



Guidelines for EEA enquiries

Ensuring an efficient enquiry service @EEA

Version: 2022

EEA activity: COM2



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1 Legal basis

1.1 Aarhus Convention

The Aarhus Convention (2001) establishes a number of rights of the public with regard to the environment and provides for:

- the right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by public authorities ("access to environmental information");
- the right to participate in environmental decision-making ("public participation in environmental decision-making");
- the right to review procedures to challenge public decisions that have been made without respecting the two aforementioned rights or environmental law in general ("access to justice").

DIRECTIVE 2003/4/EC particularly addresses the first pillar of these rights and explicitly states that “ (...) public authorities are required, in accordance with the provisions of this Directive, to make available environmental information held by or for them to any applicant at his request and without his having to state an interest”. This is in essence the mandate given to the EEA enquiry service that contributes to respecting the right to access to environmental information.

1.2 Code of good administrative behaviour for EU staff in their relation with the public

The White Paper on Administrative Reform (AR) that was adopted by the Commission on March 2000 stresses the key principles of European public administration, which focuses on service, independence, responsibility, accountability, efficiency and transparency. The Code of good administrative behaviour complements the White Paper and identifies the main principles for the relations with the public:

- Lawfulness
- Non-discrimination and equal treatment
- Proportionality
- Consistency

In addition, quality services, legitimately expected by the public, call for courtesy, objectivity and impartiality of EU staff. Dealing with enquiries is a central requirement for all EU institutions and is an activity to be organised with care and dedication. Indeed, any breach in the principles listed on the White Paper on AR and the Code of good administrative behaviour can lead to a complaint to the European Ombudsman and thus possibly damage the reputation of the Agency.

EFFICIENT ENQUIRY SERVICE STRENGTHENS
PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF
THE WORK PERFORMED WITHIN THE EEA.



1.3 Protection of personal data and confidential information

The EU institutions shall respect

- the rules on the protection of personal privacy and personal data
- the obligations set out in Article 287 of the Treaty
- the rules on protection of secrecy of criminal investigations
- the confidentiality of matters as regards Article 9 and Annexes II and III of the Staff Regulations
- the European Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data

Records for processing of information within the EEA enquiry system were defined under a specific privacy statement. In essence, this statement highlights that personal data is collected and further processed solely for the purpose of the management and follow-up of requests for information and only to the extent necessary to reply to these requests. Personal data can be accessed by the team managing the enquiry service and will not be disseminated outside the boundaries of the EEA and its relevant services. The enquiries will be deleted after termination of the legal period for conservation of electronic documents but, at any point in time, users can exercise their rights to modify or delete their data by sending an email to info@eea.europa.eu.

1.4 Access to documents

Article 255 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam, states that "Any citizen of the Union, and any natural or legal person residing or having its registered office in a Member State, shall have a right of access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents".

Article 15(3) of the consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides for a right of access to documents of the Union's institutions, bodies, offices, and agencies. The same right is recognised in Article 42 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

[Regulation \(EC\) No 1049/2001](#) of the European Parliament and the Council of 30 May 2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents (OJ L 145 of 31.5.2001, p. 43) governs this fundamental right of access to documents.

The EEA Management Board adopted in 2004 [implementing rules](#) for the application of Regulation (EC) 1049/2001 as well as a decision whereby the code of good administrative behaviour adopted by the resolution of the European Parliament in 2001 would apply by analogy to the EEA.

A [register of public documents](#) is available on the EEA website and anyone can request access to a document via the EEA enquiry online form or the access to documents mailbox (access.to.documents@eea.europa.eu).



2 Dealing with enquiries

2.1 Key rules @EEA

2.1.1 *Written correspondence*

In principle, in accordance with Article 21 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, enquirers should receive a reply in the language of their initial letter/email, provided it was written in one of the official languages of the European Union.

A reply to a letter/email addressed to an EU Institution shall be sent within 15 working days from the date of receipt of the letter/email. Within the EEA, a deadline of 9 working days is applied. If the required deadline cannot be met, a holding reply should be sent, preferably indicating the date by which the addressee may expect an answer.

The enquirer should be kept informed if its correspondence is transferred to someone outside the Agency.

Note that these rules do not apply for correspondences that are deemed improper (e.g. repetitive, abusive or pointless – see § 2.3).

2.1.2 *Telephone communication*

EEA staff should always identify themselves or their programme and should return phone calls as soon as possible. One should establish the identity of the caller and only divulge public information. Enquirers addressing the EEA enquiry service by phone and needing expert's inputs should be invited to send a written request.

2.2 Writing helpful replies

The answers provided to the enquirers should be clear and concise. The body of the text should be specific to the question asked and contain only pertinent information. Adding off-topics information is often counter-productive as they may confuse the reader.

Be as helpful as possible by giving a summarised answer and all references for details. When communicating about publications, reports or webpages, it is a good idea to give references and links for convenience.

The messages you send are a reflection of your professionalism and of the Agency as a whole, so a certain level of formality is needed. This level of formality will depend on the enquirer and the means chosen to contact the Agency. In any case, since one often does not know the level of knowledge of the enquirer in the specific area in question, it is advised to avoid informal language, slang, jargon and abbreviations.

**“TO WRITE WELL, EXPRESS YOURSELF LIKE THE
COMMON PEOPLE BUT THINK LIKE A WISE MAN”**

ARISTOTLE



It is advised to carefully check the tone of the messages sent. The choice of words, sentence length, punctuation, and capitalization can easily be misinterpreted without visual and auditory cues.

In brief:

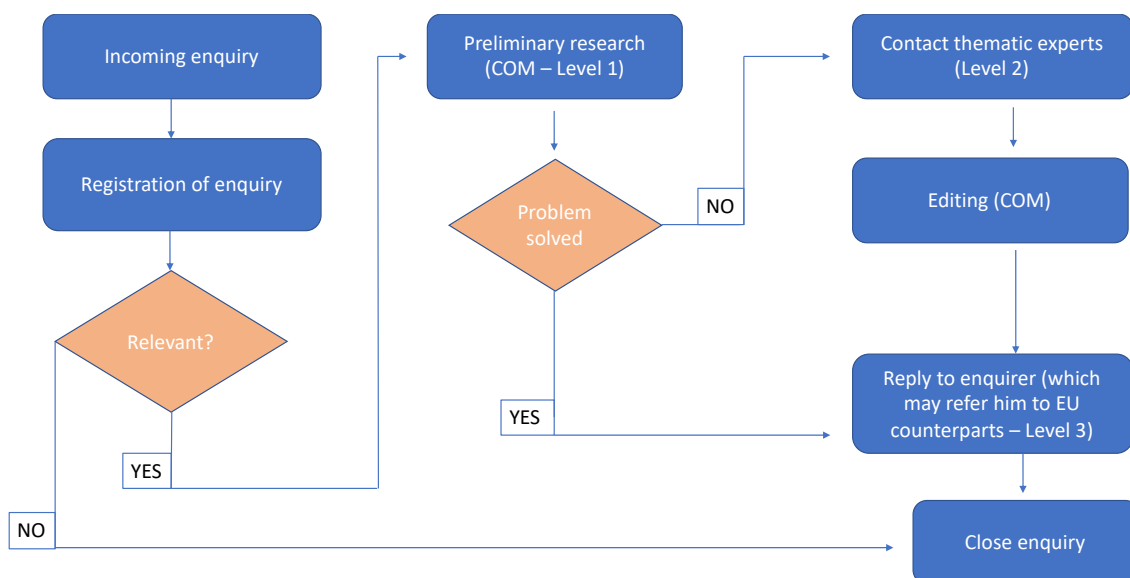
Answer the question

... in a polite way

... in a clear style

... without grammatical errors

2.3 Working procedures



2.3.1 What is an enquiry and how to register it?

An enquiry is defined as any question received from the public, ranging from citizens, students, researchers to companies, international or EU institutions. The purposes of the enquiries can be very diverse and cover a wide range of environmental topics.

Enquiries are received by the EEA via various means such as functional mailbox, EEA staff emails, phone calls, post or the online form. All enquiries from the functional mailbox info@eea.europa.eu and from the online form are automatically registered in the Enquiry system. Enquiries received through other means can be forwarded to info@eea.europa.eu. It is nevertheless to be noted that there is no obligation for EEA experts to transfer the enquiries they receive to the official enquiry mailbox. They can choose to deal with the enquiries themselves but it is appreciated if the enquiry mailbox (info@eea.europa.eu) is included in cc of correspondences for statistical purposes. If the EEA receives an enquiry by post and the enquirer's email address is not disclosed, the reply to the enquiry is sent by post. However, the enquiry and related correspondences are still registered in the enquiry system.



2.3.2 How to use the enquiry system

Daily monitoring of the enquiry system is expected. All enquirers are treated equally but urgent enquiries from embassies, national governments and key clients such as European bodies are to be closely monitored.

The enquiry system is available in [Taskman](#) and contains all enquiries received via the functional mailbox info@eea.europa.eu and the online form embedded in the EEA website.

Several tabs are visible on the system but the one that record all enquiries is the 'Issues' tab.

What to do when starting to work on a case?

1. When received, an enquiry is attributed an issue number. All correspondences regarding the issue, will be registered under the case number (e.g. #00000).
2. Fields related to the issues should be filled in:
 - Project: EEA Enquiries
 - Tracker: Support
 - Status: to be defined according to the level of development of the issue
 - New, In progress, Needs clarification, Closed
 - Note: The status 'invalid/expired' is used for repetitive promotional and marketing enquiries, unreadable enquiries or unclear enquiries for which no clarifications were provided.
 - Priority: Normal
 - Assignee: Select the team member in charge
 - Category: This refers to the purpose of the enquiry.

- Administrative information: e.g. Information from Embassies and Ministries
- Assistance in use of products: e.g. Requests for instructions on how to use EEA products (e.g. reports, databases) or services (e.g. EEA website)
- Collaboration/ Dissemination: e.g. Business collaboration and promotion of products, services or projects not related to EEA
- Commercial opportunities: e.g. Promotion of products or services for EEA use
- Complaint/ Intervention: e.g. Infringement to EU legislation
- Copyright issues: e.g. Reuse of EEA products and services
- Data (maps, database etc.): e.g. Specific data and data viewers
- Data correction: e.g. Notification of errors in datasets or websites
- Employment/ internships: e.g. Job opportunities, traineeships and internships
- European legislation: e.g. Request for information on EU directives implementation and monitoring outside the working remit of the EEA
- Funding request: e.g. Request of money for projects, researches, products



- Invitation to event: e.g. Invitation to participate as participant or speaker at event
- Opinions/ Statements: e.g. Sharing of own opinion about state of environment or request for EEA's opinion on a specific matter
- Product request: e.g. Request for reports or info materials produced by EEA or other EU institutions
- Research input: e.g. Information for thesis or other research purposes
- Thematic questions: e.g. Thematic question on an environmental topic not-related to a research
- Visit/ Interview: e.g. Request to visit the EEA premises or to meet with EEA staff
- Other: none of the above

- Parent task: Not to be used
- Start date, due date and % done: These are fields that are not mandatory to fill in but can be used as management tools by assignees.
- Enquiry topic: This refers to the environmental field dealt with in the enquiry.
- Type of enquirer: The type of enquirer should be identified by using the drop-down menu. If the background of the enquirer is unknown, please use the type 'Citizen'. This term is used as the default option for this field.
- Escalated to: This field is to be used if the enquiry needs further validation or clarification from an expert in-house or if the enquiry needs to be handled by another EU body or source. This field enables to generate statistics on 1st or 2nd level service at the EEA.
- Checklist: A checklist has been created for the EEA enquiry service and is a good tool to be used. It can be adapted for the purpose of individual enquiries.
- Ticket source: This is automatically registered by the system and the categories are: Web (=Online Form) – Correspondence (=Letter) – Email – Phone.

Note that it is also important to check the number of issues belonging to a specific enquirer in order to see if the request has not been answered yet. You can retrieve this information by consulting the 'Contacts' tab.

3. All correspondences should be sent via the enquiry system. This is valid for internal correspondences with experts (mark correspondence as 'private') and for the official replies to enquirers.
4. There are canned responses for various recurrent questions embedded in the system that can be selected to fasten the reply.
5. Once an enquiry has been dealt with, the issue should be closed by amending the 'Status' field accordingly.



How to register a new case?

There is a possibility to register a new issue by using the '+' button - 'New Issue'. This should be used to register enquiries received by post or by phone.

How to link enquiries together?

In the case of an enquirer sending multiple questions separately but clearly related to one topic, it is possible to link the enquiries. You should use the section 'Related issues' and include the Issue ID.

- If new related issue does not require an answer, use 'duplicate of' and then mark it as invalid/expired
- If new related issue does require an answer, use 'related to' but the issue can remain separate and count as an additional enquiry

You can also use the section 'Subtask' to split the issue into several parts. This functionality is not crucial for enquiries but it might come handy if many different topics are touched upon in one request and different programmes need to be activated.

How to deal with improper enquiries?

Should the enquiries received classify as abusive, improper or repetitive, the following actions can be applied:

Discontinuing correspondence

There is no need to reply to repetitive enquiries that have already been answered. In such cases, a message is to be sent explaining that the EEA has answered to the best of its knowledge and ability, and that further messages repeating the same question(s) will not be replied to.

Example of message could be:

We have provided you with all the information relevant to your question to the best of our knowledge and ability. We will be happy to answer other environment-related questions should you have any in the future, but that there is nothing further we can do on this issue. We therefore ask for your understanding that there can be no further correspondence on it.

Abusive, racist, offensive messages

The EEA closes these kind of messages without answering.

Racist/homophobic/offensive messages that are not outright abusive, do not have any questions about EU policies or are national competence are to be answered using the basic "out of scope" reply.



How does the system deal with follow-up questions?

This refers to enquirers responding to an EEA enquiry service answer with the same issue number. The correspondence relating to an issue will be stored under the same issue number and the issue will automatically be reopened (Status: Needs clarifications) each time a new correspondence is received, provided that this correspondence is received within 20 days of the original reply. After that timeframe, a new issue will be opened.

How to conduct case searches?

The overall ideal of the search function is to enable the EEA enquiries team to retrieve answers given to previous enquiries by everyone involved. This information can often be used as guidelines or sources for replying to new enquiries. It can also be a valuable tool when extracting statistical data on enquiries. The search box is located at the top of the page of the Enquiry system. Another option is to use the filters available under the 'Issues' tab.
