

DE/2026-023 – Freedom of Information Request

Request:

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, I request information about capital construction projects for education facilities completed within your authority between 1 January 2019 and present.

Project scope: New build or major extension/refurbishment projects for: primary schools, post-primary schools, special educational needs schools, further education colleges, early years facilities. Excludes minor refurbishments or projects under £500,000.

Please provide:

1) Project summary (spreadsheet format preferred):

- Project name, location, and school type
- Number of pupil places or classrooms
- Contract value and final cost
- Completion date
- Gross internal floor area (if held)

2) Final account documentation:

- Final account summaries or QS final certificates
- Cost breakdowns by element/package (if available)

I am requesting existing documents only - no data extraction required. If providing all final accounts would exceed cost limits, please provide summary data for all projects and final accounts for the 10 most recently completed projects.

This information supports research into construction cost transparency in public infrastructure, promoting better value for money and informed decision-making in capital projects. This aligns with government initiatives to publish cost benchmarks to drive efficiency in public sector construction.

If any information is withheld, please cite the specific exemption and explain why it applies. I'm happy to discuss narrowing the scope if needed.

Department Response:

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) ACT 2000

Thank you for your request for information relating to capital construction projects for education facilities completed between 1 January 2019 and present. Your request was received on 11 February 2026, and the Department is dealing with your request under the terms of the above legislation.

I must advise you that the Department does not hold information relating to further education colleges. The Department for the Economy (DfE) is the sponsor Department for further education colleges and FOI requests can be issued to DfE via the following mailbox foi@economy-ni.gov.uk.

With regard to the other information requested regarding school projects, I can advise that the Department holds information which is relevant to your request. However, it has become apparent that the collection of this information would involve a significant diversion of staff resources. The Department has estimated that the costs involved in identifying, locating, and extracting the documentation involved would exceed the FOI limit for central government of £600 (24 hours), and as a result the Department has concluded that it is not obliged to comply with your request under section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

By way of explanation, a sample of six recently completed major capital school projects were reviewed to establish the time involved in complying with your request, and the average time per project was calculated at 21.7 minutes. When applied to the ninety-one projects identified across the various capital school programmes, it was determined that the estimated total was 32.9 hours (£822), which exceeds the FOI cost limit for central government as detailed above. It should be noted that this is a conservative estimate and actual time/costs could be higher. Please also see attached Annex A – Freedom of Education Code of Practice, and Annex B which details how the Department calculated the resource required to produce the information you have requested.

Should you wish to narrow the scope of your request the Department will of course give this further consideration, for example by reducing the number of completed projects. I must also advise you that final account information is not yet available for the ten most recently completed projects. This is an ongoing process to finalise.

Annex A

From the Freedom of Information Code of Practice:

Section 12 of the Act allows public authorities to refuse to deal with any requests where they estimate that responding to the request would exceed the “appropriate limit”, or ‘cost limit’ as it is more commonly known.

If a public authority calculates that responding to a request will take it over the cost limit it is not obliged to provide a substantive response. The cost limit is calculated at a flat rate of £25 per hour. For central government departments the cost limit is £600 (24 hours) and for all other public authorities is £450 (18 hours).

Public authorities can only include certain activities when estimating whether responding to a request would breach the cost limit. These are:

- establishing whether information is held;
- locating and retrieving information; and
- extracting relevant information from the document containing it.

Other factors including redaction time or any other expenses likely to occur in cost limit calculations cannot be included when estimating whether the response would exceed the cost limit.

When calculating the cost limit public authorities can aggregate requests which ask for the same or similar information and are received within a 60 working day period. These requests can either be from the same person or a group of people acting together.

Public authorities do not have to search for information in scope of a request until the cost limit is reached, even if the applicant requests that they do so. If responding to one part of a request would exceed the cost limit, public authorities do not have to provide a response to any other parts of the request.

The cost limit can be applied on the basis of a reasonable estimate at the time the request is received. Public authorities are not under any obligation to make a precise calculation although estimates should be sensible and realistic.

Public authorities should generally focus their attention on the locations most likely to hold the relevant information. Searches may take longer, for example, where information is only held in paper records, or they are organised in a way that does not lend itself to the request in question. In some cases, it may be helpful to conduct a sampling exercise to help establish likely cost, but this is not essential.

Where a request is refused under section 12, public authorities should consider what advice, and assistance can be provided to help the applicant reframe or refocus their request with a view to bringing it within the cost limit. This may include suggesting that the subject or timespan of the request is narrowed. Any refined request should be treated as a new request for the purposes of the Act.

The cost limit should be applied before any exemption in Part II of the Act. This is because it will be necessary to establish whether information is held and to collate it before applying an exemption.

Annex B

Delivery Programme	No. of schools completed within timeline	Sample time taken to retrieve information (excluding gross internal floor area)	Sample time Minutes/Hours
Major Capital Works Programme	18	School 1	20
(typically new build schools)		School 2	15
		School 3	10
		School 4	25

		School 5	20
		School 6	40
		Total time for 6 samples (mins)	130
		Average time per search (mins)	21.7
		Total time for 18 schools (mins)	390
		Total time for 18 schools (hrs)	6.5
Fresh Start Agreement	7	Sample average of Major Capital Works 21.7 mins applied	151.7
(typically new build schools)		Total time for 7 schools (hrs)	2.5
School Enhancement Programme	9	Sample average of Major Capital Works 21.7 mins applied	195
(extend or refurbishment of existing schools)		Total time for 9 schools (hrs)	3.3
SEN Capital Investment Programme	27	Sample average of Major Capital Works 21.7 mins applied	585
(typically additional special educational needs provision)		Total time for 27 schools (hrs)	9.75
Irish Medium Development Programme	30	Sample average of Major Capital Works 21.7 mins applied	650
(typically additional classrooms extensions)		Total time for 30 schools (hrs)	10.8
		Total time estimated for 91 school projects (hours)	32.9

Does not include sourcing gross internal floor area.