**Sheffield FOI Dynamic Webapp**

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Rationale for Developing the Sheffield FOI Insight Tool

**Background**

Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation plays a critical role in promoting transparency and accountability in public sector organisations. Platforms such as WhatDoTheyKnow.com provide public access to thousands of FOI requests and responses. However, these requests are typically published as isolated records, consisting of long-form text with no structured metadata or searchable insights.

For local authorities such as Sheffield City Council, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge:

**Opportunity**

FOI requests represent valuable public interest data covering citizen concerns, government operations, and service gaps.

**Challenge**

The current presentation of FOI data is unstructured, making it inaccessible for trend analysis, performance reporting, or public exploration at scale. In addition, the volume of FOIs published by SCC directly is minute compared to the requests made (and therefore published) through WhatDoTheyKnow.com

**Problem Statement**

Sheffield City Council’s FOI responses are:

* Hard to search or filter by theme, outcome; nearly impossible without a lot of manual effort or technical knowledge (e.g. Python).
* Lacking in summarised insights or data-driven metrics.
* Not presented in a format that facilitates public engagement or journalistic analysis.

While FOI data is technically public, it is not practically accessible to non-expert users or policy analysts without significant manual effort. In addition, local authorities have only recently started developing open data platforms, and FOI publication is not usually backdated.

**Purpose of the Sheffield FOI Tool**

This project aims to address these gaps by developing an automated insight extraction and publishing platform for Sheffield FOI data.

The tool will:

* Automate the collection and structuring of FOI request data.
* Apply Natural Language Processing (NLP) to extract key topics, themes, and summaries (See FOI SummaryToolNLP Process).

Publish interactive insights through a user-friendly web interface (Dynamic Webapp; (currently hosted on GitHub Pages for the purposes of this Hackathon).

**Benefits for Sheffield**

This tool when fully released will confer numerous strategic benefits for the city.

**Enhanced Transparency**

By transforming raw FOI records into accessible data summaries and visualisations, the tool supports Sheffield City Council’s commitment to openness and public accountability.

**Empowered Citizens**

The tool enables journalists, researchers, and members of the public to:

* Search past requests to check if their question has already been answered, reducing the need to submit duplicate FOIs.
* Explore common themes and issues of public interest.
* Extract data-driven insights from a large body of FOI data that would otherwise require time-consuming manual review.

**Operational Insight**

The tool enables internal SCC stakeholders to identify frequently requested information, recurring themes, and service areas that attract public scrutiny.

**Reusable Framework**

While initially built for Sheffield, the underlying architecture can be extended to other local authorities or adapted to support other open data initiatives, provided the FOI Data is available.

**Low-Cost, Scalable Deployment**

Leveraging open technologies such as GitHub Pages (for the time being), Azure AI, and Python ensures the solution is cost-effective, maintainable, and scalable.

**How does this project align with Sheffield City Goals?**

The Sheffield FOI Insight Tool directly supports several of the Sheffield City Goals, which aim to create a fairer, greener, and more democratic city by 2035. By transforming unstructured FOI data into accessible insights, the tool advances the city's commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and community engagement.

**Goal 1: Building a Fair, Inclusive & Creative Local Economy**

By making FOI data more accessible and understandable, the tool can empower local businesses, researchers, and community organizations to identify opportunities and challenges within the city. This would fosters a more inclusive economy where stakeholders can make informed decisions that benefit the broader community.

**Goal 2: Enhancing Education, Training, and Skills**

The tool can serve as an educational resource, providing real-world data for academic research, journalism, and civic education. It can enable users to develop skills in data analysis, critical thinking, and public policy evaluation, aligning with the goal of fostering curiosity and learning.

**Goal 5: Investing in Wellbeing and Mental Health**

By shedding light on public concerns and the responsiveness of local authorities, the tool has the potential to contribute to a sense of community wellbeing. Overall, transparency in governance can build trust and reduce anxiety among citizens, supporting mental health and community resilience.

**Goal 8: Ensuring All Voices Are Heard**

The tool can amplify the voices of citizens by highlighting the topics and issues they raise through FOI requests. It could ensure that diverse perspectives are acknowledged and considered in public discourse, promoting equity and inclusion in decision-making processes.

**Goal 9: Making Long-Term Decisions for Future Generations**

By providing insights into recurring themes and systemic issues, the tool has the potential to aid in long-term planning and policy development. It helps identify areas requiring sustained attention, ensuring that decisions made today positively impact future generations.