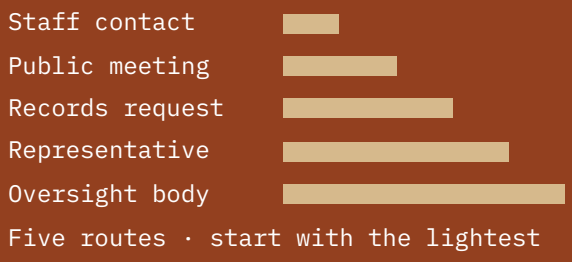
PROVA GUIDES




# Asking an Institution for the Evidence Behind a Decision

*What to ask for, which route to use, and what to do with the reply*

**FOR:**
resident groups, tenants' associations and community organizations asking a city, county, school district, housing provider, public agency or funder for the evidence behind a decision that affects them

**INCLUDES:**
what "the evidence" usually consists of, five routes for asking, how to make a request answerable, what each kind of reply tells you, and how to follow up in proportion

**EDITION:** 19 October 2026

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# Asking an Institution for the Evidence Behind a Decision

This is the place to start in this collection. It explains how to ask and what to expect. The letter and log you will fill in, a completed example, and a one-page sheet for reading the numbers you receive are separate documents in the same collection.

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# 01 Asking is ordinary civic practice

A health clinic cuts its opening days. A housing provider changes how repairs are scheduled. A school district closes a building. A park's maintenance budget moves elsewhere. Each decision is usually explained with a reason, and often the reason rests on a number: visits per session, repairs completed, cost per unit, enrollment trends. If the number affects your neighborhood, it is reasonable to ask to see it, how it was produced, and what else was considered.

Asking is not an accusation. Institutions that use public money or public authority are generally expected to be able to explain their decisions, and many staff welcome a clear, specific question more than a general complaint. A good request treats the institution as an organization that holds information you need and gives it a fair chance to provide it.

### From a decision to a specific request

| 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Agree** | **Choose** | **Ask** | **Read** | **Follow up** | **Use it** |
| Five things as a group | The lightest route likely to work | For records, not conclusions | The number the decision rests on | In proportion | A specific request back to the decision-maker |

A reply log runs alongside every step, so the group keeps its memory when volunteers change.

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# 02 What “the evidence behind a decision” usually is

Before you ask, it helps to know what kinds of material an institution normally holds when it makes a decision. Most decisions leave some of the following behind:

- **The decision record.** The report or memo put to the board, council or senior official; the minutes or resolution; the date and the person or body that decided.
- **The figures relied on.** The numbers quoted as the reason, and the underlying table or dataset they came from.
- **Definitions and methods.** What was counted, over what period, and how. A count of “repairs completed” can mean jobs closed on a computer system or jobs the tenant agreed were fixed.
- **Options considered.** Other arrangements that were looked at and why they were set aside. Sometimes none were recorded; that is worth knowing too.
- **Consultation and impact material.** Any survey, public comment summary, or assessment of who would be affected.
- **The rules applied.** A policy, standard or funding condition the decision was meant to follow.

It also helps to separate two kinds of ask. Some things you want are **records that already exist**: a report, a spreadsheet, minutes. Others are **questions that would need someone to do new work**: “Why didn’t you count weekend visits?” or “What would it cost to keep Tuesday evenings?” In many places a formal records request reaches existing records and does not oblige the institution to create new analysis or answer questions. Check your local law. Questions are still worth asking, but usually through a different route.

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## Two kinds of ask

### Records that already exist

- A report, a spreadsheet, minutes
- The figures relied on, with their definitions
- Reached by a formal records request

### Questions that need new work

- “Why didn’t you count weekend visits?”
- “What would it cost to keep Tuesday evenings?”
- Asked directly, at a meeting, or through a representative

In many places a records request reaches only the left-hand column. Check your local law.

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# 03 Before you ask: agree five things as a group

1. **The decision.** Name it, its date if known, and who made it. If you are not sure who decided, that is your first question.
2. **What you already have.** Meeting papers, press releases and published dashboards often contain part of the answer. Read them first, so your request asks for what is missing.
3. **What you most need to know.** Choose the one question that matters most to your members, and list others behind it. A long, unfocused request is harder to answer and slower to come back.
4. **Who is the contact.** One named person or role, with an address the group checks. Agree who may speak for the group.
5. **How you will keep track.** Decide now where copies of letters, replies and dates will live, so that someone else can pick it up later.

Think also about the people asking. Volunteers' time is limited. Some members may not want their own names on a letter, for reasons of tenancy, immigration status, employment or simple privacy. The organization can sign instead.

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# 04 Choose a route

There is usually more than one way to ask. Start with the lightest route that is likely to work, but do not wait indefinitely on it.

| Route | When it fits | What you are likely to get | Limits |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ask the staff contact directly | You want published papers or a quick clarification | Links, a short explanation, a name to talk to | Informal; no set deadline or record unless you keep one |
| Question at a public meeting | The decision is still being discussed; you want an answer on the record | A spoken reply in minutes or on video | Short time; detailed figures are rarely available on the spot |
| Formal public-records request | You need specific documents or data, or informal asks have stalled | Copies of existing records, or a stated reason for withholding them | Covers existing records; timescales, fees and exemptions vary by jurisdiction |
| Through an elected representative | The question is about accountability or priorities, not only documents | A response from senior staff; sometimes a meeting | Depends on the representative's interest and capacity |
| Oversight or complaints body | A process seems not to have been followed, or a request has gone unanswered | An independent look at how the matter was handled | Usually only after the institution's own route has been tried; remit varies |

The question cards in this collection work at a public meeting and in a direct ask, and they can be put to a funder or commissioner as well as to a public body. Records laws reach public bodies, not private funders such as foundations: with a private funder, the routes are a direct ask and the question cards. Every US state has some form of public-records law, and the federal Freedom of Information Act covers federal agencies; city, county and school district records are usually gove-

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rned by the state law, not the federal one. Many other countries have their own access-to-information laws. Deadlines, fees, exemptions and appeal routes differ widely. Check the law that applies to the institution you are asking, using the sources under Further reading or a local legal-aid or open-government organization.

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# 05 Make the request answerable

A request that a records officer can act on without guessing is more likely to be answered fully and quickly. Whatever the route:

- **Name the decision and its date**, and the body that made it.
- **Describe the records, not your conclusion.** "The repair completion figures cited in the 3 March report" is answerable; "proof that the cut is unjustified" is not.
- **Set a date range.** "January 2024 to the date of the decision" is easier to search than "all records".
- **Ask for definitions alongside figures.** A number without its definition is hard to use.
- **Say what format helps.** A spreadsheet is easier to check than a scanned printout. Ask for it if it exists in that form.
- **Ask for reasons with any refusal.** If something is withheld, ask which part, and on what basis.
- **Offer to narrow.** Say you are willing to discuss the scope if the request is large. This often speeds things up.
- **Ask for a contact and an expected date** for the reply.

The template in this collection turns these points into a letter you can adapt.

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# 06 What each kind of reply tells you

Replies rarely arrive as a complete answer. Each kind still tells you something, and each has a respectful next step.

| Reply | What it tells you | A reasonable next step |
|---|---|---|
| Full answer | The institution holds the evidence and has shared it | Read it carefully; thank the contact; note any gaps |
| Partial answer | Some records exist and were released; others were not | Ask which parts were withheld and why; check whether the rest exists |
| “We don’t hold that” | Either the record does not exist or it is held elsewhere | Ask whether another body holds it; note that the decision was made without it |
| Refusal with a stated reason | A specific exemption or concern applies, such as personal privacy, commercial confidentiality or draft advice | Ask whether a redacted or summary version is possible; consider review or appeal |
| Fee estimate or extension | The request is large, or staff need more time | Consider narrowing; ask for a firm date |
| No reply | The request may be lost, misdirected or waiting in a queue | Send a polite reminder with the original date; then use the review route if one exists |

“We don’t hold that” is a real answer. If a decision about your building was made without, say, any count of how many tenants were waiting for repairs, you have learned something important about the decision, even though no document arrived.

Refusals often protect something legitimate: individuals’ personal information, a contractor’s pricing, a security detail. A respectful follow-up asks for what can be shared, such as totals instead of individual records, or a redacted copy instead of none.

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# 07 Read what you receive

Documents can be long. Before reading closely, find the one number the decision actually rests on and set the rest aside for later. The sheet in this collection, *Reading a Public Number*, gives the questions to ask of it and the checks to make before drawing a conclusion. Where the questions turn up a gap, it usually calls for a further question to the institution rather than a verdict.

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# 08 Follow up in proportion

- **Clarify first.** Many gaps are misunderstandings. A short, specific follow-up often resolves them.
- **Narrow if asked.** A smaller request answered is worth more than a large one stuck.
- **Use review routes when you need them.** Most public-records laws provide some way to ask for a decision to be reviewed or appealed. Time limits may apply, so note them when a refusal arrives.
- **Get help when the stakes are high.** Local legal-aid organizations, law school clinics and state open-government groups sometimes advise community groups on records requests.

Keep the tone steady throughout. Staff who handle requests rarely made the decision itself, and a working relationship with them is often what gets the next record released.

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# 09 Keep a record

A record of what was asked, what came back and what was followed up protects the group's memory when volunteers change. It also shows any pattern: questions asked repeatedly, deadlines missed, records that turn out not to exist. The reply log in this collection's template is built for this.

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# 10 Use what you learn

Share what you found with members in plain words, including what you still do not know. Protect any personal information you receive, even by accident; do not publish it. Then take it back to the decision-maker with a specific request: publish the figures, reconsider part of the decision, consult the people affected, or look again at a stated date. A clear request based on the institution's own records is often the strongest position a community group can hold.

**RELATED:** Evidence Request Letter and Reply Log, for the letter and log to fill in; A Completed Request and Reply, Annotated, for a worked example; Reading a Public Number, for checking the figures you receive.

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# 11 Further reading


1 **Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, Open Government Guide.** A state-by-state guide to US open-records and open-meetings laws, including exemptions, deadlines and appeals.

2 **FOIA.gov.** The US federal government's site on the Freedom of Information Act; explains how requests to federal agencies work.

3 **National Freedom of Information Coalition.** A network of state and regional open-government organizations; a starting point for finding local help.

4 Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216–224. A classic account of the difference between being informed, being consulted and having real influence over decisions.

5 **American Evaluation Association, Guiding Principles.** Professional principles on integrity, respect for people and the common good; useful when asking how evidence was produced and shared.


Public-records rights, exemptions, deadlines and appeal routes depend on the jurisdiction and the institution; check the law that applies before relying on it.

QUESTION IT

Found an error, or want to question this document? Contact Prova at hello@byprova.com.

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