

CENTRALISING THE OIA FUNCTION – THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION’S SUCCESS STORY

ABOUT THE MINISTRY

As the Government’s lead advisor on the education system, the Ministry of Education employs almost 3,000 people across ten regional offices. As steward of the education system, the Ministry administers \$14.6 billion in budgeted expenditure making it one of the Government’s largest investments. Each year the Ministry responds to around 700 Official Information Act (OIA) requests.

INTRODUCING A CENTRALISED OPERATING MODEL

Until early 2015, the Ministry operated a decentralised OIA model. Business units managed their own OIA requests with support from the legal team, when needed. Under this model, a high degree of customisation of processes had occurred to suit individual business unit preferences and the Ministry was performing below 90 percent in terms of responding to OIA requests within the legislated timeframe.

The Ministry moved progressively from its decentralised arrangements over a 12 month period, with a fully centralised model in place from early 2015.

Today, all OIAs (for the agency and the Minister) are handled by the Government, Executive and Ministerial Services (GEMS) team. Each year they respond to around 700 requests. The team also looks after official correspondence, parliamentary and select committee questions, and proactive release of information. Team members are multi-skilled with individuals working across the full range of tasks as demand dictates. This approach helps the Ministry manage peaks in demand.

BENEFITS AND COSTS

Moving from a model where individual business units have full control, to one where the responsibility shifts to a centralised group has the potential to be highly contentious, so how did the Ministry make the shift?

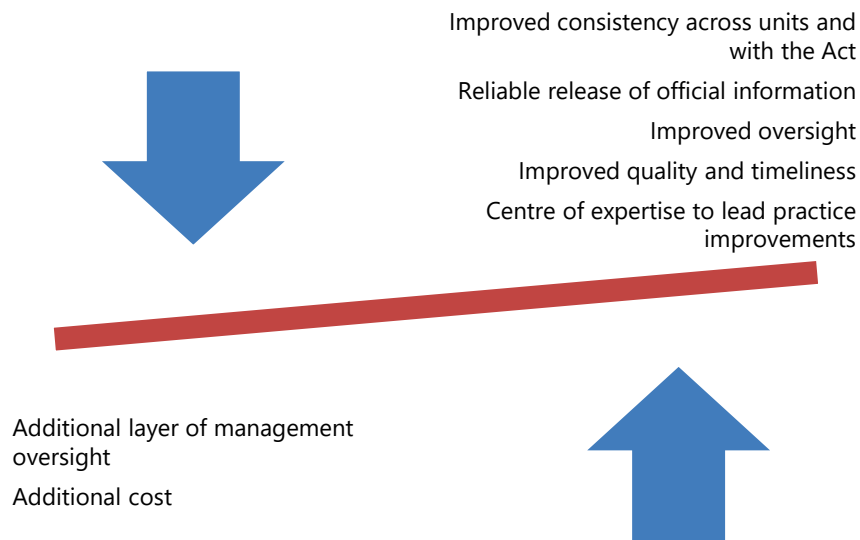
- ▶ They had support from the Ministry’s Leadership Team, which takes a strong interest in the Ministry’s management of all OIAs.
- ▶ A business leads group was set up with an OIA champion in each business unit so they can directly track progress of their OIA requests.
- ▶ The change was supported by regular communications with Ministry managers and staff about the new approach, backed up with new tools and expert advice.

- ▶ The move was also supported with the introduction of an electronic tracking and workflow management system.

The proposal to introduce a centralised model generated some understandable concerns at the beginning, including 'how will this centralised group understand my business?', 'will they be signing things out I don't agree with?', 'how do I maintain visibility of what is being sent?'

As the GEMS team became fully operational, the value proposition became much clearer. It is now easier to ensure OIAs are managed at the right level, control consistency and support organisational-wide visibility and accountability of OIAs. The Ministry also has a strong centre of expertise on the Official Information Act and how to apply it appropriately to support its business.

On balance, the Ministry's experience to date is that the benefits of the centralised model significantly outweigh the costs.



HOW IT WORKS

The GEMS team manages the entire process for every OIA request. Business units support GEMS to collate the information as well as providing supporting background material. GEMS leads the development of the final response as well as provides the expert advice around the application of the OIA.

Responsibilities and accountabilities for each step in the process for handling OIA requests are clearly defined. An overview of this is set out in their [RASCI Matrix](#), and documented more fully in an interactive [OIA Process](#) diagram, published on the Ministry's intranet. The OIA Process includes expected timing for each step.

As part of the change in operating model, the Ministry replaced its Excel spreadsheets and whiteboard approach with a tracking tool (JIRA), which monitors every OIA request through each step in the Ministry's OIA Process.

JIRA provides clear visibility of all OIA requests currently being handled and detailed metrics for monitoring and reporting purposes.

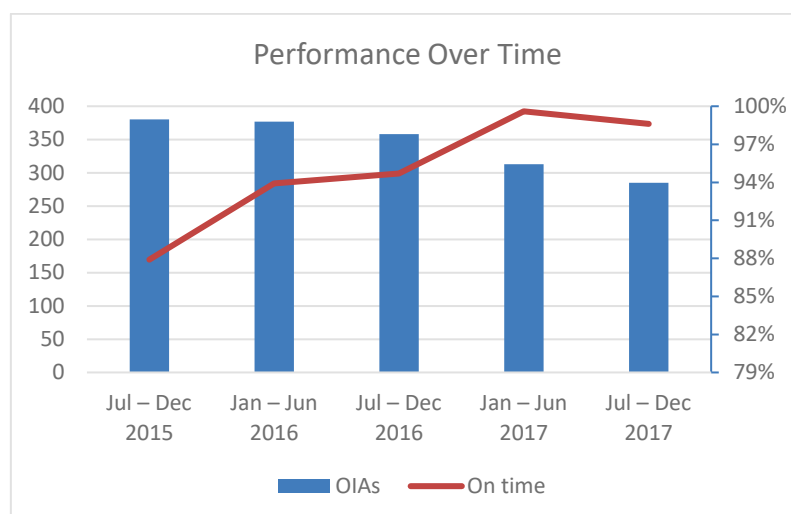
The GEMS team sits within the Strategy, Planning and Governance group with the Legal and Risk & Assurance teams among others. The team is physically located close to the Ministry's Communications team and the Office of the Secretary for Education. This close proximity is an important element in addressing any potential issues quickly and maintaining an efficient, timely process.

RAISING AWARENESS

All Ministry staff receive information to build awareness of the OIA process and the role of the GEMS team in supporting them with OIA requests. This awareness raising is reinforced through regular messages to Ministry managers and staff on new developments in the OIA space, such as publication of the Ministry's latest statistics, including reminders to staff of their OIA obligations. Regional visits are being planned to ensure all of the Ministry's offices know their obligations and to come to the Ministry for training.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

In the period January to December 2017, the Ministry completed 735 OIA requests – 5 were outside the legislated timeframe, a 99.2 percent on-time performance compared to 94.3 percent for the previous year.



WHERE TO NEXT?

The Ministry has three improvement priorities for the handling of OIA requests.

REPORTING

The GEMS team is working to enhance management reporting of OIA performance across the Ministry with the aim of lifting the visibility of timeliness performance across business units. They have developed reporting for Deputy Secretaries to show how their OIAs are tracking.

This is expected to provide data that will help identify process improvements. A “lessons learned” report has also been developed for OIAs that don’t go to plan and where they can learn from previous experiences.

PROACTIVE RELEASE

The Ministry has been gradually increasing the range of official information proactively published on its website. They have experienced a drop in the numbers of OIAs it receives where information has been proactively released and anticipate this trend to continue. Future releases of information will include:

- ▶ Routine publication of key reports and Cabinet papers
- ▶ Regular publication of selected OIA responses
- ▶ Key documents relating to emerging issues of public interest.

CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Upskilling the GEMS team across the board to be expert advisers who can provide end to end case management of the OIA process and support business units’ responses to requests is the Ministry’s key priority for building its capability. This will enhance the Ministry’s capacity to follow the Ministry’s OIA process and more consistently apply the provisions of the Act.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Please contact the Ministry’s Manager, Official and Parliamentary Information.

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