

<b>Report to:</b>	SMT
<b>Report by:</b>	Claire Stephen, Head of Policy and Information
<b>Meeting Date:</b>	8 March 2024
<b>Subject/ Title:</b> (and VC no)	Self-Assessment Toolkit assurance report (VC 203447)
<b>Attached Papers</b> (title and VC no)	none

## Purpose of report

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1. To provide information to the Senior Management Team (SMT) on the use and effectiveness of the Self-Assessment Toolkit for the period 25 March 2023 to 3 March 2024.

## Recommendation and actions

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2. I recommend that:
  - (i) SMT notes the contents of this report.
  - (ii) SMT agrees with the proposal to review self-assessment toolkits in 2024-25 operational plan.
  - (iii) the SMT agree the publication arrangements set out in the final paragraph of this report.

## Executive summary

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3. This report provides summary data about the use and effectiveness of the Scottish Information Commissioner's Self-Assessment Toolkits:
 

[Self-assessment toolkit | Scottish Information Commissioner \(itspublicknowledge.info\)](https://itspublicknowledge.info)
4. Our current website, launched in April 2022, continues to be developed and there have been some important changes to the tool we use to gather metrics (Google Analytics) since last year's report.

## Background

5. The Scottish Information Commissioner ('the Commissioner') has produced six modules of the Self-Assessment Toolkit:
  - (i) Module 1: Responding on time (published in October 2014)
  - (ii) Module 2: Searching for, locating and retrieving information (January 2015)
  - (iii) Module 3: Advice and assistance (June 2015)
  - (iv) Module 4: Publishing information (June 2017)
  - (v) Module 5: Conduct of reviews (December 2019)
  - (vi) Module 6: Monitoring and managing FOI performance (September 2020)

6. It is not anticipated that any further modules will be produced in the toolkit's current form. A planned internal review of modules 1 to 4, as well as the accompanying guidance and templates, took place in March 2021. As well as formatting and layout updates, this review resulted in the merging of two separate guidance documents into a single guide, 'How to carry out an FOI self-assessment', designed to streamline the process of using the toolkit.
7. Last year's report highlighted discussion workshops about the support provided by the Commissioner's office, held during the Centre for FOI Practitioners' Conference in August 2021. The toolkits were discussed and feedback gathered. It was intended that a revised approach to self-assessment toolkits would be undertaken when (and if) a second phase of website work is undertaken. Resource and technical issues have delayed this work in the midst of a number of changing work priorities during the last year.
8. FOI practitioners in Scottish public authorities are the target audience for the toolkit. The toolkits are regularly promoted through a range of channels, including: Twitter; the Open Update newsletter; our intervention activity; FOI network group meetings; engagement with new bodies subject to FOI law; and other conferences, meetings and events.
9. The Self-Assessment Toolkit approach has been influential in other jurisdictions. For example, the Policy and Information Team have advised and supported staff from the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in the development of their own toolkits. The first toolkit - on the subject of timeliness - was launched in 2020, and a second toolkit, focusing on the use of section 12 of the UK FOI Act, was published in February 2021 and we have recently assisted the ICO in the production of their toolkit looking at vexatious requests.

### **Use of the self-assessment tools**

10. We have moved to Google Analytics (GA4). This has meant some changes to the metrics we can use for this report when compared with the "page views" data in previous year's report.
11. The statistics for all six of the self-assessment toolkit modules in total are as follows:

- There were 156 "sessions" (of which 121 were "engaged sessions" )

Explanatory note: Last year we reported on the bounce rate which is the % of single page sessions where there is no interaction with the page but there is no need to measure "bounce" rates now that we can measure which sessions are "engaged". Similarly, there is no "Exit rate" data (how often the user exits the page once viewed).

- Those sessions equate to 101 (existing) users with a further 22 "new users" identified and average user engagement was measured as 2h 04mins.

There is a full breakdown of these metrics, by module, in Appendix 1 of this report.

### **Effectiveness of the toolkits**

12. Since last year's report, and taking into account feedback about the self-assessment toolkits from stakeholders, we've looked at what metrics we need within the functionality afforded by GA4 . The breakdowns in the Appendix 1 reflect this work to quantify and measure more meaningfully activity involving these toolkits to better understand their existing usage.
13. We continue to draw on any anecdotal evidence from interventions and FOI network group feedback. : We know that authorities that have used one or more of the toolkit modules found them to be a useful resource which lead to positive change. Our interventions often require

authorities to carry out a self-assessment and produce and submit an action plan and this is key subsequent FOI improvement work.

14. As reported previously, it's now clear that many authorities do not have the time to devote to using them as a tool to monitor and improve their practice. It's rare that authorities carry out a self-assessment voluntarily. It's only when an intervention is initiated that using the toolkit (with an action plan) that these toolkits come into their own to increase capacity and free up resources.
15. We already know that the volume of guidance to be read, with the repetition of information across modules (and the format of the evidence grid ) can lead to a perception of any module of the toolkit requiring significant time and attention to complete, and being difficult to work on remotely.
16. We are also aware that the streamlining of the toolkit guidance carried out as part of the internal review in 2020-21 had limited success.
17. Nevertheless, the Self-Assessment Toolkit as a concept and a resource continues to play a valuable role in supporting the Commissioner's interventions and wider strategic aims to improve authority practice.
18. That's why we included work in our 2023-24 P&I Workplan to take a broader review, informed and guided by key stakeholders. The objective was to determine the feasibility of simpler, more interactive web-based tools similar to those used by the ICO. Unfortunately, this has been put on pause due to volume of work in that workplan.

## Proposed actions

19. Revisit this project in 2024-25: gather the additional stakeholder feedback we need on use and effectiveness of existing toolkits. Collect practitioner views (as primary audience) on what they would find most effective to assess and alter practice with their organisations.
20. Consider and scope a new delivery model for self-assessment toolkits. Discuss with web service provider the current capacity of our CMS to host interactive toolkits. Since last year's report we have moved forward with our briefing for section 14 of FOISA and are now in a position to pilot this, along similar lines the ICO for its section 14 toolkit. A number of learning points from the ICO's work in this area are common and transferrable.

## Risk impact

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21. The Commissioner is the regulator of FOI in Scotland and has functions and duties to fulfil.
22. The toolkit, as a means of driving improvements in authority practice, is a mechanism used to ensure public authority compliance with FOI legislation and good practice, and supports mitigation of relevant strategic and operational risks.

## Equalities impact

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23. The format of the toolkit documents - PDF and Word, using tables - may present a potential impact in the context of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 ( WCAG 2.2 AA is the standard at the time of this report) - particularly as all modules now fall within scope of those regulations, however we have just been given a compliance "pass" rating in our most recent Accessibility testing from the UK Government Digital Service (31 January 2024) so this may be less of a risk than last year

given recent improvements and improved staff understanding of accessibility. Also, accessibility training is proposed for 2024-25.

24. No other specific equalities impact has been identified in relation to the toolkits. Equalities issues are addressed in individual modules as appropriate - for example, Module 3 includes a focus on providing advice and assistance to people who need additional support.

## Privacy impact

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25. There is no direct privacy impact arising from this report.

## Resources impact

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26. Self-Assessment Toolkit activity is delivered within existing planned resources. However, if the mode of delivery is altered, this may require resource to make the necessary changes. If designed and implemented correctly, these resources could delivery training and learning more effectively.

## Operational/ strategic plan impact

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27. Delivery and maintenance of the toolkit contributes to achievement of the Commissioner's strategic and operational plans, particularly in relation to improving authority performance, including the following strategic objectives as set out in the Strategic Plan 2020-2024:
- (i) enable and support high standards of FOI policy and practice (Strategic Aim 2)
  - (ii) develop Scottish public sector culture and practice where the proactive disclosure of information is routine and valued (Strategic Aim 3)
  - (iii) influence and support the development and strengthening of Scottish FOI law and practice (Strategic Aim 4)

## Records management impact (including any key documents actions)

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28. No records management impacts arise from this report.

## Consultation and Communication

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29. This report will be published alongside the MSMTM minute.

## Publication

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30. I recommend that this committee report is **published in full**.

## Appendix 1

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The following data covers almost a full year i.e. 25 March 2023 to 3 March 2024. This is the period we have been running GA4 metrics.

Page Title	Total Users	New Users	User Engagement	Engaged Sessions	Sessions	Total users
<b>GA4 Reported Totals</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>Ave 2h 04m</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>122</b>
Self-assessment toolkit Scottish Information Commissioner	0	0	0s	0	0	122
Module 1: Responding on time	50	2	26m 20s	51	65	0
Module 2: Searching for, locating and retrieving information	23	3	23m 15s	30	38	0
Module 3: Advice and Assistance	19	0	17m 49s	21	24	0
Module 4: Publishing information	29	5	31m 50s	34	40	0
Module 5: Conduct of reviews	19	1	11m 03s	22	24	0
Module 6: Monitoring and managing FOI performance	28	11	14m 06s	24	32	0
<b>Modules: Cumulative Totals</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>124m 23s</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>0</b>

### Definitions:

In GA4, a “Session” is an interval (measured in hours and minutes) in which a user interacts with the website. The session ends when the user leaves the website or automatically after 30 minutes of inactivity.

“Engaged Sessions” last more than ten seconds, feature a conversion event, or include at least two pageviews or screen views.