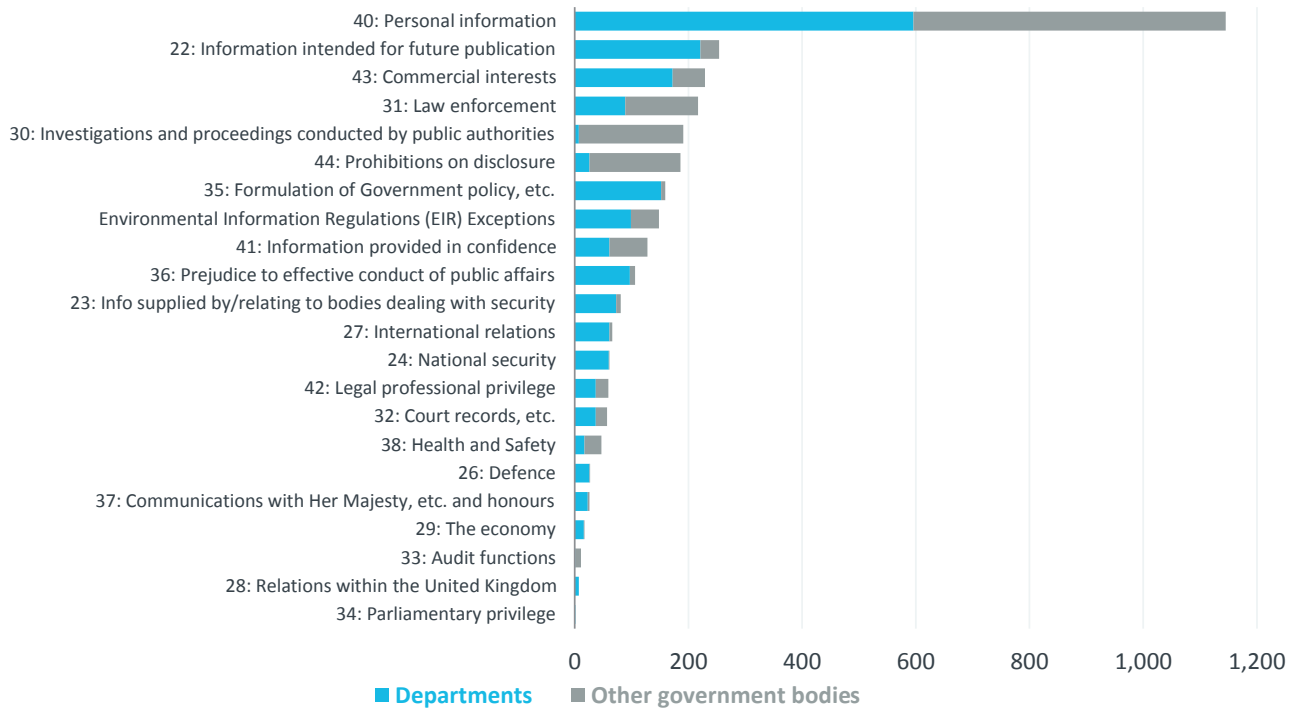
DH's full disclosure rate plummeted in 2012 Q1 (when its number of requests spiked), while DfE's has dropped from 82% in 2010 Q2 to 59% in 2014 Q2. HMRC, which had the highest percentage of fully withheld requests in the most recent quarter, fell from a full disclosure rate of 49% in 2010 Q2 to 27% in 2014 Q2.

Figure 11.11: Resolvable FoI responses granted in full, 2010 Q2 – 2014 Q2



Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics.

Figure 11.12: Grounds for withholding information, 2014 Q2



Source: Institute for Government analysis of FoI quarterly statistics.

Government bodies can cite a number of sections of the Freedom of Information Act (and Environmental Information Regulations) that exempt or except information from being released. In the second quarter of 2014, section 40 – which exempts personal data from being released – accounted for more than four times as many exemptions as any other section.

Between them, sections 41 and 43 – often referred to as 'commercial confidentiality' clauses – accounted for 233 exemptions by government departments (a total of 357 when other government bodies are included).

Overall: Wales Office, DH, DfT provide most timely responses, HO bottom of the table

Figure 11.13: Overall rankings for responses to information requests

Department	Parl'y Questions	Rank	Correspondence	Rank	Freedom of Info	Rank	Overall Rank
Wal	99.64%	2	100%	1	100.00%	1	1
DH	98.92%	5	95%	3	99.59%	2	2=
DfT	99.79%	1	97%	2	95.99%	7	2=
DfID	99.39%	3	94%	5	98.20%	3	4
BIS	97.24%	6	93%	6	96.52%	4	5=
FCO	99.36%	4	95%	3	93.45%	9	5=
DWP	95.26%	7	89%	7	91.27%	13	7
DECC	86.67%	11	74%	11	92.16%	10	8=
Scot	85.77%	12	72%	12	94.87%	8	8=
HMT	76.92%	15	72%	12	96.21%	5	8=
NIO	90.91%	10	86%	8	87.93%	15	11
CO	92.59%	8	72%	12	90.27%	14	12
DfE	92.13%	9	66%	17	91.42%	12	13
DCMS	80.12%	14	51%	19	96.05%	6	14=
MoD	81.04%	13	82%	10	86.92%	16	14=
Defra	73.83%	16	71%	16	92.06%	11	16
Moj	28.22%	19	83%	9	82.52%	18	17
DCLG	63.00%	17	72%	12	82.46%	19	18
HO	50.38%	18	61%	18	84.21%	17	19

Source: Institute for Government analysis of parliamentary questions, 2013-14; ministerial correspondence, 2013; Fol statistics, 2014 Q2.

Taking a composite ranking across all three forms of information request, the Wales Office comes out on top as providing the highest percentage of timely responses to parliamentary questions, ministerial correspondence and Fol requests, although it does receive a relatively small number. DH and DfT, which both receive considerably more, round out the top three.

HO is bottom, having finished second-bottom in answering written parliamentary questions on time, second-bottom in answering ministerial correspondence within target, and third-bottom in answering Fol requests in time. DCLG is second from bottom, and MoJ – responsible for the government’s Fol policy – is third from bottom.