



Australian Government

**Office of the Australian
Information Commissioner**

FOI Guidelines

Guidelines issued by the Australian
Information Commissioner under s 93A
of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*

oaic.gov.au



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PART 1 — INTRODUCTION

Structure and purpose of the Information Commissioner's FOI Guidelines

1.1 The *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act) s 93A provides that the Australian Information Commissioner may issue written guidelines for the purposes of the FOI Act (Guidelines). These Guidelines provide information and guidance on the interpretation, operation and administration of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act). The Guidelines are divided into the following parts:

- Part 1 – Introduction
- Part 2 – Scope of application of the FOI Act
- Part 3 – Processing and deciding on requests for access
- Part 4 – Charges for providing access
- Part 5 – Exemptions
- Part 6 – Conditional exemptions
- Part 7 – Amendment and annotation of personal records
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- Part 15 – Reporting

1.2 The FOI Act specifies that agencies and ministers must have regard to these guidelines in exercising powers and functions under the FOI Act, both generally (s 93A) and specifically in relation to:

- the Information Publication Scheme (s 9A(b)) (see Part 13 of these Guidelines)
- in working out whether access to a conditionally exempt would, on balance be contrary to the public interest (s 11B(5)) (see Part 6 of these Guidelines)
- in making a decision on a request for access to a document of an agency or an official document of a minister (s 15(5A)) (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

Overview of the FOI Act

1.3 The FOI Act is the legislative basis for open government in Australia at the Commonwealth level. The FOI Act applies to official documents of Australian Government ministers, documents of most Commonwealth agencies and in some circumstances, contractors of the Commonwealth (see Part 2 of these Guidelines).

1.4 The FOI Act is supplemented by the *Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 1982* and the *Freedom of Information (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 1982*.

1.5 Each person has legally enforceable rights under and subject to the FOI Act to obtain access to government documents and to apply for the amendment or annotation of records of personal information held by government.

1.6 The FOI Act also requires agencies to publish specified categories of information, and encourages the proactive release of other government held information.

Objects of the FOI Act

1.7 In performing functions and exercising powers under the FOI Act, agencies and ministers must also consider its objects, which are set down in s 3:

- to give the Australian community access to information held by government, by requiring agencies to publish that information and by providing for a right of access to documents
- to promote Australia's representative democracy by increasing public participation in government processes, with a view to promoting better-informed decision making
- to promote Australia's representative democracy by increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of government activities
- to increase recognition that information held by government is to be managed for public purposes and is a national resource
- that powers and functions under the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

1.8 In interpreting the provisions of the FOI Act, the interpretation that would best achieve these objects is to be preferred (*Acts Interpretation Act 1901*, s 15AA).

Access to government documents

Form of request

1.9 There are some formal requirements to make a valid FOI request for documents of an agency or official documents of a minister. They include that a request must be in writing (s 15(2)(a)) and must state that it is a request for the purposes of the FOI Act (s 15(2)(aa)).

1.10 A request must also provide such information as is reasonably necessary to enable a responsible officer of the agency or the minister to identify the document that is requested (s 15(2)(b)) and must give details of how notices under the FOI Act may be sent to the applicant (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

1.11 An agency has a duty to take reasonable steps to assist a person to make a request so that it complies with the formal requirements of the FOI Act (s 15(3)) (see Part 2 of these Guidelines).

Charges

1.12 Section 29 of the FOI Act provides a discretion for an agency or minister to impose a charge for processing a request or providing access to a document. Imposition of a charge must be assessed at the lowest reasonable cost under the *Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 1982* (Charges Regulations) (see Part 4 of these Guidelines). A charge cannot be imposed if an applicant is seeking access to a document that contains their own personal information (Charges Regulations, reg 5(1)).

Exempt documents

1.13 Where an FOI request has been made and any required charges have been paid, an agency or minister must give access to a document unless at that time of its decision, it is an ‘exempt document’. Exempt document means:

- the agency, person or body is exempt from the operation of the FOI Act, entirely or in respect of certain documents (see ss 5-7 and schs 1-2 of the FOI Act; and Part 2 of these Guidelines),
- in the case of official documents of a minister, a document contains matter not relating to the affairs of an agency or department of state (see s 4(1) and Part 2 of these Guidelines), or
- an exemption under Part IV of the FOI Act applies to the document (see Part 5 and Part 6 of these Guidelines).

1.14 Exemptions under Part IV of the FOI Act fall into two categories:

- Division 2: those which are not subject to a separate public interest test (eg documents affecting national security, Cabinet documents or documents affecting law enforcement and public safety) (see Part 5 of these Guidelines), and
- Division 3: those subject to a public interest test under s 11A(5) which is weighted in favour of disclosure (eg documents affecting personal privacy, deliberative processes or certain business information) (see Part 6 of these Guidelines)

Timeframes

1.15 An agency or minister has a statutory obligation to acknowledge that an FOI request has been received as soon as practicable, and no later than 14 days after receiving a request (s 15(5)(a)).

1.16 Once an FOI request for documents has been received, an agency or minister must, as soon as practicable, and no later than 30 days after receiving a request, take all reasonable steps to enable the applicant to be notified of a decision on the request (s 15(5)(b)).

1.17 The FOI Act allows for the extension of that statutory timeframe in certain circumstances, for example, where third-party consultation is required, with the agreement of the applicant or with the approval of the Information Commissioner (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

Practical refusal

1.18 An agency or minister may refuse a request if a ‘practical refusal reason’ exists (s 24) but only after following the ‘request consultation process’ set out in s 24AB of the FOI Act (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

1.19 A practical refusal reason means that:

- a request does not sufficiently identify the requested documents (s 24AA(1)(b)); or
- the work involved in processing the request:
 - in the case of an agency—would substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the agency from its other operations (s 24AA(1)(a)(i)), or
 - in the case of a Minister—would substantially and unreasonably interfere with the performance of the Minister’s functions (s 24AA(1)(a)(ii)).

Reasons for decisions

1.20 If access is refused in respect to any part of a request for access, the decision maker must provide a statement of reasons under s 26 of the FOI Act (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). That provision also applies in relation to a decision to refuse to amend or annotate a record (s 51D(3)).

Disclosure log

1.21 Agencies and ministers must publish information that has been released in response to each FOI access request on a website, subject to certain exceptions under s 11C of the FOI Act. This publication is known as a ‘disclosure log’ (see Part 14 of these Guidelines).

Amendment and annotation of personal information

1.22 Individuals have the right under Part V of the FOI Act to seek amendment or annotation of their personal information in a document of an agency or an official document of a minister (see Part 7 of these Guidelines).

1.23 Where an applicant already has lawful access to the document, which has been used, is being used or is available for use by the agency or minister for an administrative purpose and contains personal information about the applicant which is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading, an applicant may request that a record:

- be corrected (amendment), or
- be annotated to include a statement explaining their objection and the reasons for their objection (annotation).

1.24 A decision on a request for amendment or annotation must be made and notified as soon as practicable but not later than 30 days from the day after the request for amendment or annotation was received (s 51D(1)).

Review of decisions***Internal review***

1.25 A person who is not satisfied with a decision on a request for documents, or for amendment or annotation, may request an internal review by the agency of an ‘access refusal’ decision (in the case of the FOI applicant; s 54(2)) or an ‘access grant’ decision (in the case of an affected third party; s 54A(2)) (see Part 9 of these Guidelines).

1.26 An access refusal decision is defined in s 53A as:

- a) a decision refusing to give access to a document in accordance with a request
- b) a decision giving access to a document but not giving, in accordance with the request, access to all documents to which the request relates
- c) a decision purporting to give, in accordance with a request, access to all documents to which the request relates, but not actually giving that access
- d) a decision to defer the provision of access to a document (other than a document covered by paragraph 21(1)(d) (Parliament should be informed of contents))
- e) a decision under section 29 relating to imposition of a charge or the amount of a

charge

- f) a decision to give access to a document to a qualified person under subsection 47F(5)
- g) a decision refusing to amend a record of personal information in accordance with an application made under section 48, and
- h) a decision refusing to annotate a record of personal information in accordance with an application made under section 48.

1.27 An access grant decision is defined in s 53B as a decision to grant access to a document where there is a requirement to consult with a state under s 26A, the Commonwealth or a state under s 26AA, a business entity under s 27, or an individual or legal personal representative of a deceased person under s 27A (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

1.28 Internal review is a merit review at a latter point in time and the new decision maker is not bound by the earlier decision.

1.29 Internal review is not available if an access refusal decision or access grant decision was made by a minister (ss 54(1) and 54A(1)) or made personally by the principal officer of an agency (ss 54(1) and 54A(1)) (see Part 9 of these Guidelines).

Information Commissioner review

1.30 An FOI applicant can apply to the Information Commissioner for merit review (IC review) of an access refusal decision by an agency or minister (s 54L), and an affected third party can apply for review of an access grant decision (s 54M) (see Part 10 of these Guidelines).

1.31 The application for IC review can be made following the initial decision by the agency or minister, or after internal review by the agency. This includes where a decision is not made within the statutory time frame and is a deemed access refusal (ss 15AC(3) and 51DA(2)) or a deemed affirmation of the original decision after a request is made for internal review (54D(2)).

1.32 The Information Commissioner can affirm the agency's or minister's decision, vary that decision, or set aside the decision and substitute a new decision to be implemented by the agency or minister (s 55K).

1.33 Decisions of the Information Commissioner made in accordance with s 55K of the FOI Act are published on the Australasian Legal Information Institute website (www.austlii.edu.au). A summary table with links to the decisions is published on the website of the OAIC (www.oaic.gov.au).

Further review of decisions

1.34 A party to the IC review can apply to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) for review of the Information Commissioner's decision under s 55K (s 57A(1)(a)) or review of an agency or minister's decision where the Information Commissioner has decided not to undertake a review under s 54W(b) (s 57A(1)(b)). An application may also be made to the AAT for review of a decision to make a vexatious applicant declaration

(s 89N) (see [1.36]-[1.37]; and Part 10 of these Guidelines).

1.35 Additionally, the Federal Court of Australia may decide questions of law referred by the Information Commissioner (s 55H) or determine matters on appeal on a question of law from the Information Commissioner's decision (s 56) (see Part 10 of these Guidelines).

Complaints and investigations

1.36 The Information Commissioner can investigate an action taken by agencies under the FOI Act, either in response to a complaint or on the Commissioner's own motion (see Part 11 of these Guidelines).

1.37 The IC review function and the complaint investigation function provide different remedies. For example:

- through the IC review process, the Information Commissioner can make the correct and preferable decision (if more than one legally correct option is available) on a request for access, amendment or annotation (s 55K) or finalise an IC review matter by making a decision in accordance with the terms of an agreement reached by the parties (s 55F) (see Part 10 of these Guidelines)
- the outcome of a complaint investigation can be a notice of completion to the agency and any complainant, containing results of the investigation and any recommendations (ss 86 – 88).

1.38 Given the different outcomes and potential overlap between complaints and IC reviews, the Information Commissioner may decide not to investigate a complaint that could be dealt with more effectively through an IC review process.

1.39 Under the *Ombudsman Act 1976*, the Commonwealth Ombudsman also retains authority to investigate complaints against agency actions under the FOI Act.

Information Publication Scheme

1.40 Part II of the FOI Act establishes an Information Publication Scheme (IPS) for Australian Government agencies subject to the FOI Act. This is a statutory framework for pro-active publication of information (see Part 13 of these Guidelines).

1.41 The IPS requires agencies to publish a broad range of information on their website and provides a means for agencies to proactively publish other information. Agencies must also publish a plan that explains how they intend to implement and administer the IPS (an agency plan).

Vexatious applicant declarations

1.42 The Information Commissioner has the power to declare a person to be a vexatious applicant (s 89K). The Information Commissioner may exercise that power if satisfied that a person has engaged in one or more FOI access actions that involve an abuse of process or if a particular request is manifestly unreasonable. Before making such a declaration, the Commissioner must invite the person involved to make a submission (see Part 12 of these Guidelines).

1.43 Decisions in which a declaration is made are published on the websites of the OAIC (www.oaic.gov.au) and the Australasian Legal Information Institute (www.austlii.edu.au).

Publication and access powers not limited

1.44 The FOI Act is not intended to restrict the circumstances in which government information can be released. Section 3A(2) states that it is not the intention of the Parliament in enacting the FOI Act to limit the power of government agencies to publish information or provide access to documents, or to prevent or discourage agencies from doing so.

1.45 An agency may disclose information without a request under the FOI Act, including information which would be exempt under the FOI Act. An agency may also disclose exempt information if a request is made under the FOI Act, except where restrictions such as secrecy provisions prohibit disclosure.

Administrative access to documents

1.46 The Information Commissioner encourages agencies to establish administrative access schemes to give access to certain types of information outside the formal FOI process (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). Greater access to government information informally or via specific administrative access schemes advances the object of the FOI Act to ‘facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost’.¹

Oversight of FOI Act

1.47 The OAIC, established under the *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* (AIC Act), is an independent agency that monitors FOI and promotes the objects of the FOI Act through a range of statutory functions. In addition to merit review of FOI decisions, investigating complaints about FOI administration and the vexatious applicant declaration powers, the Commissioner:

- publishes these Guidelines, which are to be revised periodically
- registers and makes decisions on requests for extensions of time under the FOI Act²
- promotes awareness and understanding of the FOI Act
- provides advice and assistance to the public and agencies, and
- monitors agency compliance with the FOI Act.

1.48 The Information Commissioner must also prepare an annual report, for presentation to the Attorney-General and tabling in Parliament, covering a range of FOI and privacy matters (s 30 of the AIC Act). Agencies must provide the Commissioner with FOI information needed to prepare the report (s 93 of the FOI Act) (see Part 15 of these Guidelines).

1.49 The OAIC is headed by the Australian Information Commissioner, who may be

¹ See *FOI agency resource 14: Administrative access*, July 2014, at www.oaic.gov.au.

² See Part 3 of these Guidelines and *FOI agency resource 13: Extension of time for processing requests*, July 2014, at www.oaic.gov.au

supported by an FOI Commissioner and a Privacy Commissioner. In addition to its FOI function, the OAIC has:

- privacy functions under the *Privacy Act 1988* (Privacy Act)
- the information commissioner functions, which are to report to the minister on policy and practice with respect to government information management and any other functions conferred on the Information Commissioner.

1.50 The privacy, FOI and information commissioner functions are vested in the Information Commissioner by the AIC Act. The privacy and FOI functions can be exercised by any of the commissioners. Only the Information Commissioner can exercise the information commissioner functions.

Further published resources

1.51 In addition to these Guidelines, the website of the OAIC (www.oaic.gov.au) provides various practical resources for the public and government agencies on the operation and administration of the FOI Act. These include:

- Written guidance such as the FOI Guide, FOI fact sheets and answers to frequently asked questions
- Resources for FOI decision makers (FOI agency resources) including step by step guidance, tips, checklists, and templates for notices and statements of reasons
- A database of published Information Commissioner review (IC review) decisions.

Part 2 —

Scope of application of the Freedom of Information Act

Version 1.8, April 2025

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PART 2 — SCOPE OF APPLICATION OF THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

- 2.1 Section 11(1) of the FOI Act gives every person a legally enforceable right to obtain access to a document of an agency or an official document of a minister, unless the document is exempt.
- 2.2 An agency or a minister is not required to give a person access to a document at a particular time if at that time the document is an ‘exempt document’ (s 11A(4)). An ‘exempt document’ is:
- a document that is exempt, or conditionally exempt where disclosure would be contrary to the public interest, under Part IV of the Act (see Parts 5 and 6 of these Guidelines)
 - a document in respect of which an agency, person or body is exempt from the operation of the FOI Act under s 7 (see [2.13] – [2.27] below)
 - an official document of a minister that contains some matter that does not relate to the affairs of an agency or of a department of state (s 4(1)).

Agencies subject to the FOI Act

- 2.3 As a general rule, an Australian Government agency will be subject to the FOI Act unless expressly provided otherwise. ‘Agency’ is defined at s 4(1) as:
- a department of the Australian Public Service
 - a prescribed authority or
 - a Norfolk Island authority.

Prescribed authority

- 2.4 A prescribed authority is defined in s 4(1) of the FOI Act to mean:
- a body corporate, or an unincorporated body, established for a public purpose by, or in accordance with the provisions of, an enactment or an Order-in-Council
 - any other body, incorporated or unincorporated, that has been declared by the FOI Regulations to be a prescribed authority for the purposes of the FOI Act¹
 - a person holding an office or appointment under an enactment or Order in Council or that is prescribed in the regulations
 - NBN Co.
- 2.5 Some bodies, offices and appointments are expressly excluded from the definition of prescribed authority and therefore are not covered by the FOI Act (ss 4(1) and 4(3)). These include:

¹ Aboriginal Hostels Ltd has been prescribed under the *Freedom of Information (Prescribed Authorities, Principal Offices and Annual Report) Regulations 2017*.

- an incorporated company or association
 - Territory Legislatures, and the officers and members of the Territory legislature
 - Royal Commissions or a Commission of inquiry as defined in s 4(1).²
- 2.6 Unincorporated bodies such as boards, councils and committees that have been established to assist or perform functions connected with a prescribed authority are deemed to be within that prescribed authority (s 4(2)). Similarly, an office that has been established by an enactment to perform duties as an employee of a department, a member of a body or for the purposes of a prescribed authority, is not separately treated as a prescribed authority (s 4(3)).
- 2.7 Section 68A of the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* exempts departments and people holding or performing the duties of an office established under that Act from the definition of a prescribed authority under the FOI Act. The Parliamentary Librarian, the Department of the Senate, and the Department of the House of Representatives are established under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* and therefore those entities and their staff are excluded from the operation of the FOI Act. In addition, the Parliamentary Budget Office and the Parliamentary Budget Officer are deemed not to be prescribed authorities under s 7(1) and Division 1 of Part I of Schedule 2 of the FOI Act.

Courts, tribunals and the Official Secretary to the Governor-General

- 2.8 The FOI Act has a restricted application to courts, court registries and the Official Secretary to the Governor-General.³ Specifically, the FOI Act does not apply to a request for access to a document of a court or registry, or the Official Secretary to the Governor General ‘unless the document relates to matters of an administrative nature’ (ss 5 and 6A). The FOI Act does not apply to the holder of a judicial office (s 5(1)(b)), or to the Governor-General. A further exclusion exists for documents relating to the handling of complaints about judicial officers (ss 5(1A)–(1C)).
- 2.9 Courts of Norfolk Island are taken to be Norfolk Island authorities for the purposes of the FOI Act and, as with other courts, the FOI Act does not apply unless the document requested relates to matters of an administrative nature (s 5(2)).
- 2.10 The phrase ‘matters of an administrative nature’ is not defined in the FOI Act. *In Kline v Official Secretary to the Governor General*, the High Court held that the phrase refers to documents that concern ‘the management and administration of office resources, such as financial and human resources and information technology’.⁴ By contrast, the phrase

² Records of commissions of inquiry are deemed to be in the possession of other agencies and to be available for access under the FOI Act, see [2.72].

³ Section 6 (supplemented by Schedule 1) deems the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, the Australian Fair Pay Commission and the Industrial Registrar and Deputy Industrial Registrars to be prescribed authorities to which the FOI Act applies in respect of requests for documents relating to matters of an administrative nature. However, both Commissions and the Registrars ceased operations in 2009. Some of the functions have been assumed by the Fair Work Commission (previously Fair Work Australia), which is subject to the FOI Act.

⁴ [2013] HCA 52 [13] and [41] (joint judgment of French CJ, Crennan, Kiefel & Bell JJ). Gageler J, in a separate judgment at [74], drew a similar distinction between the exercise or performance of substantive powers and functions, and ‘providing logistical support (or infrastructure or physical necessities or resources or platform) for the exercise or performance of those substantive powers or functions to be able to occur’.

does not apply to documents that relate to the discharge of a court's or the Governor-General's 'substantive powers and functions'.⁵ The High Court approved a similar distinction drawn by the Full Federal Court in the decision on appeal⁶ between the substantive functions or powers of a court or the Governor-General, and the office 'apparatus' supporting the exercise or performance of those substantive powers and functions.

- 2.11 Applying that distinction, the High Court held in *Kline* that the FOI Act did not apply to an FOI request to the Official Secretary to the Governor General for access to documents relating to the administration of the Order of Australia, including decisions on the award of Australian honours. As to courts, the High Court observed that the FOI Act applies only to documents relating to the management and administration of registry and office resources, and not to documents relating to the discharge of the substantive powers and functions of adjudication or tasks referable to the exercise of judicial, rather than administrative, powers and functions.⁷
- 2.12 There is no similar exclusion from the FOI Act applying to tribunals, such as the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART) and the Veterans' Review Board. Tribunals fall within the definition of 'prescribed authority' in s 4 of the FOI Act and the FOI Act applies to them in the same way as it applies to other agencies. In particular, an FOI request may be made for access to a document in the possession of the tribunal that was created by a tribunal member for the purpose of an adjudication (though the exemption provisions may apply to any such FOI request in the usual way).⁸

Exemption of certain persons and bodies

- 2.13 Some persons and bodies are excluded from the operation of the FOI Act. As a result, access to documents held by these people or bodies cannot be requested under s 15(1) of the FOI Act.
- 2.14 Under s 7(1), the following bodies specified in Schedule 2, Part I, Division 1 are not prescribed authorities for the purposes of the FOI Act and are therefore not subject to the FOI Act:
 - Aboriginal Land Councils and Land Trusts
 - Auditor-General
 - Australian Secret Intelligence Service
 - Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)
 - Australian Signals Directorate
 - Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security
 - National Workplace Relations Consultative Council

⁵ [\[2013\] HCA 52](#) [41].

⁶ *Kline v Official Secretary to the Governor-General* [\[2012\] FCAFC 184](#) [21], on appeal from *Kline and Official Secretary to the Governor-General* [\[2012\] AATA 247](#), which was an appeal from 'B' and *Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General* [\[2011\] AICmr 6](#).

⁷ [\[2013\] HCA 52](#) [45] and [47].

⁸ See *McLeod and Social Security Appeals Tribunal* [\[2014\] AICmr 34](#).

- Office of National Intelligence (ONI)
 - Parliamentary Budget Office
 - Parliamentary Budget Officer.
- 2.15 Under s 7(1A), the following parts of the Department of Defence specified in Schedule 2, Part I, Division 2 are taken not to be part of the Department of Defence or agencies in their own right for the purposes of the FOI Act:
- Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation
 - Defence Intelligence Organisation.
- 2.16 Section 7(2AAA) of the FOI Act provides that the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service Advisory Board, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service Consultative Committee, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission are not prescribed authorities for the purposes of the FOI Act. As a result, these entities are not subject to the FOI Act.

Exemptions applying to commercial activities, security and defence intelligence documents and other matters

- 2.17 Section 7(2) (supplemented by Schedule 2, Part II) lists agencies that are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to particular documents. The list includes:
- the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in relation to program material and datacasting content (discussed below)
 - the Reserve Bank of Australia in relation to its banking operations and exchange control matters
 - the Australian Statistician, in relation to documents containing information collected under the Census and Statistics Act 1905
 - the Attorney-General's Department in relation to its commercial activities and activities undertaken by the Australian Government Solicitor
 - various bodies such as Australia Post, Comcare, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), NBN Co and Medicare, in relation to documents in respect of commercial activities (discussed below).
- 2.18 For a complete list of bodies exempt under s 7(2), see Schedule 2, Part II.
- 2.19 The exemption for 'program material' of the ABC and SBS has been considered in Federal Court,⁹ AAT¹⁰ and IC review decisions.¹¹ In *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Herald and Weekly Times Pty Limited*, the AAT decided that program material means a document 'which is the program and all versions of the whole or any part of the program, any transmission broadcast or publication of the program, and includes a

⁹ See *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v University of Technology, Sydney* [2006] FCA 964 and *Bell v Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation* [2008] FCAFC 40.

¹⁰ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Herald and Weekly Times Pty Limited* [2012] AATA 914.

¹¹ *Herald and Weekly Times Pty Ltd and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2012] AICmr 7; 'F' and *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2012] AICmr 8; 'ER' and *Special Broadcasting Service* [2015] AICmr 12 and *Fist and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2014] AICmr 14.

document of any content or form embodied in the program and any document acquired or created for the purpose of creating the program, whether or not incorporated into the complete program'.¹² Documents containing salary information about ABC presenters, and documents relating to the classification of television programs, were neither 'program material' nor documents 'in relation to' program material. That latter phrase requires 'at least a reasonably direct relationship' or connection between a document and the nominated topic, and not a connection that is indirect, remote or tenuous.¹³

2.20 The term 'commercial activities' is defined in s 7(3) as meaning the current or proposed commercial activities of an agency that are carried on in competition with persons other than governments or authorities of governments. A separate definition of 'commercial activities' applies to NBN Co, namely, current or proposed commercial activities of NBN Co (s 7(3A)).¹⁴ The following points can be made about the scope of the exemption for 'commercial activities':¹⁵

- activities are conducted on a commercial basis if they are related to, engaged in, or used for commerce
- the commercial goal (profit making or the generation of income or return) is among the circumstances to be taken into account in determining whether a particular activity is a commercial activity
- commercial activity can be regarded as a business venture with a profit-making objective and involves activity to generate trade and sales with a view to profit
- the exemption in s 7(2) does not require that a document be created for the dominant purpose of carrying on a commercial activity and
- documents that relate to the appointment of a corporate advisor and agreements between 2 commercial entities¹⁶ have been found to fall within the exemption for commercial activities.

2.21 All Australian Government agencies are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to 'intelligence agency documents' (for example, a document that originated with or was received from ASIO or ONI) (s 7(2A)) and 'defence intelligence documents' (for example, a document that originated with or was received from the Department of Defence and relates to the collection, reporting or analysis of operational intelligence (s 7(2C)). These exemptions also apply to documents in the possession of ministers (s 7(2B)). The exemption extends to a part of a document that contains an extract from, or a summary of, an intelligence agency document or a defence intelligence document. In such cases, the remainder of the document may not fall within the scope of the exemption and may otherwise be appropriate for release.

¹² [\[2012\] AATA 914](#) [57].

¹³ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Herald and Weekly Times Pty Limited* [\[2012\] AATA 914](#) [99]. See also, *Jonathan Sequeira and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Freedom of information)* [\[2023\] AICmr 23](#) [29] in which a distinction was made between program material acquired for the purpose of creating a program and one in which the work was created and owned by a third party and not broadcast by the ABC.

¹⁴ See *Battersby and NBN Co Ltd* [\[2013\] AICmr 61](#).

¹⁵ *Battersby and NBN Co Ltd* [\[2013\] AICmr 61](#). See also *Bell v Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation* [\[2008\] FCAFC 40](#); *Johnston and Australian Postal Corporation* [\[2006\] AATA 144](#) and *Internode Pty Ltd and NBN Co Ltd* [\[2012\] AICmr 4](#).

¹⁶ Respectively, *Battersby and NBN Co Ltd* [\[2013\] AICmr 61](#) and *Internode Pty Ltd and NBN Co Ltd* [\[2012\] AICmr 4](#).

- 2.22 Section 7(2DA) exempts ministers and agencies from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to documents given to, or received by, the Independent Review into the workplaces of Parliamentarians and their staff (the Review), or in relation to a person performing functions in relation to the Review for the purposes of the Review, or a document brought into existence by the Review or a person performing functions in relation to the Review. However, ministers and agencies, other than the Australian Human Rights Commission, are not exempt in relation to documents created for purposes other than the Review to which a right of access otherwise exists or existed under the FOI Act.
- 2.23 Further, s 7(2DC) of the FOI Act provides that ministers and agencies are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to **documents brought into existence by** the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service Advisory Board, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service Consultative Committee, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission; or **documents given to or received by** one of those bodies **in connection with the performance of their functions**. To ensure clarity in the application of this exemption, s 7(2DD) provides that the exemption does not apply to documents created for a purpose other than in connection with the performance of the functions of those bodies.
- 2.24 All Australian Government agencies and ministers are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to documents that contain a summary of, or an extract or information from, a private session of a Royal Commission to which Part 4 of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* applies,¹⁷ as well as documents that originated with, or have been received from, a Royal Commission¹⁸ and the documents:
- contain information obtained at a private session of the Commission or
 - relate to a private session and identifies a natural person who appeared at a private session or
 - contain information given by a natural person to a member, or member of the staff, of the Commission for the purposes of a private session (whether or not the private session was, or is to be, held) and identifies the person who gave the information or
 - contain information to which s 60N of the *Royal Commission Act 1902* (which deals with certain information given to the Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission) applies or
 - contain information to which s 60P of the *Royal Commission Act 1902* (which deals with certain information given to the Disability Royal Commission) applies or
 - contain information to which s 60Q of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (which deals with certain information given to the Defence and Veteran Suicide Royal Commission) applies.
- 2.25 ‘Data scheme entities’, as defined in the *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022*,¹⁹

¹⁷ Part 4 of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* relates to private sessions for certain Royal Commissions which include the Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission, the Defence and Veteran Suicide Royal Commission and the Disability Royal Commission.

¹⁸ As defined in Part 4 of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902*.

¹⁹ ‘Data scheme entities’ are defined in s 11(1) of the *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022* to be either data custodians of public sector data or accredited entities. Section 11(1) provides that an entity is a **data custodian** if it is a Commonwealth body and is not an excluded entity, and it either controls public sector data (whether alone or

are excluded from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to a document that contains scheme data within the meaning of that Act, to the extent the document contains such data.

- 2.26 Also excluded from the operation of the FOI Act are documents held by Australian Government agencies and ministers that originated with, or have been received from, the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) (an AUSTRAC intelligence document) that concerns information communicated to AUSTRAC:²⁰
- under s 16 of the *Financial Transaction Reports Act 1988*
 - under s 41 of the *Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Act 2006*
 - in response to a notice given under s 49 of the *Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Act 2006*
 - that contains a summary of, or an extract or information from, an AUSTRAC intelligence document, to the extent that it contains such a summary, extract or information.
- 2.27 Under s 7(2H) agencies and ministers are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to a document given to, or received by, the National Cyber Security Coordinator, for the purposes of performing a function, or exercising a power, under Part 4 of the *Cyber Security Act 2024* (Coordination of significant cyber security incidents).

Mandatory transfer of FOI requests

- 2.28 Some FOI requests must be transferred to another agency (ss 16(2) and 16(3)). This requirement applies to FOI requests for documents originating with, or received from, agencies that are exempt or partly exempt from the FOI Act (in particular, those outlined at [2.13] – [2.16] above). The requirements for transfer of FOI requests are described in more detail in Part 3 of these Guidelines which also identifies the categories of document for which a mandatory transfer is required.
- 2.29 Certain requirements also apply for transfer of applications for amendment and annotation of personal information and are described in Part 7 of these Guidelines.

Entities subject to national law regimes

- 2.30 The FOI Act applies in a modified way to some entities even though they are not ‘agencies’ as defined in s 4 (see [2.3] above). For example, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHRPA) was not established under federal legislation; but instead operates under state and territory legislation enacted in each jurisdiction and collectively referred to as ‘The Health Practitioner Regulation National Law’.²¹ The Health Practitioner Regulation National Law applies the basic framework of the FOI Act

jointly with another entity), including by having the right to deal with that data, or has become the data custodian of output of a project in accordance with s 20F.

²⁰ Part II, FOI Act 1982 (Cth).

²¹ The *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act 2009* (QLD), the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (NSW) No 86a*, the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Victoria) Act 2009*, the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (ACT) Act 2010*, the *Health Practitioner Regulation (National Uniform Legislation) Act 2010*, the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Tasmania) Act 2010*, the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act (South Australia) Act 2010* and the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (WA) Act 2010*.

to AHPRA. Applicants can therefore make requests to AHPRA for access to information under the National Law; and the National Health Practitioner Ombudsman is the review body for AHPRA decisions in response to such requests (not the OIAC).²²

- 2.31 Similarly, the Education and Care Services National Law applies the basic framework of the FOI Act to childhood education and care agencies. The National Law provides for a discrete FOI Commissioner to review FOI decisions and an Ombudsman to respond to complaints.²³

Responding to FOI requests if an exemption applies

- 2.32 Where an agency is exempt in whole from the FOI Act under s 7, it is not obliged to respond to FOI requests for documents or applications for amendment or annotation of personal records. It is nevertheless good administrative practice for an exempt agency to reply to an FOI applicant stating that the agency is not subject to the FOI Act. Where the mandatory transfer provisions in s 16(2) apply, this reply may be provided by the relevant Department of State.²⁴ Equally, it may be open to the agency, independently of the FOI Act, to grant access to a document on an administrative basis if there is no secrecy provision that prohibits this.
- 2.33 A different response may be required if an agency that is exempt only in relation to particular types of documents receives an FOI request relating to those documents. The FOI applicant may dispute the agency's view that the documents are of an exempt nature — for example, that the documents relate to the agency's commercial activities, or do not relate to matters of an administrative nature in a court. It is open to the FOI applicant to seek Information Commissioner review of the agency's decision. To facilitate that process, the agency should observe the procedures in the FOI Act when responding to the FOI applicant. For example, the agency should respond to the FOI applicant in writing within the timeframe that applies under the FOI Act and advise the FOI applicant they can seek IC review of the decision that the documents they seek are not subject to the FOI Act. Failure to do so within the prescribed timeframe may result in the agency making a 'deemed access refusal' decision (s 15AC(3)).
- 2.34 The procedures outlined in the previous paragraph should also be followed in other circumstances where an agency or minister that is subject to the FOI Act receives a request for documents to which the FOI Act may not apply. For example, this procedure should be followed if a minister receives an FOI request for documents that are, in the minister's view, not 'official documents of a minister' (discussed below at [2.61] – [2.68]), or if the National Library of Australia or similar agency receives a request for documents that are regarded as being part of a library, historical or museum collection.

Ministers

- 2.35 The right of access to documents extends to the 'official documents of a minister'

²² For further information about seeking access to documents from AHPRA refer to: [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency - Freedom of Information \(ahpra.gov.au\)](https://www.ahpra.gov.au/Agency-Freedom-of-Information).

²³ For further information about the operation of the National Education & Care Services Commissioners and Ombudsman refer to: [The Ombudsman and Commissioners - National Education & Care Services, FOI & Privacy Commissioners & Ombudsman](#).

²⁴ The requirement for an agency to transfer an FOI request applies in relation to FOI requests for documents originating with, or received from, agencies that are exempt or partly exempt from the FOI Act, see [2.29].

(ss 11(1)(b) and 11A).²⁵ The definition of an ‘official document of a minister’ is discussed at [2.61] – [2.68] below. A minister includes an assistant minister.²⁶

- 2.36 A minister is independent of their portfolio agency for the purposes of the FOI Act and is therefore responsible for processing any FOI requests they receive. It is nevertheless open to a minister to arrange for their portfolio agency to provide assistance in processing FOI requests on matters such as:
- Registration and tracking of requests: on receiving an FOI request, a minister’s office is responsible for searching for the documents it holds, but can arrange for the portfolio agency to assist with registration and tracking of requests. It may assist the efficient processing of FOI requests, including compliance with the 30-day time frame in the FOI Act, for any administrative support arrangements provided by agencies for ministers to be documented and for details of the arrangement be published on the minister’s website. Similarly, the agency should advise FOI applicants of the role they may perform under arrangements with the minister’s office.
 - Reporting: a minister is required by s 93 of the FOI Act to provide information to the Information Commissioner for the purposes of the Information Commissioner’s reporting functions. A minister may obtain assistance from a portfolio agency in meeting this requirement.
- 2.37 When an agency assists a minister to process an FOI request, they are undertaking FOI Act functions. For example, if the agency maintains a mailbox to which the minister’s FOI requests are sent and forwards those requests to the minister. In these circumstances, complaints about the way an FOI request was handled are within the Information Commissioner’s complaint handling jurisdiction under Part VII B of the FOI Act.²⁷
- 2.38 Ministers may transfer a request to a portfolio agency, or another appropriate agency, if the document is held by the agency and is not held by the minister (s 16(1)(a)) or the document is held by the minister but the subject matter of the document is more closely connected with the agency’s functions (s 16(1)(b)).²⁸ In such cases, transfer of the request must be agreed to by the receiving agency, and should be documented in writing. Any documents within scope of the request and in the possession of the minister should also be passed on to the agency, or other minister, at the time the request is transferred. The applicant should also be notified when a request is transferred.²⁹
- 2.39 Further information about the kinds of documents that can be requested from a minister and the impact of a new minister on outstanding FOI requests and reviews can be found at [2.61] – [2.78] below.

Decision making in the minister’s office

²⁵ In *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 at [63] per Jagot J, the AAT accepted that the definition of exempt document includes official documents of a minister that contain some matter that does not relate to the affairs of an agency or a department of state.

²⁶ Assistant ministers, like ministers, are appointed under s 64 of the Constitution and have the same responsibilities and obligations under the FOI Act.

²⁷ The Information Commissioner has power to investigate the actions taken by an agency in the performance of functions or the exercise of powers under the FOI Act, but does not have the same power with respect to ministers.

²⁸ *Bienstein v Attorney-General* [2007] FCA 1174.

²⁹ Part 3 of the FOI Guidelines deals with transferring requests at paragraphs [3.57] to [3.68].

- 2.40 There is no express power in the FOI Act for a minister to authorise another person to make a decision on an FOI request received by the minister.³⁰ It is nevertheless open to a minister to authorise senior members of the minister's staff to make FOI decisions.³¹ Authorisations should be documented in a written instrument, or under an arrangement in writing approved by the minister. In these circumstances, the authorised person makes a decision on behalf of the minister in the capacity of an agent, rather than in their own right as an authorised person.
- 2.41 A minister may also choose to authorise senior staff in a portfolio agency to make decisions on FOI requests. An authorisation could apply for a certain period of time, such as during a caretaker period. In such circumstances, the agency would need to have access to the records of the minister or be assisted by the minister's office in conducting searches. Staff authorised to make decisions on behalf of a minister should always ensure their capacity to do so is clearly articulated in the s 26 statement of reasons.

Documents available in response to an FOI request

- 2.42 The right of access applies to:
- a document of an agency that is subject to the FOI Act
 - an official document of a minister
- unless the document is an exempt document (s 11(1)).

Meaning of 'document'

- 2.43 A 'document' is defined in s 4(1) to include any or any part of the following:
- any paper or other material on which there is writing
 - a map, plan, drawing or photograph
 - any paper or other material on which there are marks, figures, symbols or perforations having a meaning for persons qualified to interpret them
 - any article or material from which sounds, images or writing are capable of being reproduced with or without the aid of any other article or device
 - any article on which information has been stored or recorded, either mechanically or electronically
 - any other record of information
 - any copy, including any part of any copy, of a reproduction or duplicate of a thing listed above.
- 2.44 The definition of 'document' is broadly stated and is not exhaustive. It includes sound recordings, films, video footage, microfilm, and information stored on computer tapes, disks, DVDs and portable hard drives and devices. It can also include information held on

³⁰ Whereas s 23 provides that an FOI request to an agency, court or tribunal may be decided by an authorised person.

³¹ See *Carltona Ltd v Commissioners of Works* [1943] 2 All ER 560.

or transmitted between computer servers, backup tapes, mobile phones and mobile computing devices (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). The term also covers forms of recorded information that are 3-dimensional, such as a land use planning model.

- 2.45 Because the definition of document includes ‘any part of’ a document, an agency can deal with an FOI request for a specific portion of a larger document, such as an appendix to a paper or a chapter of a report, without having to examine the entire document for exempt matter.³²
- 2.46 Material maintained for reference purposes that is otherwise publicly available (such as library reference material) and Cabinet notebooks are not ‘documents’ (s 4(1)).³³ The Information Commissioner has found that the exclusion for material held for reference purposes by agencies and ministers’ is not intended to exclude from the operation of the FOI Act material published on departmental websites, and apart from the limited circumstances provided for in s 12(1), there is no provision in the FOI Act to refuse access to a document solely on the ground that it is publicly available.³⁴

Documents in existence

- 2.47 The right of access under the FOI Act is to existing documents, rather than to information, for example, answers to a series of questions on a topic. The FOI Act does not require an agency or minister to create a new document in response to an FOI request except in the limited circumstances set out in ss 17 and 20. These circumstances arise when the FOI applicant seeks access in a different form (s 20) or where it appears that the FOI applicant seeks information that is not available in a discrete form in written documents but is stored in an agency computer system rather than in a discrete form (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). An FOI request may nevertheless be framed by reference to a document that contains particular information.
- 2.48 The right of access applies to documents that exist at the time the FOI request was made. An FOI applicant cannot insist that their FOI request cover documents created after the FOI request is received. However, the agency or minister can consider whether to include documents that were created after the FOI request was received. This may be more administratively efficient because the FOI applicant might otherwise submit a new FOI request for the later documents.

Documents of an agency

- 2.49 A ‘document of an agency’ is defined in s 4(1) as:
- a document in the agency’s possession, whether created or received in the agency or
 - a document in relation to which an agency has taken contractual measures under s 6C to ensure that it receives the document from a contractor or sub-contractor providing services to the public on the agency’s behalf (see [2.52] – [2.59] below).

³² In *Timmins and Attorney-General’s Department* [2015] AICmr 32 the Information Commissioner found that an attachment to a brief within the scope of the applicant’s FOI request was also within the scope of the request because the brief could not be properly understood without being aware of the attachment’s contents. Another attachment was not considered to be in scope because it was only attached to the brief to illustrate work that had been undertaken (at [14]-[22]).

³³ See *Diamond and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* [2013] AICmr 57.

³⁴ *Mills and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 54 [20].

- 2.50 ‘Possession’ of a document is not limited to actual or physical possession, but can include constructive possession where an agency has the right and power to deal with a document,³⁵ regardless of where and by whom it is stored.³⁶ Any record of information which an agency has downloaded from a shared database or any other database and stored on hard disks or file servers in its physical possession should be treated as a ‘document’ of that agency.
- 2.51 The definition of ‘document of an agency’ does not require the document to be related to the functions or activities of the agency, only that the document is in the possession of the agency.³⁷

Documents held by Commonwealth contractors

- 2.52 A person may make an FOI request to an agency for access to a document held by a contractor or subcontractor relating to the performance of a ‘Commonwealth contract’. These documents are included in the definition of ‘document of an agency’ (s 4(1)) because of the requirement that contracts preserve the right to access to this information.
- 2.53 Agencies are required by s 6C of the FOI Act to ensure that Commonwealth contracts entered into on or after 1 November 2010 contain contractual measures that enable the agency to obtain any document when an FOI request is received. The term ‘Commonwealth contract’ is defined in s 4(1) to mean a contract:
- to which the Commonwealth or an agency is or was a party
 - where services are or were to be provided under the contract on behalf of an agency to a person who is not the Commonwealth or an agency³⁸ and

³⁵ In *McLeod and Social Security Appeals Tribunal* [2014] AICmr 34 at [20] the Information Commissioner noted that a question may arise as to whether documents created by a person in an official capacity but not stored in the record system of an agency are documents that are ‘in the possession of the agency’. It was said that this issue could arise in many other situations in which documents created by an agency staff member or contractor are either not stored in the agency’s record system or are viewed as personal working papers. The information Commissioner explained that ‘possession’ of a document is not limited to actual or physical possession, but can include constructive possession where an agency has the right and power to deal with a document, regardless of where and by whom it is stored. As a result, text messages on work issued mobile phones, documents on personal devices on which software has been installed so the device can be used for work purposes, and public servants using applications such as ‘WhatsApp’ on work issued devices to exchange text, images and video or audio messages may be ‘documents of an agency’ on the basis that they can be said to be within the constructive possession of the agency.

³⁶ In *Brett Goynes and Australian National Audit Office* [2015] AICmr 9 the Information Commissioner considered that documents within the possession of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) would be within the ‘constructive possession’ of the Auditor-General because the role of the ANAO is to assist the Auditor-General under the *Auditor-General Act 1997* [26]. This is consistent with the listing of the Auditor-General as an ‘Exempt agency’ (within Schedule 2 of the FOI Act) being extended to the ANAO.

³⁷ ‘OV’ and *Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 48 [23], [25]–[26].

³⁸ In ‘LI’ and *Department of Education and Training (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 41 [18] the Australian Information Commissioner found that the requested documents were likely held by a ‘Block Grant Authority’ which received and assessed applications and made recommendations to the Minister under a funding agreement. The Information Commissioner said that the funding was by way of a capital grant and did not form part of a Commonwealth contract as defined in s 4(1) of the FOI Act. In *Michael Leichenring and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 70 (7 April 2024) [21]–[22] the relevant contract provided for services to be provided to the Commonwealth and not to ‘a person who is not the Commonwealth or an agency’ as required by the definition of ‘**Commonwealth contract**’ in s 4(1) of the FOI Act. As a result, the Assistant Commissioner decided the relevant contract was not a ‘document of an agency’ under s 4(1) of the FOI Act.

- in which the services are in connection with the performance of the agency's functions or the exercise of its powers.
- 2.54 In summary, in relation to contracts entered into on or after 1 November 2010, the FOI Act confers a right of access to documents held or created by a contractor or subcontractor relating to their provision of services on an agency's behalf to the public or a third party. If an agency receives an FOI request for access to such a document, the agency is to take action to obtain a copy of the document from the contractor or subcontractor, and then decide whether access is to be given to that document under the FOI Act.
- 2.55 A person who has been given access to a document of this kind may apply to the agency under s 48 of the FOI Act to amend or annotate the personal information in the document about that person. However, s 48 applies only if the personal information 'has been used, is being used or is available for use by the agency or Minister for an administrative purpose'.
- 2.56 If the agency collects, uses, has access to, or relies on, personal information to perform its functions, this is personal information that has been used, is being used, or is available for an 'administrative purpose'. This requirement will not be satisfied only because the agency has a right to obtain the document from the contracted service provider under a contract to which s 6C applies. Therefore, where a contracted service provider gives an agency access to a database that contains a wide range of personal information, not all the personal information may be available for use by the agency for an administrative purpose. It is relevant to consider whether the individual provided their personal information to the contracted service provider for limited purposes that do not extend to provision of the information to the agency. The purpose that the information was provided by the individual may be evidenced by:
- a written agreement between the individual and the contractor
 - information such as in a booklet or brochure that was provided to the individual prior to them providing their personal information to the contractor or
 - evidence from the individual and the contractor of the context within which the personal information was provided.
- 2.57 In addition, it is relevant to consider the terms under which the agency or minister has access to the database that is owned by the contractor.
- 2.58 Whether personal information has been used or is being used by the agency or minister for an administrative purpose is a question of fact. This question must be determined by considering firstly whether the information is personal information, secondly whether the information was used or is currently being used by the agency and thirdly, whether the information was used or is being used in the course of performing the functions of the agency. Whether the information is available for use by the agency or minister is also a question of fact. This depends on whether the agency or minister has a right to access the information in question (see [2.50] above).
- 2.59 The Information Commissioner has published an agency resource containing guidance material about s 6C and a model clause that agencies can include in relevant contracts.³⁹

³⁹ See OAIC website '[What is an agency's obligations on a Commonwealth contract? | OAIC](#)'.

Official documents of a minister

- 2.60 An ‘official document of a minister’ means a document in a minister’s possession in their capacity as a minister, being a document that relates to the affairs of an agency (s 4(1)).
- 2.61 The time for assessing whether a document is an ‘official document of a minister’ is the time when the request for access is made, and only at that time.⁴⁰
- 2.62 The first element of this definition is that a document is ‘in the possession of a minister ... in his or her capacity as a Minister’. This includes a document in the possession of a minister’s office and is not confined to a document that is personally held by the minister. For example, under a similar provision in Victoria it was held that an electronic diary maintained by the Premier’s Chief of Staff in providing support functions to the Premier was a document in the Minister’s possession.⁴¹
- 2.63 ‘Possession’ of a document can also include constructive as well as actual possession: see [2.50]. Section 4(1) further provides that a document is in a minister’s possession if the minister is entitled to access a document that has passed from their possession, other than a document that is a document of an agency.⁴² Irrespective of the minister’s entitlement to access a document, if the relevant document is in an agency’s possession, that document is a ‘document of an agency’. A document cannot be both a document of a minister and a document of an agency.⁴³
- 2.64 Documents which a minister holds solely in their capacity as a Senator or member of Parliament, that is documents not related to ministerial responsibilities and functions (for example, documents relating to electorate matters), are not an official document of a minister and do not fall within the scope of the Act.⁴⁴
- 2.65 The second element of the definition is that a document in the minister’s possession ‘relates to the affairs of an agency’. Documents relating to the minister exercising his or her ministerial responsibilities and functions, and ministerial staff supporting a minister to perform ministerial functions, is a document that relates to the affairs of an agency (in this case, the agency being the minister). This phrase is to be understood broadly and encompasses any matter that falls within the scope of ministerial responsibilities or the portfolio responsibilities of a minister. This includes any matter that could be the subject of a Government action or decision; any matter relating to the functions and powers conferred on the minister under legislation; and any matter on which legislation may be introduced into the Parliament; and matters relating to business or activities of an agency. The phrase is not restricted only to matters within the minister’s own portfolio responsibility but could relate to an agency within the portfolio responsibility of any minister. The content of a document and the context in which it was created or held by the minister will also be relevant.⁴⁵
- 2.66 Documents held by a minister that have been found to relate to the affairs of an agency

⁴⁰ *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268 [99]. This was affirmed by the Full Federal Court in *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126 [65].

⁴¹ *Office of the Premier v Herald and Weekly Times* [2013] VSCA 79 [65]–[66].

⁴² See [2.79] for discussion regarding documents that a minister has placed in the care of the National Archives of Australia and at [2.76] in relation to briefing materials returned to a department.

⁴³ See *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268 at [18].

⁴⁴ FOI Act, s 4.

⁴⁵ *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 995 [63]–[64].

include:

- entries in the Prime Minister’s appointments diary relating to meetings with other political leaders to discuss the legislative program⁴⁶
- a letter to the Prime Minister from a former Prime Minister conveying views on issues of national policy⁴⁷
- a reference written by a minister on official letterhead⁴⁸ and
- a work diary of a ministerial adviser (in a Victorian decision).⁴⁹

2.67 Documents held by a minister that do not ‘relate to the affairs of an agency’ include:

- personal documents of a minister that are not related to their capacity as a minister
- personal documents of a member of the minister’s staff that are not related to a ministerial function
- documents of a party political nature⁵⁰
- documents held in the minister’s capacity as a local member of parliament not dealing with the minister’s portfolio responsibilities.⁵¹

2.68 Examples of documents that do not relate to the affairs of an agency include entries in the Prime Minister’s appointments diary relating to party-political events⁵², and a letter to the Prime Minister from an organisation established to provide support to the political party headed by the Prime Minister.⁵³

2.69 The provisions of the FOI Act relating to amendment and annotation of personal records also apply to the official documents of ministers (s 48). That is, a person may apply to a minister to amend or annotate an official document that is claimed to contain incomplete or incorrect personal information about the person making the application (see Part 7 of these Guidelines).

Archived ministerial documents

2.70 A document that a current or former minister has placed in the care of the National Archives of Australia is not a document of an agency (s 13(1)). Access to archived documents is governed by the *Archives Act 1983*.

⁴⁶ *Fletcher and Prime Minister of Australia* [2013] AICmr 11.

⁴⁷ *Parnell and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2012] AICmr 31.

⁴⁸ *Parnell and Minister for Infrastructure and Transport* [2011] AICmr 3 [14].

⁴⁹ *Office of the Premier v Herald and Weekly Times* [2013] VSCA 79.

⁵⁰ See *The Australian and Prime Minister of Australia* [2016] AICmr 84 [17] in which the Information Commissioner identified the following diary entries as relating to party political events and which were therefore did not relate to the affairs of an agency: meetings between the Prime Minister and various members of the Liberal National Coalition, some of whom were serving Ministers; entries pertaining to meetings between the Prime Minister and members of the Liberal National Coalition who were not serving Ministers; entries for party political events scheduled for the Prime Minister’s attendance.

⁵¹ *Re Michael Nassib Said and John Dawkins, MP* [1993] AATA 9.

⁵² *Parnell and Prime Minister of Australia (No. 2)* [2011] AICmr 12.

⁵³ *Parnell and Prime Minister of Australia* [2011] AICmr 10.

Caretaker period

- 2.71 In the period after the announcement of a federal election, the Australian Government assumes a caretaker role. This practice recognises that the Executive cannot be held accountable for its decisions in the normal way and that every general election carries the possibility of a change of government. The caretaker period continues until the election result is clear or, if there is a change of government, until the new government is appointed by the Governor-General.
- 2.72 During the caretaker period, the business of government continues and ordinary matters of administration still need to be addressed. As a result, processing of FOI requests will continue in the usual way during the caretaker period both for ministers and agencies.⁵⁴

Change of Minister

- 2.73 A change of minister can occur when ministers change within the Government of the day (for example, a ministerial reshuffle following a machinery of government change or retirement), or when there is a change of government.⁵⁵ When there is a change of minister both the outgoing minister and the incoming minister should be aware of their responsibilities under the FOI Act.
- 2.74 Where an FOI request is made to a minister and subsequent to the request there is a change of minister before a decision is made on the request, the obligation to process the request continues. In practical terms, the obligation to respond to an FOI request will fall to the incoming minister responsible for that portfolio matter.
- 2.75 Similarly, where a review or appeal of an FOI decision is on foot at the time of a change of minister, the new minister will be the respondent party in that matter.⁵⁶
- 2.76 As noted at [2.61], the time for assessing whether a document is an ‘official document of a Minister’ is the time the FOI request is made, and only at that time.⁵⁷ Therefore, a document does not cease to be an ‘official document of a minister’ if the incoming minister does not have possession of the document.

⁵⁴ Information about the caretaker conventions is available from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website: [Guidance on Caretaker Conventions](#).

⁵⁵ Information about the circumstances in which changes to ministerial arrangements occur and the principles to be applied are set out in the Australian Public Service Commission publication ‘Ministerial Transitions – Strengthening Partnerships’ issued November 2021 (available from the APSC website [Ministerial Transitions](#) | [Australian Public Service Commission](#) (apsc.gov.au)).

⁵⁶ In *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268, the Federal Court of Australia said at [123] that s 20 of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*, which provides that the holder or occupier of an office, appointment or position includes all persons who for the time being hold or occupy the office, appointment or position or who perform the duties of the office, appointment or position, and s 3 of the FOI Act providing that information held by the Government is a national resource to be managed for public purposes, mean that where there is a change in the person holding office of Minister after a request but before the Minister makes an initial decision on the request, the duty to determine that request is owed by the new occupier of the office. In *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126, the Full Federal Court said at [93] that that duty is necessary for the provisions of the FOI Act to be workable and to achieve the objects in s 3 of the FOI Act. It is important to note that the Full Federal Court, at [93]–[94], did not uphold other aspects of the reasoning in *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* expressed at [123] of that decision – namely the requirement for the minister responsible for deciding an FOI request to maintain possession of a document until the request has been finally determined and the right of the new minister to demand access to a document that is the subject of an unresolved FOI request from the former minister.

⁵⁷ *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126 [65].

- 2.77 In all cases there is a duty on a minister not to frustrate the right of an FOI applicant to have their FOI request determined, including on review or appeal.⁵⁸ That duty can be described as a duty to preserve an FOI applicant's right to have their FOI request determined.
- 2.78 An example of an act that would lead to a contravention of this duty on ministers, and frustrate the rights of an FOI applicant, would be to destroy or otherwise conceal a requested document before an FOI request has been determined or a review or appeal has been decided.

Responsibilities of outgoing ministers

- 2.79 Outgoing Ministers must ensure that documents that are the subject of an ongoing FOI review or appeal matter are transferred to the incoming minister, or an agency or person authorised to act on behalf of the incoming minister with respect to the matter.
- 2.80 Outgoing ministers should do all they can to process any outstanding FOI requests before leaving office, consistent with the objects of the FOI Act – to give the Australian community access to information held by the Government of the Commonwealth by providing a right of access to documents (s 3 of the FOI Act). The outgoing minister should bear in mind that in enacting the FOI Act the Parliament intended that functions and powers under the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4)).
- 2.81 If an outgoing minister cannot process an outstanding FOI request before leaving office, they must not frustrate the right of an FOI applicant to have their FOI request determined, including on review or appeal. Practical examples of how an outgoing minister could preserve an applicant's right to have their FOI request determined are:
- where a decision has not been made on the FOI request, provide the incoming minister the FOI request and any relevant documents to enable the incoming minister to make the decision on the FOI request (having regard to convention, this approach may be appropriate in circumstances where the incoming minister is from the same government).
 - where the preconditions in section 16 of the Act are satisfied – transfer the FOI request, and any relevant documents, to an agency⁵⁹. For example, the portfolio agency in possession of the document, or another agency in possession of the document (such as the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for cabinet documents). When an FOI request is transferred under s 16, it is treated as a request made to the receiving agency (see s 16(5)), and that agency is responsible for making a decision on the request.⁶⁰ (Note: a transfer under s 16 of the FOI Act is only possible if no decision has been made on the request, the statutory timeframe has not expired, and the transfer has been agreed to by the receiving agency).⁶¹

⁵⁸ *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126 [93].

⁵⁹ The Full Federal Court in *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126 [94] suggested this as one way to preserve an FOI applicant's right to have their FOI request determined.

⁶⁰ Part 3 of the FOI Guidelines deals with transferring requests at paragraphs [3.57] to [3.68].

⁶¹ If the statutory timeframe has expired, the incoming minister may apply to the OAIC for an extension of time under s 15AC of the FOI Act. The minister may then transfer the request to the portfolio department if the criteria in s 16(1) are met.

- provide the FOI request and any relevant documents, including any documents related to an ongoing review or appeal, to a person in a relevant portfolio agency who they have authorised to make decisions on FOI requests.⁶²
- 2.82 Records of an outgoing minister that are not related to an ongoing FOI request, review or appeal should be dealt with in accordance with the Archives Act and GRA 38.⁶³ The Archives Act prescribes the record keeping requirements for outgoing ministers. This includes obligations to transfer or deposit certain documents and records when a minister ceases to hold office as a minister.⁶⁴

Responsibilities of Incoming Ministers

- 2.83 As noted at [2.74], the incoming minister is responsible for responding to undecided FOI requests, reviews and appeals with the outgoing minister at the time they departed the ministerial office, or requests that are subject to review or appeal. To ensure the incoming minister can discharge their responsibilities under the FOI Act, they will need to ensure timely processing of any undecided FOI requests, and respond to any reviews or appeals of FOI decisions.
- 2.84 If an incoming minister receives an FOI request for documents of a former minister, the incoming minister should quickly assess which agency is best placed to process the request or take all reasonable steps to find the documents. For example, if the documents are in a relevant portfolio's agency's possession, the incoming minister may transfer the request to that department under s 16 of the FOI Act.⁶⁵
- 2.85 The incoming minister will also need to provide information and statistics to the Information Commissioner to enable the Commissioner to prepare the report required under s 30 of the *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* (see [Part 15](#) of these guidelines).

Documents in certain institutions

- 2.86 If an agency places:
- a document in the memorial collection within the meaning of the *Australian War Memorial Act 1980*
 - a document in the collection of library materials maintained by the National Library of Australia
 - material in the historical material in the possession of the Museum of Australia
 - a document in the care of the National Archives of Australia (other than as a document relating to the administration of the National Archives) or
 - a program or related material in the collection of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

⁶² See also paragraphs [2.40] and [2.41] for information about ministerial authorisations.

⁶³ See National Archives of Australia website [General Records Authority 38 | naa.gov.au](https://naa.gov.au/general-records-authority-38).

⁶⁴ See National Archives of Australia's resources [Quick reference guide to General Records Authority 38 – Ministers of State | naa.gov.au](https://naa.gov.au/quick-reference-guide-to-general-records-authority-38-ministers-of-state); and [Quick reference guide on managing ministerial records | naa.gov.au](https://naa.gov.au/quick-reference-guide-on-managing-ministerial-records).

⁶⁵ *Geoffrey Shafran and Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 46 (4 March 2025) at [24].

the document is deemed to be in the possession of the agency that transferred the document (s 13(2)). If that agency no longer exists, the document is deemed to be in the possession of the agency with functions to which the document is most closely related. A person seeking access to the document can make an FOI request to the relevant agency, which must retrieve the document from the institution to meet the request.

- 2.87 A document is not deemed to be a ‘document of an agency’ by reason of its being in one of the collections outlined above if a person (including a minister or former minister) other than an agency, placed the document in the care or custody of the relevant institution (s 13(1)).
- 2.88 Documents that are in the custody of the National Archives of Australia and are within the open access period are discussed below at [2.90].

Records of commissions of inquiry

- 2.89 Records of certain commissions of inquiry are also deemed to be ‘documents of an agency’ and within the possession of the relevant agency, as follows:
- records of a Royal Commission that are in the care of the National Archives of Australia are taken to be documents of an agency and in the possession of the department responsible for the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* (currently the Attorney-General’s Department) (s 13(3)(a))
 - records of the Commission of Inquiry (as defined under the now repealed *Quarantine Act 1908*)⁶⁶ that are in the care of the National Archives of Australia are taken to be documents of an agency and to be in the possession of the Agriculture Department (within the meaning of the *Biosecurity Act 2015*) (s 13(3)(b))
 - records of a Commission of Inquiry under the *Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act 2006* that are in the custody of the National Archives are taken to be documents of an agency and in the possession of the department responsible for the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act (s 13(3)(c)).

Documents open to public access and not available under the FOI Act

- 2.90 As discussed above, the right to obtain access under the FOI Act does not apply to all documents that are in the possession of agencies that are subject to the FOI Act. The FOI Act does not apply to documents of the following kinds that are open to public access under other arrangements:
- the document or a copy of it is within the open access period as defined in the *Archives Act*,⁶⁷ unless the document contains personal information, including personal information about a deceased person (s 12(1)(a)).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ The Commission of inquiry referred to in s 13(3) relates to the equine influenza outbreak in Australia in 2007 and related matters.

⁶⁷ The open access period is defined in s 3(7) of the *Archives Act 1983* and in ss 22A (cabinet notebooks), 22B (census information) and 22C (Independent Review and PWSS documents).

⁶⁸ In *Park-Kang and Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 703, Member Webb found (at [22]) that while s 12(1)(a) of the FOI Act removed a person’s entitlement under that

- the document is already publicly available, as part of a public register or in accordance with an enactment where a fee or other charge may apply (s 12(1)(b)).⁶⁹ An example of a public register is a register of births, deaths and marriages. A consumer protection register is an example of a register created under an enactment. This extends to documents that are available to the public in accordance with arrangements made between the agency and a publisher.⁷⁰
- the document, under a State or Territory law, is open to public access as part of a land title register subject to a fee or charge (s 12(1)(ba)).
- the document is made available for purchase by the public in accordance with arrangements made by an agency (s 12(1)(c)).⁷¹

Personnel records

2.91 If an agency has established procedures for access to personnel records, an employee or former employee may only apply for access to their records under the FOI Act in limited circumstances (s 15A). A personnel record means those documents containing personal information about an employee or former employee that an agency has kept for personnel management purposes (s 15A(1)). An application under the FOI Act for access to those records may only be made where the employee or former employee has made a request under those agency procedures and is either:

- not satisfied with the outcome or
- has not been notified of the outcome within 30 days (s 15A(2)).

enactment to obtain access to a document within the 'open access period' determined under the Archives Act, s 12(1) does not act negatively upon an applicant's accrued right to review, or to the right of access that crystallized under the FOI Act at the time that he made his request. This is so because the applicant's FOI request and application for review under the FOI Act were made before the records in question crossed the 'open access period' threshold under the Archives Act.

⁶⁹ In *Knapp and Australian Accounting Standards Board* [2014] AATA 744, the AAT considered the meaning of 'available for purchase' at [24]–[26]) and found that the documents must be capable of being obtained without undue delay and in a condition that the public can take advantage of them.

⁷⁰ *Lester and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation* [2014] AATA 646 [22].

⁷¹ *Lester and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation* [2014] AATA 646 [27]–[28].

Part 3

Processing and deciding FOI requests

Version 1.9, October 2025

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Administering the FOI Act — general considerations

Key principles

- 3.1 The *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (FOI Act) specifies the way agencies and ministers process FOI requests for access to documents. Further information about the agencies subject to the FOI Act and the documents available for access under the FOI Act is in Part 2 of these Guidelines.
- 3.2 In addition to the detailed guidance in this Part, agencies and ministers should have regard to the principles that underpin the right to obtain access to documents held by government (see Part 1 of these Guidelines). These include that:
- subject to the FOI Act, every person¹ has a legally enforceable right to obtain access to government documents (s 11(1))
 - a person's reasons for seeking access to a document, or an agency or minister's belief about a person's reasons for seeking access, are not relevant (s 11(2))²
 - the functions and powers given by the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4))
 - the FOI Act does not limit any power to give access or publish to information or documents under other legislative or administrative arrangements (s 3A(2)).
- 3.3 The OAIC has developed a 'Self-Assessment Tool' to assist agencies understand the effectiveness of their information access systems and the extent to which these comply with the FOI Act. The Self-Assessment Tool includes sections on proactive release of government held information and processing requests for access and can be found on the OAIC website.³ The Self-Assessment Tool can be used in conjunction with these Guidelines.
- 3.4 Part 3 of the FOI Guidelines provides agencies and ministers with guidance on processing and deciding requests for access under s 15 of the FOI Act. Guidance on applying charges can be found in [Part 4](#); applying exemptions in [Part 5](#); applying conditional exemptions in [Part 6](#); amendment and annotation of personal records in [Part 7](#); internal review in [Part 9](#); review by the Information Commissioner in [Part 10](#); investigations and complaints in [Part 11](#); vexatious applicant declarations in [Part 12](#); the Information Publication Scheme in [Part 13](#); the disclosure log in [Part 14](#) and reporting in [Part 15](#).

¹ Section 2C(1) of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* provides: 'In any Act, expressions used to denote persons generally (such as "person", "party", "someone", "anyone", "no - one", "one", "another" and "whoever"), include a body politic or corporate as well as an individual.'

² A person's right of access should not be affected by their reasons for seeking access. However, it may be a relevant consideration when deciding whether a document is exempt.

³ See: [Self-assessment tool for agencies | OAIC](#) on the OAIC website (www.oaic.gov.au).

Access to government information — administrative release

- 3.5 An agency or minister may choose to provide administrative access outside the formal FOI Act request process.⁴ This may be as informal and flexible as providing information or documents when requested by a member of the public, or collating and releasing data or statistics following receipt of a specific FOI request. Alternatively, an agency or minister may choose to establish, and notify on its website, an administrative access arrangement that is to operate alongside the FOI Act, either generally or for specific categories of information or documents.⁵
- 3.6 Administrative release can offer benefits to agencies, ministers and members of the public. The advantages of administrative release include that it:
- advances the objects of the FOI Act by facilitating public access to information promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost
 - encourages flexibility and engagement with the public
 - can rely on technology to facilitate easy collation, integration and distribution of information
 - can offer a lead-in to the FOI process by enabling a person to clarify the type of information they wish to access from an agency
 - aligns with the broader movement in public administration to facilitate dialogue and negotiation between parties before formal legal processes are used
 - potentially offers cost benefits and quicker processing times.
- 3.7 Administrative access arrangements should be tailored to the size of an agency, its work, the FOI requests it typically receives, and its regular procedures for public contact and access.⁶
- 3.8 To facilitate early discussion and promote the use of administrative access schemes, agencies should promote all forms of access to the information they hold. As well as proactively publishing information and making information available through administrative access schemes, agencies may encourage members of the public to contact them to discuss the best way to obtain relevant information, before a formal FOI request is made.
- 3.9 Administrative access arrangements should operate alongside FOI Act processes. Importantly, there should be an efficient process for referring administrative requests to the formal FOI process where FOI is more appropriate or where the FOI applicant would prefer to apply under the FOI Act.⁷ Agencies must comply with obligations arising from the formal FOI process, including the obligation to provide reasons for its decision within the stipulated

⁴ For more information see the OAIC agency resource *Administrative access* at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/administrative-access/>.

⁵ In addition to implementing administrative access arrangements, Australian Government agencies should also have regard to Part II of the FOI Act which establishes an Information Publication Scheme (IPS). The IPS requires agencies to publish a broad range of information on their websites and authorises proactive publication of other information. Further information about the IPS can be found in Part 13 of the FOI Guidelines ([Part 13: Information Publication Scheme | OAIC](#)).

⁶ The OAIC has published a resource that explains administrative access and how to establish an administrative access arrangement. See <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/administrative-access/>.

⁷ Where it appears that the document is likely to contain a substantial amount of exempt matter, it will generally be more appropriate to process the request under the FOI Act.

timeframe when responding to an administrative access request. In circumstances where the FOI applicant has requested documents under the FOI Act, but the agency is minded to release documents under administrative access arrangements, it is expected that the agency will seek the FOI applicant's consent, and withdrawal of the FOI request, before releasing the documents administratively.⁸

- 3.10 Administrative release of an individual's own personal information must also comply with the minimum requirements set out in Australian Privacy Principle (APP) 12 of the Privacy Act even if the agency has separately formalised a process for applying for access and correction under the Privacy Act. Similarly, arrangements that allow for correction of personal information must comply with the minimum requirements set out in APP 13.⁹
- 3.11 Agencies should also be mindful of s 15A of the FOI Act which provides that where the agency has established procedures for employees to access their personnel records, the employee cannot make a request under s 15 of the FOI Act unless:
- they first make a request under s 15A and
 - they are not satisfied with the outcome of the request or
 - they have not been notified of the outcome of their request within 30 days.

Further information about the operation of s 15A can be found in [Part 2](#) of these Guidelines ([2.91]).

- 3.12 Giving employees access to their personnel records outside of the FOI Act allows agencies to more quickly and efficiently provide access to this category of personal information without the formal requirements of processing an FOI request under s 15 of the FOI Act.

Right of access

- 3.13 Every person has the legally enforceable right to obtain access to a document of an agency or an official document of a minister (s 11(1)). An FOI applicant does not have to reside in Australia or be an Australian citizen.¹⁰ The term 'person' also includes a body politic or body corporate, such as a company.¹¹

Reasons for a request

- 3.14 A person's right of access is not affected by any reasons they give for seeking access, or an agency's or minister's belief as to the reasons for seeking access (s 11(2)). In general, any use an applicant might make of the documents is not relevant to the decision whether to grant them access. In the decision of *'FG' and National Archives of Australia*, the Information Commissioner explained that s 11(2) is to be read as meaning that a person's right of access is not to be adversely affected or diminished by their stated or assumed reasons.¹² However, the Information Commissioner in *'FG'* also explained that an applicant's reasons for

⁸ See *'AOY' and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 229 [18] in which it was found that a reasonable construction of the applicant's FOI request encompassed material that Services Australia had released administratively to the applicant but which the applicant had not withdrawn as part of their request.

⁹ For more information, see Chapters 12 and 13 of the Information Commissioner's APP Guidelines, available at www.oaic.gov.au.

¹⁰ *Re Lordsvale Finance Ltd and Department of the Treasury* [1985] AATA 174.

¹¹ See s 2C of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*.

¹² [2015] AICmr 26 [40].

requesting the information may be a relevant consideration for the purposes of considering whether disclosure would be unreasonable where required under an exemption or for the purposes of the public interest test for a conditional exemption.¹³ For example, when deciding whether the disclosure of personal information about a person under s 47F(1) would be unreasonable, an agency or minister may take into account the likelihood of an FOI applicant publishing the personal information in an article.¹⁴

- 3.15 Nothing in the FOI Act limits what an applicant may do with the released documents (although other legal restrictions such as copyright will still apply, see [3.32926]–[3.331]). A decision to give a person access should therefore be made in the knowledge that they may share the content of the documents with others, or publish them to a larger audience.¹⁵
- 3.16 However, it would be incorrect for an agency or minister to proceed on the basis that disclosure under the FOI Act is always the same as ‘disclosure to the world at large’.¹⁶ Although the FOI Act does not limit further dissemination by the FOI applicant, agencies and ministers should be aware that not every applicant will disseminate information obtained through an FOI request. Agencies and ministers should ensure that each FOI request is examined on its own merits when deciding whether disclosure of the information would be unreasonable under a particular exemption, where unreasonableness is a relevant consideration.
- 3.17 In addition, the disclosure log provisions require documents released in response to FOI requests to be published on a website within 10 working days of them being released to the FOI applicant, subject to limited exceptions for personal, business and other information (see [Part 14](#) of these Guidelines). Agencies and ministers are encouraged to provide advance notice to FOI applicants and third parties that, if released, the documents will be published in a disclosure log subject to certain exceptions.¹⁷

The applicant’s identity

- 3.18 The FOI Act does not require an applicant who is a natural person to disclose or provide proof of their identity, nor does it require a body corporate or politic to establish that it is a legal entity. The FOI Act does not prevent a natural person from using a pseudonym.¹⁸
- 3.19 An FOI applicant’s identity can nevertheless be relevant in deciding if requested documents are exempt from disclosure. For example, where a person has submitted an FOI request for their own personal information, or documents relating to their business affairs, an agency or minister should be satisfied of the FOI applicant’s identity before giving them access to the

¹³ [\[2015\] AICmr 26](#) [44].

¹⁴ [\[2015\] AICmr 26](#) [41] citing ‘BA’ and Merit Protection Commissioner [\[2014\] AICmr 9](#) [81].

¹⁵ *Re Sunderland and the Department of Defence* [\[1986\] AATA 278](#); ‘FG’ and National Archives of Australia [\[2015\] AICmr 26](#); and ‘BA’ and Merit Protection Commissioner [\[2014\] AICmr 9](#).

¹⁶ See ‘FG’ and National Archives of Australia [\[2015\] AICmr 26](#).

¹⁷ The relevant exceptions are listed in s 11C(1) and include personal information about any person; information about the business, commercial, financial or professional affairs of any person; other information that the information Commissioner determines would be unreasonable to publish; and any information that would not be reasonably practicable to publish due to the extent of modifications or deletions.

¹⁸ This principle is also reflected in APP 2 in the Privacy Act, which provides that an individual has the option when dealing with an entity to which the Privacy Act applies (which includes agencies and ministers) ‘of not identifying themselves, or of using a pseudonym’. Two exceptions to APP 2 include where an entity is required or authorised by a law, or a court/tribunal order, to deal with an identified individual, or it is not practicable to deal with an individual who is not identified. Those exceptions may apply to some FOI requests, but not in all instances.

documents, particularly where the FOI applicant purports to seek access to their own personal or business information. The protections under ss 90–92 of the FOI Act for officers disclosing documents in good faith may not apply if an agency or minister’s office has been negligent in failing to make appropriate enquiries (see [3.326]–[3.331]). If the identity of the FOI applicant cannot be verified, the agency may decide that disclosure of personal information would be unreasonable and contrary to the public interest in all the circumstances.

- 3.20 However, it will not generally be necessary to confirm the identity of the FOI applicant when deciding an FOI request seeking access to non-personal information. Circumstances in which identification may be necessary include where the requested information includes personal or business information, or where it may be subject to secrecy provisions that prohibit release except to certain persons or in certain circumstances.
- 3.21 The OAIC encourages agencies to make online FOI request forms available to increase the timely and efficient processing of FOI requests. Online forms can capture relevant contact details for consultation, assist with triage, registration and acknowledgement and can also help applicants understand how to identify the documents they want to access. However, while an agency may choose to make an FOI request form available on its website, agencies cannot refuse to process an FOI request form submitted by other means such as by email or post).
- 3.22 The rise in the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) brings with it the potential for FOI requests to be made without human intervention. As noted above, the FOI Act does not prevent the use of a pseudonym and an FOI request is not invalid on this basis. It follows that an FOI request is not invalid on the basis that the identity of the requestor is not apparent.
- 3.23 However, the legally enforceable right of access in s 11 of the FOI Act is conferred on ‘every person’. Section 2C of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* extends the definition of ‘person’ to include ‘a body politic or corporate as well as an individual’. Without a person or corporate entity making an FOI request (even if assisted by AI), there is no right of access under the FOI Act. To reduce the possibility of ‘bot’ generated FOI requests, agencies may consider publishing an online FOI request form that includes technology that can identify whether the user is a robot. Such a request will not be a valid request under the FOI Act. However, as noted at [3.21] above, the FOI Act does not require any particular form to be completed to make a valid request, or for people to identify themselves. Agencies should be open to receiving FOI requests from people in ways other than by using an online form.
- 3.24 If a need arises to establish an FOI applicant’s identity, an agency or minister should only seek personal information that is reasonably necessary for the purpose of deciding the FOI request (consistent with APP 3 in the Privacy Act). The minimum amount of personal information required will vary depending on the nature of the documents sought by the applicant and whether the documents contain sensitive material. An FOI applicant’s identity should not be provided to any third party without prior consultation and agreement by the FOI applicant. This also applies if there is a request consultation process under ss 26A, 27 or 27A, or if another agency is consulted. Nevertheless, knowing an FOI applicant’s identity may help a third party more easily decide whether to object to disclosure and to frame any specific objections, and this issue can be raised in consultation with an FOI applicant.

Requests by agents and groups

- 3.25 An FOI request may be made by one person on behalf of another person (who may be a natural person or a body corporate), by an organisation on behalf of a client, or by a person

as the agent or representative of a group of individuals or corporate bodies. This is acknowledged in s 29(5)(a), which refers to payment of an FOI charge causing financial hardship ‘to a person on whose behalf the application was made’.

- 3.26 The FOI Act does not directly state whether a request must be made by a single entity or whether it can be made by a group, a partnership or an unincorporated association. A logical consequence of the principle that a request can be made by a person using a pseudonym (see [3.18]) is that a request may be made by a group of individuals or corporate bodies or an unincorporated association.¹⁹ The expression in s 15 is that ‘a person’ may request access to a document. The presumption is that words in an Act ‘in the singular number include the plural’, unless there is a contrary legislative intention (see ss 2C and 23 of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*).
- 3.27 Further, the FOI Act is to be administered ‘as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost’ (s 3(4)). That object will best be met if, wherever practicable, agencies and ministers accept and respond to FOI requests without any threshold enquiry as to the identity or legal personality of the applicant: the agency or minister’s focus should be on the FOI request, not the requester.
- 3.28 Nor is it exceptional that the administrative law rights of request, complaint and review can be exercised by unincorporated groups or associations.²⁰
- 3.29 It may nevertheless be problematic to process (or continue processing) an FOI request that is not made singly by an individual or body corporate unless the agency or minister can obtain further information or the name of a contact person. The following is a non-exhaustive summary of those circumstances.
- 3.30 Firstly, as discussed at [3.20], the identity of an FOI applicant can be relevant when the requested documents contain personal or business affairs information or are subject to secrecy provisions that prohibit release except to certain persons or in certain circumstances. Where an FOI applicant seeks access to a document on behalf of another person, and the document contains information pertaining to that other person, it may be necessary for the FOI applicant to demonstrate that they have the authority of that person to obtain access and, if necessary, to confirm their right to the information under a secrecy provision (see [5.134]—[5.143]).

¹⁹ The AAT reached a contrary view in *Re Apache Energy Pty Ltd and National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority* [2012] AATA 296. The AAT found that the reference in s 15 of the FOI Act to a request from ‘a person’ was confined to the singular and that a request could not validly be made by a partnership. A similar view, that a person may not act in concert with others to make a single FOI request, was adopted by the AAT in *CKI Transmission Finance (Australia) Pty Ltd; HEI Transmission (Australia) Pty Ltd and Australian Taxation Office* [2011] AATA 654. The Information Commissioner’s reasons for disagreeing with that AAT decision are explained in *Who qualifies as a ‘person’ eligible to make a request under s 15 of the Freedom of Information Act 1982?*, January 2013, available at www.oaic.gov.au.

²⁰ The *Administrative Review Tribunal Act 2024* provides that an application to the Tribunal for review of a decision can be made by a person whose interests are affected by a reviewable decision (s 17) and that ‘an organisation or association of persons, whether incorporated or not, is taken to be a person whose interests are affected by a decision if the decision relates to a matter included in the objects or purposes of the organisation or association at the time the decision is made and the matter has not been removed from the object or purposes of the organisation or association’ (s 15). The *Ombudsman Act 1976* defines the function of the Ombudsman as one of investigating ‘action that relates to a matter of administration ... in respect of which a complaint has been made to the Ombudsman’; the Act speaks of the complaint to the Ombudsman being made by a complainant at the request of another person or a body of persons’ (s 6(5)). The *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* s 46P provides that a complaint of unlawful discrimination may be lodged by a person aggrieved, ‘on that person’s own behalf [or] on behalf of that person and one or more other persons who are also aggrieved [or] by 2 or more persons aggrieved ... on their own behalf [or] on behalf of themselves and one or more other persons who are also aggrieved’.

- 3.31 Secondly, an FOI applicant can apply under s 29(5) of the FOI Act for payment of a charge to be reduced or not imposed on the basis that payment of the charge would cause financial hardship to the FOI applicant or to a person on whose behalf the request is made. If an FOI request is made by a group of people, it may be difficult for an agency or minister to decide that issue without receiving more information about the members of the group.
- 3.32 Thirdly, where the FOI applicant has an affiliation with an organisation but leaves that organisation while the request is being processed (for example, a journalist who leaves a media organisation), it may be necessary to ascertain whether the request was made in a personal or a representative capacity (noting that this should be done when the FOI request is first received by the agency or minister), and whether the FOI applicant wishes the processing of the request to continue. This issue may become more important if a charge is payable, the request has reached the stage of internal or IC review, or a third party objects to disclosure under ss 26A, 27 or 27A of the FOI Act.

The formal requirements of an FOI request

- 3.33 A request for access to documents under the FOI Act must meet the following formal requirements:

- The FOI request must be in writing (s 15(2)(a)).²¹
- The FOI request must state that it is a request for the purposes of the FOI Act (s 15(2)(aa)). This requirement distinguishes an FOI request from a simple enquiry requesting administrative access. Agencies and ministers should nevertheless take a flexible approach when assessing whether an applicant has met this requirement. For example, if a person sends an email to an FOI mailbox requesting access to agency documents, the agency may take s 15(2)(aa) as being met because the intention to make an FOI request is clear. If an applicant's intention is not clear, the agency or minister should contact them to confirm whether the request was intended to be made under the FOI Act.
- The FOI request must provide such information as is reasonably necessary to enable a responsible officer of the agency or the minister to identify the document that is requested (s 15(2)(b)) (see [3.194—3.196]). Before refusing a request for failing to meet this requirement an agency or minister must undertake a 'request consultation process' (see [3.223]—[3.229]).
- The FOI request must give details of how notices under the FOI Act may be sent to the applicant (s 15(2)(c)). The return address may be a physical, postal or electronic address (such as an email address).²²

²¹ Section 15(3) of the FOI Act requires agencies to take reasonable steps to assist a person make a request that complies with s 15. As stated at [3.43], reasonable steps may include transcribing an oral request for a person who is not able to make a written request. Such a request will then comply with the requirement in s 15(2)(a) to be in writing.

²² The address given by the applicant only needs to be sufficient to permit the agency to send notices under the FOI Act. For example, the OpenAustralia Foundation Ltd, a registered charity, operates Right to Know (www.righttoknow.org.au), a service that automates the sending of public interest FOI requests to agencies and ministers. Right to Know automatically publishes all correspondence between applicants and the agency or minister. Right to Know does not allow people to make FOI requests for their own, or some else's, personal information. Right to Know encourages FOI officers to contact them to discuss any request that may result in disclosure of personal information. Because the Right to Know website allows notices to be sent to the platform, use of that website satisfies s 15(2)(c).

- The request must be sent to the agency or minister. This may be done by:
 - o delivery of the request in person to a central or regional office of the agency or minister as specified in a current telephone directory
 - o sending of the request by pre-paid post to an address of the agency or minister as specified in a current telephone directory; or
 - o sending by electronic communication to an email or fax address specified by the agency or minister²³ (s 15(2A)).
- 3.34 The FOI Act requires an FOI request to be made in writing. Although the FOI Act does not require an FOI applicant to complete a particular form to make a valid FOI request, there can be advantages for agencies in promoting the use of an online form or smartform on their website. These forms can assist in capturing information relevant and necessary to the FOI request, including whether the request relates to an existing application or request, proof of identity for requests seeking access to the applicant's own personal information or authority to act if made by a representative. Agencies should be careful not to require more personal information than is needed to process the FOI request, for example, by requiring proof of identity when non-personal/policy documents are requested. Further, such forms can incorporate technology to help identify whether a request has been artificially generated.
- 3.35 An agency is required, under s 15(3), to take reasonable steps to assist a person to make an FOI request that complies with the formal requirements in s 15(2). This may include situations in which an individual has expressed a wish to make an FOI request to an agency or minister (s 15(3)(a)), or where an individual has made a request that does not comply with s 15(2) (see s 15(3)(b)). This requirement is addressed in further detail below.

Taking reasonable steps to assist an applicant

- 3.36 An agency may only refuse an FOI request that does not meet the formal requirements in s 15(2) and 15(2A) after it has taken reasonable steps to assist a person to make a request that complies with the FOI Act (s 15(3)).
- 3.37 This duty to take reasonable steps applies both when a person wishes to make an FOI request and when they have made a request that does not meet the formal requirements of the FOI Act (s 15(3)(b)).
- 3.38 This duty may arise, for example, where a person has expressed a wish to make an FOI request but is prevented from doing so, or would find it difficult to do so, because of their particular circumstances (including health, age or disability; geographical, technological or social isolation; or limited English skills). This duty may also arise where a person has made an FOI request that does not meet all the formal requirements in s 15(2)), for example, where the request does not state that it is a request made under the FOI Act.
- 3.39 An agency has a separate duty to take reasonable steps to assist a person direct their FOI request to the appropriate agency or minister (s 15(4)). This duty may arise, for example, if the document requested is not in the possession of the agency but is known or likely to be in the possession of another agency or minister. An agency or minister may also transfer an

²³ The OAIC encourages agencies to use a specified email address (i.e., FOI@agency.gov.au) and to make this email address available on their website. For further information, see OAIC, [Guide to the access of information page on an agency's website](#) | OAIC, available at www.oaic.gov.au. Applicants are encouraged to use this address to make the FOI process more efficient for both agencies and the applicant.

FOI request to another agency or minister under s 16 of the FOI Act if it does not have the document in its possession, or the document requested is more closely connected with the functions of the other agency or minister (see [3.58]—[3.80] below).

- 3.40 While the FOI Act places an obligation only on agencies, ministers are encouraged to adopt a similar approach to assisting applicants.

What are reasonable steps?

- 3.41 What constitutes ‘reasonable steps’ will depend on the particular circumstances, including the person’s ability to comply with the formal requirements. It is the responsibility of an agency to be able to justify that reasonable steps have been taken in each instance.
- 3.42 Factors that may be relevant in determining what constitutes reasonable steps in the circumstances may include:
- the nature of the request
 - the extent of detail required to clarify the scope of the request
 - the FOI applicant’s knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the structure of government and the functions of agencies
 - whether the FOI applicant needs special assistance because of language or literacy issues or because of a disability.
- 3.43 For example, a reasonable step may include offering to transcribe a verbal request from a person who is unable to submit a written request to the agency so as to record and submit a written FOI request on their behalf.
- 3.44 Where the person has limited English skills, a reasonable step may include contacting the person using a translation services provider, who can then relay the person’s FOI request to the agency in English.
- 3.45 If a person has not yet made an FOI request and contacts an agency to ask whether they hold particular information, it is appropriate to explain the agency’s functions and the type of information that is held. A person should be advised if the FOI request relates to information that the agency has already published in its disclosure log, or as part of the Information Publication Scheme (IPS) (see Parts [14](#) and [13](#) of these Guidelines respectively).
- 3.46 An agency should also be flexible in assisting an applicant to provide the details necessary for a request to fulfil the formal requirements of the FOI Act (for example, notifying the FOI applicant of a missing detail by telephone or email). This contact can be made either before or after an FOI request is formally acknowledged. It should rarely be necessary to require the submission of a fresh written FOI request if only a minor detail, such as a date relevant to a particular document or the applicant’s return address, has been omitted from the FOI request. Once the further information is provided, the agency or minister’s office should inform the FOI applicant that their request meets the statutory requirements and that the timeframe for deciding the FOI request has commenced.
- 3.47 It is important to keep good records of contact with FOI applicants, such as file notes of conversations, so that the agency can demonstrate, if required, that it has taken reasonable steps in accordance with s 15(3) or (4).
- 3.48 The requirement to take reasonable steps also arises under s 24AB(4) of the FOI Act, which requires that an agency or minister take reasonable steps to assist the FOI applicant revise their FOI request when a practical refusal reason exists, so that the practical refusal reason no longer exists (s 24AB(3)). Reasonable steps might include providing a breakdown of the

time estimated for each step to process the request and suggesting what would be a reasonable request in the circumstances.²⁴ Further information about the requirements under the request consultation process is outlined below at [3.223]–[3.229].

- 3.49 If, after taking reasonable steps to assist an applicant make a valid request, the request still does not comply with the formal requirements in s 15 of the FOI Act (except for s 15(2)(b) which requires a request consultation process under s 24AB – see [3.50] below) the agency may treat the request as invalid.
- 3.50 If an FOI request does not comply with s 15(2)(b) (identification of documents) it is the agency’s duty to take reasonable steps to assist the person make a request than complies with s 15(3). Failure to provide sufficient information about a requested document so that a responsible officer of an agency, or the minister, can identify it, is listed as a practical refusal reason in s 24AA(1)(b) of the FOI Act. Further, the note to s 15(3) states that an agency or minister may refuse to deal with a request if satisfied that a practical refusal reason exists, after undertaking a request consultation process. As a result, both agencies and ministers must undertake a request consultation process, as set out in s 24AB of the FOI Act, before refusing a request on the basis that it does not satisfy the identification of documents requirement in s 15(2)(b). Agencies and ministers cannot simply tell the applicant the request is invalid because it does not satisfy s 15(2)(b) and refuse to deal with it.

Interpreting the scope of a request

- 3.51 In making a decision about release of documents, it is implicit that the decision-maker must first make findings about the scope of the FOI request and the documents in the agency’s or minister’s possession that fall within that scope.
- 3.52 The starting point for determining the scope of the FOI request is the wording of the request.²⁵ An FOI request should be interpreted as extending to any document that might reasonably be taken to be included within the description the FOI applicant has used.²⁶ An FOI request for a ‘file’, including a historical or archived file, should be read as a request for all the documents contained in that file, including the inside and outside of a file cover in the case of a physical document.
- 3.53 An FOI request for all documents relating to a particular subject will also include any document or print which lists the names of all the files the agency or minister may consider relevant to the request. An agency or minister will need to exercise care in relation to any sensitive material, such as personal names, that may appear on the list. If in doubt, the agency or minister should consult the FOI applicant to discuss what documents they seek. Other considerations relevant to construing the scope of a request are discussed below at [3.195].
- 3.54 FOI requests must be read fairly by an agency or minister. A narrow or pedantic approach to construction is not acceptable.²⁷ Although a request under the FOI Act must be for ‘documents’ rather than for ‘information’, a request may be phrased with reference to the

²⁴ *Maria Jockel and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 70 [31].

²⁵ *'AKP' and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)* [2024] AICmr 111 [12].

²⁶ *Re Gould and Department of Health* [1985] AATA 63.

²⁷ *Jack Waterford and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 21; *'QG' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 23 [32]–[38]; and *AQM' and Comcare (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 246 [17]–[20].

information that a document contains. This may be an effective and concise way for an FOI applicant to identify documents.

- 3.55 An FOI applicant may not know exactly what documents exist and may describe a class of documents, for example, all documents relating to a particular person or subject matter; or all documents of a specified class that contain information of a particular kind; or all documents held in a particular place relating to a subject or person. In all these circumstances, where the FOI request is framed by the FOI applicant in terms that are different to the way an agency or minister records, categorises and stores information, the agency has a responsibility to assist the FOI applicant understand what information is in the relevant documents. This may assist the FOI applicant refine the scope of their FOI request to match a specific set of documents. The agency may suggest a revised scope and should work with the FOI applicant to arrive at an appropriate scope of the request.²⁸
- 3.56 The fact that a person may already have a copy of the document they have requested is not a relevant consideration when considering the scope of a person's FOI request. However, an agency or minister may choose to consult the FOI applicant to seek their agreement to exclude such material from the scope of their request.
- 3.57 There have been instances of agencies using s 22 of the FOI Act to delete the names of government officials below the Senior Executive Service (SES) rank on the basis that those names are irrelevant to the scope of an FOI request. There is no apparent logical basis for treating the names of SES officials as being within the scope of a request, but other officials as being irrelevant to the request.²⁹ Without further explanation as to why the names of government officials are irrelevant to the scope of a request, it is unlikely that the application of s 22 is appropriately justified. The appropriateness of the deletion of public servants' names and contact details under s 22 of the FOI Act is discussed further at [3.166].

Transferring FOI requests to other agencies

- 3.58 Section 16 provides for the transfer of FOI requests between agencies, and between agencies and ministers.³⁰ A transfer can occur in some circumstances by agreement between agencies and ministers; in other circumstances a transfer is mandatory (see [3.79]). As noted at [3.39], an agency also has a duty under s 15(4) to take reasonable steps to assist a person direct their FOI request to the appropriate agency or minister, and this enables the agency to discuss where a request could be directed with the FOI applicant.
- 3.59 An agency or minister may partially or wholly transfer an FOI request (s 16(3A)). When an agency or minister receives an FOI request for documents, some of which are in the possession of different agencies, the request is notionally divided into different FOI requests. Each agency or minister then has an obligation to make their own decision on the FOI request in accordance with the FOI Act. Information about reporting FOI requests that are transferred, either in full or in part, can be found in the FOI Statistics Guide on the OAIC's website.³¹

²⁸ Principle derived from [23] in *'QG' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 23.

²⁹ *'LK' and Department of the Treasury (Freedom of Information)* [2017] AICmr 47 [79] and *'FM' and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [2015] AICmr 31 [14].

³⁰ Section 16 refers to agencies, but at s 16(6) states that 'agency' includes a Minister'.

³¹ [FOI Statistics Guide \(oaic.gov.au\)](https://www.oaic.gov.au/foi-statistics-guide).

- 3.60 The transfer of an FOI request under s 16 can facilitate access by avoiding the need for the FOI applicant to make a new FOI request to another agency or minister and by providing a whole of government approach to making information available to the public. Transfer of an FOI request also allows the decision to be made by the agency or minister best placed to make an informed assessment about disclosure of relevant documents.
- 3.61 Because the transfer of an FOI request under s 16 affects the obligations of agencies and ministers, consultation between them is essential. Informal consultation is particularly important in the case of complex FOI requests or FOI requests where the FOI applicant has requested the same documents from numerous agencies or ministers. Agencies and ministers' offices are encouraged to consult each other as soon as possible and, where an FOI request may contain more than one part, agree promptly as to who will be responsible for each part.
- 3.62 A decision to transfer an FOI request under s 16 is not open to external review because it is neither an access refusal nor an access grant decision.
- 3.63 If an agency's practice is to process FOI requests on behalf of their minister, rather than transfer the request to the minister under s 16, the agency should publish this arrangement on its website, because it is relevant to the requirement to publish information about its functions and decision-making powers affecting members of the public (under s 11(2) of the FOI Act).
- 3.64 When there is a change of minister, both the outgoing minister and the incoming minister have responsibilities under the FOI Act if undecided requests or reviews and appeals remain on foot. These responsibilities may give rise to the transfer of documents and are dealt with in more detail in [Part 2](#) of these Guidelines.³²
- 3.65 The agency or minister that first receives an FOI request is referred to in the following paragraphs as the 'transferring agency', and the agency or minister that receives the transferred FOI request is referred to as the 'receiving agency'.

Relevant considerations when deciding to transfer an FOI request under s 16

- 3.66 If a request is deemed to have been refused because it was not decided within the relevant statutory processing time, it cannot be transferred under s 16 of the FOI Act. This is because s 16 provides for transfer of 'a request' (defined in s 4 to mean 'an application made under subsection 15(1)'). If a decision has already been made (including if a decision is deemed to have been made under s 15AC(3)), it is no longer 'a request' to which s 16 applies.³³
- 3.67 For a valid transfer to be made, the grounds identified in s 16 need to be met. It is not appropriate to transfer an FOI request on grounds outside those identified in s 16. For example, an agency or minister cannot transfer an FOI request on the basis that it does not have the resources to deal with it or would prefer that another agency that shares possession of the requested document deal with the FOI request.
- 3.68 It is also a requirement of s 16(1) that the agency or minister to whom an FOI request is made obtains the agreement of the receiving agency before transferring it (s 16(1)). If the receiving agency does not agree to accept the FOI request on transfer, the preconditions in s 16(1) are

³² See [Part 2: Scope of application of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 | OAIC](#) [2.73]–[2.85].

³³ See *'ANV' and Minister for Defence (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 202 [6]. An agency or minister may continue to process the request, however they cannot formally transfer it under s 16 to another agency or minister.

not met and any purported transfer will be ineffective. The requirement for agreement does not apply with respect to transfers under ss 16(2) or 16(3) (mandatory transfers).

- 3.69 Agencies and ministers should assess FOI requests promptly to ascertain whether it may be appropriate to transfer a request under s 16 so as not to disadvantage the FOI applicant, or the receiving agency, by impacting on the available time to process the request (with additional work potentially required by the receiving agency to apply for an extension of time to decide the request) or causing undue pressure on the receiving agency (because when a request is transferred to an agency, the request is taken to have been received by the receiving agency on the day it was first received by the transferring agency (s 16(5), see [3.73] below).
- 3.70 It is good practice for ministers to check whether they hold the document(s) requested as soon as they receive a new FOI request (or whether a portfolio department or other agency holds the requested documents). This is because the time for assessing whether a document is an ‘official document of a minister’ is to be made at the time the FOI request is received.³⁴ If the relevant document is in an agency’s possession, that document is a ‘document of an agency’. A document cannot be both a document of a minister and a document of an agency.³⁵
- 3.71 A transfer under s 16 can only be made to an agency or minister, as defined in the FOI Act (s 4). Therefore this excludes State government authorities, private sector organisations and any other persons. Transferring an FOI request under s 16 is also considered a ‘disclosure’ under the Privacy Act, and therefore it needs to be authorised or required under the FOI Act (in this case, s 16) to be permitted under the Privacy Act (APP 6.2(b)). The lawfulness of a transfer (disclosure) made under s 16 can therefore be considered in the context of a complaint made to the Information Commissioner under the Privacy Act (s 36(1)).
- 3.72 Where the requested document, or information in the document, originated with, or was received from, a State government authority, agencies and ministers should instead use the consultation provisions under s 26A of the FOI Act if they consider the State government authority might reasonably wish to contend that the circumstances in s 26A(1)(c) apply.³⁶

Timeframe

- 3.73 A transferred request is deemed to have been received by the receiving agency at the time it was received by the transferring agency (s 16(5)(b)). In other words, the decision-making period commences when the FOI request was originally received. The receiving agency or minister is not given extra time as a result of the transfer. It is therefore important that agencies and ministers give early consideration to whether an FOI request should be transferred. This will enable the notices to the applicant under s 15(5)(a) (acknowledgement of receiving an FOI request) and s 16(4) (transfer of FOI request) to be combined and to ensure the receiving agency or minister is not disadvantaged by delay. In these circumstances, the receiving agency may also consider seeking an extension of the processing period under s 15AA, with the agreement of the applicant. For the extension to be valid, the agency must ensure that the requirements under s 15AA are followed. Further

³⁴ *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268 [99]. This was affirmed by the Full Federal Court in *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCFCA 126 [65].

³⁵ See *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268 [18].

³⁶ If it appears to the agency or minister that the State authority might reasonably wish to contend that the document is conditionally exempt under s 47B, and access to the document would be contrary to the public interest.

information about the timeframes for notifying a decision under the FOI Act is at [3.243]—[3.251].

Notifying the applicant

- 3.74 The transferring agency must advise the FOI applicant that their FOI request has been transferred (s 16(4)). The notification should state when the request was transferred and why, and the name and contact details of the agency or minister to which the request was transferred. Particular care needs to be taken in relation to certain documents whose existence should neither be confirmed nor denied (see [3.80]—[3.191]). Where it is necessary to enable the receiving agency to deal with the FOI request, the transferring agency should also send a copy of the relevant document to the receiving agency (s 16(4)). As noted at [3.68], when requests and documents are transferred under s 16(1), the receiving agency must agree to the transfer for it to be effective.
- 3.75 An agency or minister that receives an FOI request may transfer the request, or part of the request, to another agency or minister with their agreement if:
- the document is not in the agency’s or minister’s possession but is to their knowledge in the possession of another agency or minister or
 - the subject matter of the document is more closely connected with the functions of another agency or minister (s 16(1)).
- 3.76 It is implicit in these requirements that an FOI request cannot be transferred solely as a matter of administrative convenience, or because another agency or minister produced the document requested or also has a copy of it. Equally, before a decision is made to transfer an FOI request, an agency or minister should take whatever reasonable steps are necessary to ascertain whether they have the document that meets the description in the FOI request.³⁷
- 3.77 Part 2 of the FOI Guidelines has more detailed information about the transfer of FOI requests when there is a change of government (see [2.73]—[2.85]).
- 3.78 Documents generated by the joint activities of a number of agencies (such as an interdepartmental committee) might be ‘more closely connected’ with the agency that chaired the committee or which initiated the production of the document.

Mandatory transfer of requests

- 3.79 Sections 16(2) and 16(3) provide for the mandatory transfer of certain types of FOI requests, as specified in Table 1 below. These sections relate to requests for access to documents held by an agency but which originated in, or have been received from, agencies exempt from the operation of the FOI Act or agencies that are exempt in respect of specific documents, and the documents are more closely connected with the functions of that other agency. This requirement partially overlaps with s 7, which provides that all agencies and ministers are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to intelligence agency documents and defence intelligence documents (see Part 2 of these Guidelines).

³⁷ *Bienstein v Attorney-General* [2007] FCA 1174; (2007) 96 ALD 639.

Table 1: Transfer requirements for documents originating with or received from an agency listed in Schedule 2 (agencies that are exempt from the operation of the FOI Act and agencies that are exempt from the FOI Act in respect of particular documents)

Document originated with ...	and the document is more closely connected with ...	the document must be transferred to ...
an exempt agency listed in Division 1, Part I, Schedule 2 (e.g., Auditor-General, Australian Secret Intelligence Service or Australian Intelligence Organisation)	the functions of the exempt agency	the responsible portfolio department (s 16(2)(c)).
an exempt agency that is a part of the Department of Defence listed in Division 2, Part I, Schedule 2 (e.g., Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation and the Defence Intelligence Organisation)	the functions of the exempt agency	the Department of Defence (s 16(2)(d)).
an agency exempt in respect of particular documents, as listed in Part II or Part III of Schedule 2 (e.g., documents in respect of commercial activities or program material)	documents in respect of which the listed agency is exempt	the agency (s 16(3)).

Transfer of requests without revealing the existence of documents

- 3.80 Where appropriate, the transferring agency should consult the receiving agency about the possible application of s 25 before completing a transfer. Section 25 makes it clear that an agency or minister does not have to confirm or deny the existence and characteristics of certain documents, that is, documents that are exempt under s 33 (national security, defence or international relations), 37(1) (law enforcement or public safety) or 45A (Parliamentary Budget Office documents). Consultation with the receiving agency is particularly important to prevent inadvertently confirming to an FOI applicant the existence of such a document before the decision-maker has had the opportunity to consider whether to rely on s 25.

Consultation

- 3.81 Prompt and effective consultation with relevant parties involved in dealing with an FOI request is essential to good administration.

Consultation with other agencies

- 3.82 Each agency or minister is required to make their own decision in relation to an FOI request. However, before making a decision about release of a document it is good practice to consult other relevant agencies, even if the FOI Act does not require consultation and when the agency does not intend to disclose the document. Through consultation the decision-maker may discover that another agency has already disclosed the document in response to an FOI request, or made it publicly available. Consulting other agencies will also assist in

managing requests where an FOI applicant has requested access to the same or similar documents from several agencies.

- 3.83 In some cases, more than one agency will be involved in creating a document, such as through an inter-agency working group. In such circumstances, agencies should ensure there are procedures in place at the time a document is created to determine whether it will be published under the IPS (see [Part 13](#) of these Guidelines) or released in response to an FOI request. This may lessen the need for consultation if an FOI request is later received.

Consultation with the applicant

- 3.84 Various provisions of the FOI Act require contact with the FOI applicant. However, agencies and ministers' offices are encouraged, as a matter of good administrative practice, to contact an FOI applicant to discuss their FOI request as soon as practicable after receiving it. This contact provides an early opportunity to assist the FOI applicant address any formal requirements that have not been met (see [3.33] above). Early consultation can also lead to greater efficiency in processing the request. The agency or minister can discuss with the applicant the scope of their request, particularly if a preliminary assessment indicates there may be a practical refusal reason [3.192], or where estimated charges may be high (see [Part 4](#) of these Guidelines). In many cases, an FOI applicant may not be aware of the nature and volume of the agency's records and as a result their request may be expressed in wider terms than is necessary.
- 3.85 An agency or minister may also wish to seek the FOI applicant's agreement to extend the processing period (including the period as extended under ss 15(6) or (8)) by no more than 30 days to deal with the request (s 15AA).

Consultation with third parties

- 3.86 An agency or minister may need to consult a third party where requested documents affect Commonwealth-State relations (s 26A), contain business information (s 27) or are documents affecting another person's privacy (s 27A).
- 3.87 In deciding whether to undertake third party consultation, an agency or minister must first decide if consultation is required by making a judgement about whether a third party might reasonably wish to contend that the requested document is exempt from disclosure. In doing so, there is no obligation on the decision-maker to search for things not apparent from the face of the document to which access is sought, or not known to the decision-maker, before deciding whether consultation is needed.³⁸
- 3.88 There must be some rational basis which the agency or Minister can discern, based on the face of the document, or from something else actually known to the decision-maker, indicating that disclosure of the document would, or could be expected to, unreasonably affect the person adversely in relation to his or her personal information, lawful business or professional affairs.³⁹ Consultation is only required where there is some rational basis upon which the person involved could *reasonably* seek to rely on the actual terms of the exemption (as distinct from, for example, a mere preference or even a strong preference, for document or information not to be disclosed). The mere appearance of a person's name in the document, in the absence of anything more, may not be sufficient for it to be apparent

³⁸ See *Attorney-General v Honourable Mark Dreyfus* [2016] FCAFC 119 [65].

³⁹ *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 [42]-[49].

that a person might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention.⁴⁰ The decision-maker is not otherwise obliged to make inquiries or search for some basis upon which it might appear that a person might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention.⁴¹

- 3.89 As discussed in *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Freedom of information)*⁴² the consultation requirements in ss 27 and 27A are designed to ensure that third parties are given an opportunity to make submissions in support of a contention that a relevant exemption applies. The same considerations apply to the consultation requirement in s 26A.
- 3.90 In *Drake*, the Freedom of Information Commissioner said that the consultation requirement does not apply if the agency has itself formed the view that a relevant exemption or exemptions apply such that access should be denied.⁴³ While that reasoning arose in the context of a practical refusal reason, when making other access decisions *Drake* permits agencies not to consult if they have formed the view that they will not give access to the requested documents. However, it does not prevent consultation to test their thinking, or to elicit further information to inform the FOI decision.
- 3.91 Where an agency or minister finds that disclosure of a document would likely affect Commonwealth-State relations, the agency or minister must not decide to give the applicant access to the document unless consultation has taken place in accordance with arrangements entered into between the Commonwealth and the State about consultation under s 26A.
- 3.92 One of the conditions that must be met for consultation between the Commonwealth and a State under s 26A, is that arrangements have been entered into between the Commonwealth and a State about consultation (s 26(1)(a)). This condition has been satisfied as arrangements have been entered into between the Commonwealth and the States to facilitate Commonwealth-State consultation under s 26A of the FOI Act.
- 3.93 The terms of these arrangements, which are held by the Attorney-General's Department,⁴⁴ are outlined below:

Administrative arrangements with regard to consultation with State Governments

Arrangements have been put in place to facilitate consultation with State Government agencies where consultation is required pursuant to section 26A.

Agreement has been obtained from the States that all correspondence and communication should, at first instance, go through the delegated FOI contact officer of the particular agency and not directly to the author or action officer whose name may appear on the document. This procedure has been put in place to ensure FOI requests are appropriately received and monitored, and to minimise inconsistency across jurisdictions

⁴⁰ *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 [49]. See also *Attorney-General v Honourable Mark Dreyfus* [2016] FCAFC 119 [65].

⁴¹ See *Attorney-General v Honourable Mark Dreyfus* [2016] FCAFC 119 [56]–[57].

⁴² [2023] AICmr 6 [26]–[29]. Although the discussion in *Drake* is about consultation under ss 27 and 27A, the points made apply equally to consultation under s 26A.

⁴³ *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 6 [26]–[27].

⁴⁴ Arrangements with regard to consultation with state governments under s 26A of the FOI Act is held by the Attorney-General's Department in its '1996 FOI Memoranda No. 26A'. The 1996 FOI Memoranda can be found on the National Library of Australia's TROVE website: [17 Mar 2012 - Freedom of Information Guidelines - Trove](#).

where an applicant makes FOI requests across several Commonwealth and State agencies.

- 3.94 As noted at [3.91] above, s 26A(2) of the FOI Act provides that an agency or minister cannot decide to give access to a document unless consultation with a State has taken place in accordance with the arrangements entered into under s 26A of the FOI Act. To avoid confusion as to whether consultation has taken place if a State does not respond to the consultation notice, agencies and ministers are advised to include in the consultation notice a due date for response and advice to the effect that if no response is received it will be assumed the State has no objection to release of the document, and that a decision may be made on that basis.
- 3.95 The consultation requirements in relation to documents that are business documents (s 27) or documents affecting personal privacy (s 27A) only require an agency or minister to undertake consultation if it is reasonably practicable to give that person a reasonable opportunity to make submissions in support of the exemption contention (ss 27(5) and 27A(4)). In determining whether it would be reasonably practicable to consult, the agency or minister should have regard to all circumstances, including the time limits for processing the request.
- 3.96 Where an agency or minister is required to consult a third party:
- the timeframe for making a decision is extended by 30 days (s 15(6))
 - the agency or minister must give the third party a reasonable opportunity to make submissions in support of the exemption contention (ss 27(4)(a) and 27A(3)(a))
 - any submissions by the third party must be considered (ss 27(4)(b) and 27A(3)(b))
 - the third party must be given notice of the decision and their review rights (ss 27(6) and 27A(5)) and
 - the FOI applicant will only be given access to a document when the third party's opportunities for review have run out (ss 27(7) and 27A(6)).
- 3.97 The extension of the processing period by 30 days referred to in s 15(6) does not apply to internal review or IC review. Where an agency identifies, during an internal review, a need to consult a third party who had not previously been consulted, the timeframe for processing the internal review request is not extended.
- 3.98 If an affected third party does not agree that the FOI applicant should be given access to a document, the agency or minister should explain to the third party that a submission⁴⁵ must be made in support of the exemption contention before the third party's review rights will apply.⁴⁶ If the third party does not make a submission in support of the exemption contention, the agency or minister is not required to provide written notice of the decision to the third party, nor is the agency or minister required to wait until the third party's review rights have expired before providing access to the document to the FOI applicant (ss 27(8) and 27A(7)).
- 3.99 If a third party is consulted, they should be told that if a response is not received within the time specified the agency or minister may proceed to make an access grant decision.

⁴⁵ Submission' is not defined in the FOI Act. However, any submission should support the exemption contention to which the third party was consulted in accordance with ss 27 and 27A.

⁴⁶ For more information about third party review rights, see the OAIC website: [Personal and business information: third-party review rights | OAIC](#).

- 3.100 When consulting a third party, the agency or minister should frame the consultation notice in a way that does not suggest a response. The onus should be placed on the third party to frame their own response and provide their own reasons for contending that the relevant exemption applies. For example, this can be done by asking questions such as ‘do you object to disclosure of the document, and why?’, rather than framing the question in a way that invites a particular response, such as ‘do you agree that disclosure of the document would cause damage to your business?’.
- 3.101 The third party should also be made aware that the agency or minister is generally required to publish documents that are released in response to an FOI request unless an exception to the publication requirement applies (see [Part 14](#) of these Guidelines). Agencies should also be mindful when consulting third parties that consultation is undertaken in accordance with the Privacy Act and that the FOI applicant’s personal information is not provided to the third party without the FOI applicant’s consent.
- 3.102 More information on consultation with third parties is in [Part 6](#) of these Guidelines.

Decisions on requests for access to documents

Principles of good decision making under the FOI Act

- 3.103 The public expects agencies and ministers to act fairly, transparently and consistently in their administrative decision making and to be accountable for the decisions they make. The quality of decisions under the FOI Act is particularly important given the integral role FOI requests can have in securing open government.
- 3.104 Decisions made under the FOI Act must be consistent both with the requirements of the FOI Act and with general principles of good decision making. Those general principles are explained in 5 best practice guides published by the Administrative Review Council (ARC).⁴⁷ The ARC issued new guidance in the form of a Best Practice Guide: Statements of Reasons which should inform the reasons for decisions provided by agencies and ministers.⁴⁸ That guidance contains references to decision making under the FOI Act. This Part discusses how the ARC guidance and principles are relevant to decisions made under the FOI Act.
- 3.105 In summary, as the ARC guides explain, the general principles require that:
- decisions are lawfully made
 - procedural fairness is observed (ss 15(3), 15(5), 24AB and 29(1))
 - decisions are based on findings of fact (s 26(1)(a))
 - reasons are given for decisions (s 26(1))
 - people directly affected by administrative decisions are informed of their review rights (s 26(1)(c)).

⁴⁷ See ARC *Best Practice Guides*, at [Administrative Review Council publications | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#).

⁴⁸ See [Best Practice Guide: Statements of Reasons](#), 8 August 2025.

Lawfulness

General principle

3.106 A decision that is made under legislation must conform to the requirements of the legislation and be made by an authorised decision-maker. This requirement is explained in further detail in the ARC Best Practice Guide No 1, *Decision Making: Lawfulness*.⁴⁹

Decision making under the FOI Act

3.107 The FOI Act specifies in detail how decisions are to be made and the criteria and principles on which decisions are to be based. For example, the FOI Act specifies:

- the agencies and documents to which the FOI Act applies
- the procedure for making and notifying decisions on FOI requests
- the documents to which access may be refused.

These FOI provisions are discussed below and in other Parts of these Guidelines.

3.108 Decision making under the FOI Act must take into account the objects in s 3 of the FOI Act. As discussed in further detail in [Part 1](#) of these Guidelines, the objects embody a policy — or presumption — of open government that is relevant to all FOI decision making. This is emphasised in s 3(4), which states Parliament’s intention ‘that functions and powers given by this Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost’.

3.109 Another specific object, stated in s 3A, is that agencies and ministers retain an administrative discretion (subject to other legislation) to provide access to information and documents other than under the FOI Act.

3.110 Decision-makers must also have regard to these Guidelines when making decisions under the FOI Act (s 93A). The Guidelines are not a legislative instrument (s 93A(3)) and, by contrast with the provisions of the FOI Act, do not have binding force. However, it is well established that decision-makers should, at a minimum, have regard to the Guidelines in discharging powers and functions under the FOI Act.⁵⁰

Authorised decision-makers

3.111 The FOI Act specifies that a decision relating to an FOI request made to an agency may be made by the responsible minister or the principal officer of the agency, or by officers who are properly authorised (s 23(1)).

3.112 FOI instruments authorising staff to make decisions under s 23 of the FOI Act should be in writing. FOI authorising instruments must be published on an agency’s website because they fall within the definition of ‘operational information’ in s 8A(1) of the FOI Act and so

⁴⁹ Available at: [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 1 - Lawfulness | Attorney-General's Department](#).

⁵⁰ With respect to FOI decision-makers and the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART) in *Francis and Department of Defence* [2012] AATA 838, applied in *Bradford and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)*. The AAT explained that FOI decision-makers (including members of the Tribunal reviewing FOI decisions) should ‘apply the Guidelines unless there is a cogent reason to do otherwise’. However, in *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 945, the AAT noted that insofar as the second level of external merits review, s 93A of the FOI Act only requires the AAT to ‘have regard’ to the FOI Guidelines, and in having regard to the FOI Guidelines, the AAT must be tempered by its obligation to make correct decisions under the FOI Act. In *Utopia Financial Services Pty Ltd and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 269, it was further explained that the AAT is only required to have regard to the FOI Guidelines to the extent that they are consistent with the functions and powers conferred on it by the FOI Act.

should be included on an agency's IPS entry. Officers should confirm that they are authorised before making a decision in response to an FOI request.

- 3.113 Where all FOI decisions are made by the agency head, this needs to be stated on the agency's website so that it is clear staff are not authorised to make decisions in response to FOI requests.
- 3.114 A decision on an FOI request made to a court may be made by the principal officer, or an officer acting within their scope of authority (s 23(2)).
- 3.115 Agencies should ensure a sufficient number of officers are authorised at appropriately senior levels to make both original and internal review decisions. The capabilities and work level standards of APS employees may assist agencies to ensure they authorise officers who have the necessary skills.⁵¹
- 3.116 A decision made in response to a request to a minister may be made by the minister personally, or by someone the minister has authorised to act on their behalf, which may be either a member of their staff or an officer of an agency. It would be prudent for a minister to make an authorisation in writing, because the FOI decision will be a decision of the minister, not the person acting on the minister's behalf.⁵²
- 3.117 Authorised officers may obtain assistance from other officers and take advice and recommendations into account, but they are nevertheless responsible for reaching an independent decision and exercising any discretion.⁵³

Procedural fairness

General principle

- 3.118 A decision that directly affects the rights or interests of a person or organisation must be made in accordance with the principles of natural justice (also known as procedural fairness). The decision-maker is required to follow a fair decision-making process, complying with the 'bias rule' and the 'hearing rule'. These requirements are explained in further detail in the ARC Best Practice Guide No 2, *Decision Making: Natural Justice*.⁵⁴
- 3.119 The bias rule requires a decision-maker to be impartial and have no personal stake in the decision to be made. The decision-maker must be free of both actual and apparent bias, that is, of conduct that might appear to a fair-minded observer to affect their impartiality in reaching a decision.⁵⁵ For example, a fair minded observer may perceive there to be a conflict of interest if a person who made an administrative decision affecting the FOI requestor's rights was also to make a decision on an FOI request seeking access to documents relating to that administrative decision.
- 3.120 The hearing rule requires that a person who could be adversely affected by a decision be notified that a decision may be made and is given an opportunity to express their views

⁵¹ For more information about these standards see the Australian Public Service Commission's website at www.apsc.gov.au.

⁵² For further information about ministerial decision making see [2.40]-[2.41] of these Guidelines ([Part 2: Scope of application of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 | OAI](#)).

⁵³ See ARC Best Practice Guide No 1, *Decision Making: Lawfulness* 2007 at p 6 available at [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 1 - Lawfulness | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#).

⁵⁴ Available at: [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 2 - Natural Justice | Attorney-General's Department](#).

⁵⁵ *Ebner v Official Trustee in Bankruptcy* [2000] HCA 63; (2000) 205 CLR 337.

before that occurs.⁵⁶ The nature of this ‘notice and comment’ procedure can vary from one decision or context to another. The minimum requirement, however, is that a person should be given sufficient information and a reasonable opportunity to comment, to ensure that procedural fairness is upheld.

The bias rule and FOI decision making

3.121 The bias rule is relevant to all decision making under the FOI Act. Two examples of where caution is needed are:

- An authorised FOI decision-maker who knows an FOI applicant personally, especially if there is a close or social relationship. Generally, a decision-maker is not prevented from making a decision by reason only of previous contact with an FOI applicant in the context of their work, which may be a regular occurrence in some agencies.
- An authorised FOI decision-maker should exercise care in making decisions about material or documents they have been personally involved with, or had oversight of. In some situations it may be more appropriate that another authorised FOI decision-maker decide the FOI request.

3.122 An FOI decision-maker must approach each decision with an open mind and, for example, consider any submission made by an FOI applicant as to why a document is not exempt or a charge should be reduced. Generally, a decision-maker is not prevented from making a decision by reason of having dealt previously with a similar issue or applicant, or having expressed a view about FOI Act principles or requirements.

3.123 The Australian Public Service Commission has issued guidance to assist agencies to identify and manage conflicts of interest.⁵⁷

The hearing rule and FOI decision making

3.124 The FOI Act specifies in detail the procedure to be followed in making decisions on FOI requests. For example, agencies and ministers :

- are required to provide reasonable assistance to persons to make FOI requests (s 15(3)) (this subsection does not apply to ministers)
- must notify an FOI applicant that an FOI request has been received (s 15(5))
- must give an applicant a reasonable opportunity to revise a request before it is refused for a practical refusal reason (s 24AB)
- must allow an applicant to respond before a charge is imposed (s 29)
- must provide the applicant with a written statement of reasons for the decision (s 26)
- must advise the applicant of their right to seek internal review or IC review of an adverse decision (s 26(1)(c)).

3.125 The FOI Act also specifically recognises the rights of third parties to be consulted about the release of documents that affect their interests in certain circumstances (ss 26A, 27 and 27A — see [Part 6](#) of these Guidelines).

⁵⁶ *Kioa v West* [1985] HCA 81; (1985) 159 CLR 550; see also ARC Best Practice Guide No 2, *Decision Making: Natural Justice* 2007, p 1 available at [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 2 - Natural Justice | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#).

⁵⁷ Available at www.apsc.gov.au.

- 3.126 A person who disagrees with a decision on access to documents, or amendment or annotation of personal records, has the right to apply for internal review by the agency (internal review is not available if the decision was made personally by the principal officer of the agency or the responsible minister (s 54(1)), as long as the application is made within the relevant statutory timeframes (see [Parts 9](#) and [10](#) of these Guidelines). The review processes provide an opportunity for an affected person to be heard, and to that extent, for natural justice to be observed.

Facts and evidence

General principle

- 3.127 An administrative decision must be based on facts. A central obligation of a decision-maker is therefore to identify and separate the ‘material questions of fact’; gather and assess information or evidence to support each finding of fact; and explain how each finding of fact was reached. These requirements are explained in further detail in the ARC Best Practice Guide No 3, *Decision Making: Evidence, Facts and Findings*.⁵⁸
- 3.128 A material question of fact is one that is necessary to a decision — or, put another way, the existence or non-existence of the fact can affect the decision to be made. Legislation will ordinarily set out the factual matters that must be considered, but sometimes these will be present more by implication than by direct legislative statement.
- 3.129 The obligation rests on a decision-maker to be reasonably satisfied that a finding of fact can or cannot be made on the available evidence. Unless legislation states otherwise, there is no onus or burden on a party to prove that a fact does or does not exist. In discharging the obligation to be reasonably satisfied, the decision-maker may have to draw inferences from the available evidence or information known to the decision-maker. The evidence should be logically capable of supporting the decision-maker’s findings of fact.

Fact finding in FOI decision making

- 3.130 The obligation on FOI decision-makers to base each decision on facts is captured in s 26(1)(a). The statement of reasons for a decision to refuse or defer access to a document ‘shall state the findings on any material question of fact, referring to the material on which those findings were based, and state the reasons for the decision’ (see below [3.281]—[3.291] below).
- 3.131 The FOI Act specifies the material facts that must be examined in deciding whether to grant access to documents in response to an FOI request. Similarly, it is implicit in many provisions of the FOI Act that findings, including inferences from known facts, may need to be made. The following examples are illustrative:
- a material fact in considering whether a document is exempt under s 33(a)(ii) is whether release of the document would cause damage to the defence of the Commonwealth
 - a material fact in considering whether a document is exempt under s 34 is whether the document was created for the dominant purpose of consideration by Cabinet

⁵⁸ Available at [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 3 - Evidence Facts and Findings | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#).

- in making a decision about release of documents, it is implicit that the decision-maker must first make findings about the scope of the request and the documents in the agency's possession that fall within that scope
- in deciding whether payment of a charge would cause financial hardship to an applicant (s 29(5)(a)), a decision-maker may need to consider the financial position of an applicant, including, for example, whether the applicant receives income support.

3.132 It follows from the above, that a decision-maker must search for and consider all relevant documents within the scope of the request before deciding that the documents are exempt from disclosure. To decide that the documents are exempt based on the type of document requested does not accord with administrative law principles (unless s 25 applies – see [3.181]–[3.191] below).⁵⁹

3.133 The standard principle in administrative proceedings — that no party bears the onus of proof, and the decision-maker must be reasonably satisfied of the matters to be decided — does not apply to IC reviews (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).

Reasons

General principle

3.134 Members of the public are entitled to know the reasons why an administrative decision that affects them has been made. Giving reasons promotes fairness, transparency and accountability. It gives the person affected by the decision the opportunity to have the decision explained and to seek review if they wish. This fundamental theme in administrative law and good decision making is explained further in the ARC *Best Practice Guide No 4, Decision Making: Reasons*.⁶⁰

3.135 The stated reasons should be meaningful and accurate, setting out what the decision-maker considered and why, including addressing arguments put to the decision-maker. Providing good statements of reasons can lead to greater acceptance of decisions by FOI applicants, with a corresponding reduction in complaints and applications for review.

Reasons under the FOI Act

3.136 Section 26 of the FOI Act requires an applicant to be given the reasons for a decision to refuse or defer access to a document. Section 26 specifies the matters that must be included in the statement of reasons, including the findings on material questions of fact, the public interest factors taken into account in applying a conditional exemption, the name and designation of the agency officer making a decision, and information about the applicant's review rights.

3.137 Under s 55E of the FOI Act in an IC review of an agency's IC reviewable decision, the Information Commissioner has power to require an agency to provide a statement or an adequate statement in compliance with its duty to provide a statement of reasons.

Accountability

General principle

3.138 Decision-makers are accountable for their decisions. There are many different forms of accountability, including political, ethical and legal accountability. The system of

⁵⁹ See also, 'AVD' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information) [2025] AICmr 68 [24]–[26].

⁶⁰ Available at: [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 4 - Reasons | Attorney-General's Department](#).

administrative law ensures both legal accountability and good decision making, through external scrutiny, review and transparency measures. Administrative law accountability is explained in further detail in the ARC Best Practice Guide No 5, *Decision Making: Accountability*.⁶¹

Accountability arrangements under the FOI Act

3.139 The FOI Act contains detailed provisions for review and oversight of FOI decision making by the OAIC (see [Parts 10](#) and [11](#) of these Guidelines). Section 26(1)(c) of the FOI Act requires information to be included in the statement of reasons about the FOI applicant's rights to review and the procedures for exercising those rights, as well as their right to make a complaint to the Information Commissioner. Further, s 26(1)(b) requires an agency decision-maker to state their name and designation in the statement of reasons for decision (for more information about this requirement see [3.283]).

3.140 In response to a request for access to documents under the FOI Act, a decision-maker may decide to:

- refuse to deal with a request that does not meet the formal requirements for a request in s 15 (see [3.33]—[3.35])
- refuse access under s 24A on the basis that the document sought does not exist, cannot be found or was not received from a contractor (see [3.142]—[3.161])
- allow access to all documents as requested, even if some are exempt (s 3A(2)(a))
- refuse access to the requested documents on the basis they are exempt, or refuse access to some documents and give access to others (discussed in [Parts 5](#) and [6](#) of these Guidelines)
- provide access to the personal information of the FOI applicant through a qualified person under s 47F(5) (discussed in [Part 6](#) of these Guidelines)
- delete exempt or irrelevant material from documents and provide access to edited copies under s 22 (see [3.162]—[3.176])
- defer access to the requested documents until a later date under s 21 (see [3.177]—[3.180])
- under s 25 refuse to confirm or deny the existence of a document that would be exempt under s 33, 37(1) or 45A (see [3.181]—[3.191])
- refuse a request under s 24 if a practical refusal reason exists under s 24AA, following a request consultation process (see [3.192]—[3.234])
- impose a charge for processing a request or for access to a document to which a request relates under s 29 (see [Part 4](#) of these Guidelines)
- decline to amend or annotate a record of the FOI applicant's personal information under s 48 (see [Part 7](#) of these Guidelines).

Refusing access to an exempt document

3.141 An agency or minister is not required to give access to a document at a particular time if at that time the document is an 'exempt document' (s 11A(4)). An 'exempt document' is:

⁶¹ Available at: [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 5 - Accountability | Attorney-General's Department](#).

- a document that is exempt or conditionally exempt where disclosure would be contrary to the public interest under Part IV of the FOI Act (see [Parts 5](#) and [6](#) of these Guidelines)
- a document in respect of which an agency, person or body is exempt from the operation of the FOI Act under s 7 (see [Part 2](#) of these Guidelines)
- an official document of a minister that contains some matter that does not relate to the affairs of an agency or of a Department of State (s 4(1)).

Refusing a request for a document that does not exist, cannot be found or is not received from a contractor

3.142 An agency or minister may refuse an FOI request if it has taken ‘all reasonable steps’ to find the document requested and is satisfied the document cannot be found or does not exist (s 24A(1)).⁶² There are 2 elements that must be established before an agency or minister can refuse an FOI request under s 24A:

- the agency or minister must have taken all reasonable steps to find the document and either:
 - o the agency or minister is satisfied that the document is in the agency’s or minister’s possession but cannot be found or
 - o the agency or minister is satisfied that the document does not exist.⁶³

3.143 Although the FOI Act is silent on what constitutes ‘all reasonable steps’, it is not enough for an agency or minister to simply assert that the document cannot be found or does not exist before taking any demonstrable steps to try to find the requested document. Rather, a thorough and systematic search must be undertaken and documented.⁶⁴

3.144 Agencies and ministers should undertake a reasonable search based on a flexible and common-sense interpretation of the terms of the FOI request.⁶⁵ What constitutes ‘all reasonable steps’ will depend on the circumstances of each FOI request and will be influenced by the normal business practices in the agency’s operating environment or the minister’s office.⁶⁶ To ensure reasonable searches are undertaken, agencies and ministers are encouraged to engage with the FOI applicant in relation to the terms of their FOI request.

3.145 ‘Reasonable’ in the context of s 24A(1)(a) has been construed as not going beyond the limits assigned by reason, not extravagant or excessive, moderate and of such an amount, size or number as is judged to be appropriate or suitable to the circumstances or purpose.⁶⁷

⁶² *Cristovao and Secretary, Department of Social Security* [1998] AATA 787 [19].

⁶³ In *Attorney-General (Cth) v Patrick* [2024] FCAFC 126 [60] the Full Federal Court clarified that the words ‘does not exist’ in s 24(1) indicates ‘that the document *does not exist at all*’. The Full Court said there was no need to depart from the ordinary meaning of the words, read in context. As a result, the words ‘does not exist’ in s 16(1) does not cover the situation in which a document is no longer in the possession of the agency or minister.

⁶⁴ *De Tarle and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 770, applying *Re Cristovao and Secretary, Department of Social Security* [1998] AATA 787; (1998) 53 ALD 138.

⁶⁵ In *‘ADN’ and the Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 44 [39]–[41] the FOI Commissioner discussed what would be a ‘reasonable search based on a flexible and common-sense interpretation of the terms of the FOI request’.

⁶⁶ *Chu v Telstra Corporation Limited* [2005] FCA 1730 [35], Finn J: ‘Taking the steps necessary to do this may in some circumstances require the agency or minister to confront and overcome inadequacies in its investigative processes’.

⁶⁷ *De Tarle and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 770, applying *Re Cristovao and Secretary, Department of Social Security* [1998] AATA 787; (1998) 53 ALD 138. See *‘ATM’ and Minister for*

However, where the subject of the requested document falls within the scope of work performed by the agency and records show that work relating to the subject matter of the document has been undertaken, further searches may need to be undertaken if initial searches do not find any documents within scope of the request.⁶⁸

- 3.146 The interpretation of the scope of an FOI request impacts search and retrieval of documents within the scope of the request. It is therefore critical that agencies and ministers fully understand the scope of the FOI request and adopt a reasonable approach to the interpretation of the request, before undertaking a search for relevant documents. See for example, *'ADN' and the Australian Taxation Office*⁶⁹ and *Joshua Badge and Department of Health and Aged Care*.⁷⁰
- 3.147 Agencies and ministers should assist FOI applicants to identify the specific documents they seek. Doing so will facilitate and promote public access to information in accordance with the objects of the FOI Act. If the document still cannot be found, the statement of reasons should:
- sufficiently identify the document
 - explain why the agency or minister is satisfied the document is in the agency's or minister's possession but cannot be found or is known not to exist
 - describe the steps the agency took to find the document
 - note the limitations of any search.
- 3.148 If a record is known to have been, or is likely to have been, destroyed under an agency's Records Disposal Authority, or in the course of normal administrative practice,⁷¹ this should be explained, if possible, with reference to the date of destruction and the agency's records management policy. A record of searches to plan and keep track of the steps taken to find a document will be useful, particularly when managing complex requests for many documents or when later explaining the search undertaken.⁷²

Communications (Freedom of information) [2025] AICmr 15 [16] for discussion of circumstances in which the Freedom of Information Commissioner did not consider the steps taken to be reasonable in all the circumstances, given a reasonable construction of the applicant's FOI request. See also, *'ADN' and the Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 44 [35] in which the FOI Commissioner did not consider that sufficient particulars had been provided to demonstrate that undertaking searches of the relevant server would be extravagant, excessive, or otherwise unreasonable (in the context of the ATO saying those searches may need to be undertaken by a specialist IT officer).

⁶⁸ In *'ATA' and Department of Veterans Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 4 [14] searches for documents within the scope of one part of an FOI request did not result in any documents being found despite the subject matter being an area of significant work for the Department and other documents released to the applicant indicating there would have been multiple project initiatives implemented. In these circumstances the Information Commissioner was not satisfied that the Department had taken reasonable steps to find the requested documents.

⁶⁹ *'ADN' and the Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 44.

⁷⁰ *Joshua Badge and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AICmr 46. For discussion about adopting a reasonable approach to the interpretation of a request see *'ATM' and Minister for Communications (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 15 [15].

⁷¹ Normal administrative practice permits agencies to destroy certain types of records which are not needed to document business decisions or are not significant records of an agency's business. For further guidance see the National Archives of Australia website at www.naa.gov.au [Normal administrative practice \(NAP\)](#) | naa.gov.au.

⁷² The OAIC has developed a checklist and search minute which sets out the steps that an agency or minister should follow to find documents within the scope of an FOI request and the steps taken when searching for documents. [3.151] lists common locations where documents may be found. The checklist and search minute can be found on the OAIC website: ['Taking all reasonable steps to find documents in a freedom of information request'](#).

- 3.149 If applicable, agencies may need to consider whether contractual measures have been taken to ensure the agency receives a document from a contracted service provider⁷³. If an agency or minister has taken contractual measures to obtain a document from a contracted service provider but has not been able to obtain that document after taking all reasonable steps, the agency or minister may refuse the FOI request (s 24A(2)).⁷⁴
- 3.150 As a minimum, an agency or minister should take comprehensive steps to find documents, having regard to:
- the subject matter of the documents
 - the current and past file management systems and the practice of destruction or removal of documents
 - the records management systems in place
 - the individuals within an agency or minister's office who may be able to assist with finding documents and
 - the age of the documents.⁷⁵
- 3.151 The OAIC has developed an agency resource '*Taking all reasonable steps to find documents in a freedom of information request*' to help agencies and ministers undertake effective and reasonable searches for requested documents. Agencies and ministers should search all possible locations for documents.⁷⁶ These locations may include:
- Case Management Systems
 - Records Management Systems (for example TRIM or HPE Content Manager)
 - Electronic documents saved on computers, tablets, smart phones and Apps (for example emails on Outlook, text messages etc)
 - Electronic documents saved on portable media devices
 - Hardcopy files stored in safes, compactus, tambours, desk drawers, etc
 - If applicable, backup systems.
- 3.152 Ensuring that the search is conducted by the officers most likely to be able to find requested documents, rather than the FOI officer, will increase the effectiveness of the search.⁷⁷ Where officers within the agency may have information about the requested documents they should be consulted, and records kept of their advice.⁷⁸ Advising FOI applicants of the

⁷³ Section 6C of the *Freedom of Information Act*.

⁷⁴ For further information about contracted service providers see '[Documents held by government contractors](#)' on the OAIC website.

⁷⁵ '*KE*' and *Cancer Australia* [2016] AICmr 87; *John Singer and Comcare* [2016] AICmr 63; and *De Tarle and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 770, applying *Langer and Telstra Corporation Ltd* [2002] AATA 341.

⁷⁶ For example see '*RN*' and *Department of Veterans' Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 2 [23]–[24].

⁷⁷ In '*RL*' and *Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 74, where the agency's decision to refuse access under s 24A was affirmed, the Information Commissioner said 'the ACQSC ... provided evidence that all documents relating to the applicant's complaint ... are stored in the NCCIMS database. This database, along with others identified by ACQSC as locations where documents are stored, were searched using relevant search parameters. It is also apparent that the ACQSC's FOI officers sought assistance from relevant officers to search for documents within the scope of the request.' See also '*RN*' and *Department of Veterans' Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 2 [15].

⁷⁸ In '*ATA*' and *Department of Veterans Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 4 [16] the Department identified areas that had responsibilities associated with the subject matter of the request. However there was no evidence these areas were

relevant business areas that conducted the searches may assure them that all reasonable steps have been taken to identify and retrieve the documents they seek and to assist in their consideration of whether to accept the agency's or minister's initial decision.⁷⁹

- 3.153 Agencies and ministers are responsible for managing and storing records in a way that facilitates finding them for the purposes of an FOI request.⁸⁰ The steps taken to search for documents should include the use of existing technology and infrastructure to conduct an electronic search of documents, as well as making enquiries of those who may be able to help find the documents.⁸¹
- 3.154 Whether it is necessary for an agency or minister to search its backup systems or physical archives for documents will depend on the circumstances. For example, if the agency is aware that its backup or archive system merely duplicates documents that are easily retrievable from its main records systems, a search of the backup system or archive would be unnecessary. Similarly, if an agency retains its backed-up data for a maximum period of 12 months, and the applicant is seeking documents that are older than 12 months, it will not be necessary to undertake a search of the backup system.⁸²
- 3.155 On the other hand, where an agency has identified the existence of archived documents, with no evidence those documents have been destroyed, reasonable steps will include searching for physical and electronic documents within the scope of the request in those archives, unless doing so would substantially and unreasonably divert the agency's resources from its other operations (s 24).⁸³
- 3.156 However, if an agency or minister is aware that its backup system or archive may contain relevant documents not otherwise available, or if the FOI applicant clearly includes backup systems in their request, a search of the backup system may be required (provided it does not involve a substantial and unreasonable diversion of agency resources, see [3.192]—[3.234]).⁸⁴
- 3.157 However, simply because a requested document is old or historical does not mean that searches do not need to be undertaken (unless records show that the document has been destroyed). For example, a document may have been used in subsequent investigations or audits and may be available given appropriate searches.⁸⁵
- 3.158 Because 'possession' of a document is not limited to actual or physical possession, but can also include constructive possession, where an agency or minister has the right and power to deal with a document, regardless of where and by whom it is stored, the FOI Act may extend

asked for or undertook searches for relevant documents before a decision was made that another area was better placed to find documents. In these circumstances, the Information Commissioner was not satisfied that all reasonable steps had been taken to find the required documents.

⁷⁹ See *'RD' and Comcare (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 61 [13].

⁸⁰ See *Langer and Telstra Corporation Ltd* [2002] AATA 341.

⁸¹ See *Smith and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2016] AATA 531; *'MC' and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 74; *William Yabsley and Australia Post (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 35; *'JG' and Department of Human Services* [2016] AICmr 53; *'JF' and Family Court of Australia* [2016] AICmr 50; *John Singer and Comcare* [2016] AICmr 63; and *John Mullen and Australian Aged Care Quality Agency* [2016] AICmr 51.

⁸² *'HL' and Department of Defence* [2015] AICmr 73.

⁸³ *Trevor Kingsley Ferdinands and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 182 [18]–[21].

⁸⁴ See also, *Trevor Kingsley Ferdinands and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 182 [20]–[21] and *'AOT' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 221 [15]–[17].

⁸⁵ See for example, *'ATA' and Department of Veterans Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 4 [14] in which documents within the scope of the request were held by a business area in relation to an Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) audit.

to records retained on personal devices or communicated through messaging apps.⁸⁶ Further, information created or received by officials is defined as a Commonwealth record for the purposes of the *Archives Act 1983* (s 3(1)) and needs to be handled in accordance with the National Archives of Australia's standards and guidance. This extends to official information sent or received via messaging apps, including disappearing messages.⁸⁷

- 3.159 As a result, agencies and ministers should ensure they have policies and procedures in place to ensure that all 'documents of an agency' and 'official documents of a minister' are not only retained but can be readily searched for and found to satisfy FOI requests. Also, where appropriate, FOI sections should ask staff to search messaging apps to find requested documents.

Advising the FOI applicant of the steps taken to find documents

- 3.160 In their decision, agencies and ministers should explain the steps taken to find documents within the scope of the FOI request, including the dates the searches were conducted, the search parameters used, the time taken to conduct the searches and whether any backup databases were examined.⁸⁸ This explanation will help the FOI applicant understand how searches were conducted and whether there is any merit in seeking further review (internal or IC review). A Search Memo template is available to assist agencies document their searches.⁸⁹ The OAIC template letters include search descriptions to assist agencies and ministers to advise applicants of search measures taken
- 3.161 Providing information describing the historic and current recordkeeping environment and the types of records stored in each electronic database may further assist applicants to see whether all reasonable steps have been taken to locate their documents.⁹⁰

Deleting exempt or irrelevant content from a document

- 3.162 An agency or minister may refuse access to a document on the ground that it is exempt. If so, the agency or minister must consider whether it would be reasonably practicable to prepare an edited copy of the document for release to the applicant, that is, a copy with relevant deletions made (s 22).⁹¹
- 3.163 An agency or minister is under the same obligation to consider preparing an edited copy of a document by deleting information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the FOI request.⁹² It is important for agencies and ministers to keep in mind that the implicit purpose of s 22 is to facilitate access to information promptly and at the lowest reasonable

⁸⁶ See [2.50] of the FOI Guidelines ([Part 2: Scope of application of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 | OAIC](#)) citing *McLeod and Social Security Appeals Tribunal* [2014] AICmr 34 [20]. Further, any record made or received in connection with discharging a minister's ministerial responsibilities is a ministerial record even if it is on a personal device. See National Archives of Australia, [General Records Authority 38](#). The definition of 'Ministerial office' includes all members of staff employed by the Minister.

⁸⁷ See [Managing social media and instant messaging \(IM\) | naa.gov.au](#).

⁸⁸ *Ben Fairless and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 115 [21].

⁸⁹ The search minute template can be found on the OAIC website: ['Taking all reasonable steps to find documents in a freedom of information request'](#).

⁹⁰ See *'RD' and Comcare (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 61 [14].

⁹¹ See also, *Bachelard v Australian Federal Police* [2025] FCAFC 5 [287]-[289].

⁹² *Re Russell Island Development Association Inc and Department of Primary Industries and Energy* [1994] AATA 2; (1994) 33 ALD 683; *Re LJXW and Australian Federal Police and Another* [2011] AATA 187; (2011) 120 ALD 516.

cost through the deletion of information that can readily be deleted, and that an applicant has either agreed, or is likely to agree, is irrelevant to their request.⁹³

- 3.164 In some circumstances, deleting irrelevant information can have advantages for both agencies and ministers and FOI applicants. For example, an agency or minister may not have to consider whether the deleted information is exempt, or if a third party should be consulted. However, it can also increase processing time if large amounts of information need to be deleted. It is also important to note that when access is granted to a document edited under s 22, the decision is reported as a partial access grant when reporting the agency's FOI statistics.⁹⁴
- 3.165 Section 22 does not apply to a document that contains only irrelevant information, which should be treated as beyond the scope of an applicant's FOI request.⁹⁵
- 3.166 In general, it will only be appropriate to delete public servants' names and contact details as irrelevant under s 22 of the FOI Act if the FOI applicant clearly and explicitly states that they do not require this information, either in their FOI request or in subsequent correspondence.⁹⁶ Where it is not apparent from the terms of the FOI request that the names and contact details of staff can be excluded, an agency or minister should not treat this information as irrelevant to the FOI request without first obtaining the consent of the FOI applicant.
- 3.167 It is not appropriate for an agency or minister to assume that the FOI applicant has consented to the exclusion of this information based on agency policy or the applicant's non-response to advice that, unless told otherwise, the agency or minister will treat this information as being irrelevant to the FOI request.⁹⁷
- 3.168 Where the agency or minister has identified general work health and safety risks associated with the disclosure of the names and contact details of their staff, or a particular staff member, the agency or minister should consider asking the FOI applicant whether they seek this information as part of their FOI request. This can be done by phone or email, or by inviting a response from the FOI applicant in the letter acknowledging receipt of the FOI request (under s 15(5)(b)). In any event, processing of the FOI request should not be delayed because of any consultation with the FOI applicant about whether this information can be excluded.
- 3.169 If agencies and ministers adopt a practice of asking FOI applicants whether they wish to exclude this kind of information from the scope of FOI requests, for example, by giving the FOI applicant the option to exclude this information through the use of a check box in an FOI

⁹³ 'FM' and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [2015] AICmr 31 [15].

⁹⁴ Section 31(3) of the *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* states that '**partial access** is granted in respect of a request if either or both of the following conditions are satisfied in relation to the request:

- (a) access was granted to an edited copy (within the meaning of section 22 of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*) of the document (or any of the documents) requested
- (b) the request related to 2 or more documents and access was refused to one or more of the documents.

Relevantly, s 22 of the FOI Act allows agencies to prepare a copy of a document, modified by deletions, to ensure that the edited copy would not disclose any information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request.

⁹⁵ *Nikjoo and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection* [2013] AATA 921 [44].

⁹⁶ 'ZT' and the Department of Home Affairs [2022] AICmr 4 [16]–[19]; *AIN' and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 59 [38].

⁹⁷ 'ZT' and the Department of Home Affairs [2022] AICmr 4 [16]; 'ACQ' and Australian Federal Police (*Freedom of information*) [2022] AICmr 79 [15]–[17]; 'AIJ' and Services Australia (*Freedom of information*) [2024] AICmr 55 [24]–[25], [28], [31]–[32] and *Paul Farrell and Australian Federal Police (No.3) (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 79 [11]–[19].

request form, this practice should be published on the agency's or minister's website to ensure transparency.

- 3.170 Deleting the names and contact details of public servants can increase the time it takes to process an FOI request and may also significantly impact processing time estimates which inform whether processing an FOI request would substantially and unreasonably divert an agency's resources from its other operations, would substantially and unreasonably interfere with the performance of a minister's functions (s 24AA), or impact the calculation of a preliminary assessment or final charge (s 29).
- 3.171 The obligation to prepare an edited copy of a document so that it does not contain exempt or irrelevant information is subject to the following conditions:
- it is possible for the agency or minister to prepare an edited copy of the document (s 22(1)(b))
 - it is reasonably practicable to prepare an edited copy, having regard to the nature and extent of the modification required, and the resources available to modify the document (s 22(1)(c)) and
 - it is not apparent from the applicant's FOI request or consultation with them, that the applicant would decline access to the edited copy (s 22(1)(d)).
- 3.172 Applying these considerations, an agency or minister should take a common sense approach in considering whether the number of deletions would be so many that the remaining document would be of little or no value to the applicant.⁹⁸ Similarly, the purpose of providing access to government information under the FOI Act may not be served if such extensive editing is required that it leaves only a skeleton of the former document that conveys little of its content or substance.⁹⁹ However merely because a document is heavily redacted does not mean it would not be of any interest to the FOI applicant.¹⁰⁰
- 3.173 Consideration should be given to consulting the FOI applicant before deciding to edit a document to delete exempt or irrelevant content. An applicant may be willing to alter the scope of their request to a specific part of the document,¹⁰¹ or to be given administrative access to particular information in the document (see [3.5]–[3.12]).
- 3.174 Care and diligence should be exercised when editing a document to delete exempt or irrelevant content under s 22. Inconsistent editing of a document (for example, deleting information from one page but retaining it on another) compromises the right of access to information.¹⁰² It also creates confusion for FOI applicants, who may be more likely to seek review of the FOI decision.

⁹⁸ *Paul Farrell and Australian Customs and Border Protection Service* [2015] AICmr 52 [28].

⁹⁹ *Paul Farrell and Australian Customs and Border Protection Service* [2015] AICmr 52; '*JL*' and *Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2016] AICmr 58; and *Parnell & Dreyfus and Attorney-General's Department* [2014] AICmr 71.

¹⁰⁰ *Bachelard v Australian Federal Police* [2025] FCAFC 5 [178], [287]–[289]. The decision in *Bachelard* can be contrasted with *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (No. 3) (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 55 [54]–[57] in which the relevant 'documents' were video footage files containing personal information. The Acting Freedom of Information Commissioner considered whether the footage could be edited to remove the personal information, as well as the extent of personal information to be removed. It was found that to prepare an edited copy of the video footage files under s 22, faces, bodies and voices of each individual would have to be obscured. As a result it was not considered to be reasonably practicable to prepare an edited copy because if the footage was edited to remove all the personal information it would leave only a skeleton that would convey little of its content or substance.

¹⁰¹ 'Document' is defined in s 4 of the FOI Act to include 'any part of a document'.

¹⁰² *AJB' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 67 [13].

- 3.175 For the purposes of transparency, when deleting irrelevant or exempt matter from a sound recording it is suggested that a sound be inserted into the section of the recording that has been deleted. This can be a tone or other obvious noise that makes it clear a deletion has been made. This is preferable to leaving a section of the recording without sound, making it difficult for the FOI applicant to identify whether the recording is blank or matter has been deleted. The schedule of documents accompanying the decision should also specify the sound that has been added to identify that matter has been deleted and the basis on which deletion have been made.
- 3.176 If a decision is made to delete or edit exempt or irrelevant matter, an agency or minister must give the FOI applicant notice in writing that the edited copy has been prepared (s 22(3)). This notice must include the grounds for the deletions, including any specific provisions about which matter the agency or minister claims to be exempt was deleted. It is generally helpful to the FOI applicant if the document is marked where text has been deleted and the grounds for the deletion added at the point of deletion. A schedule of documents accompanying the decision which identifies the basis for the deletion (e.g., ‘staff name’) will assist FOI applicants’ understanding of what has been deleted.

Deferring access to a document

- 3.177 Where an agency or minister decides to grant access to a document, they may defer access:
- if publication of the document is required by law — until the expiration of the period within which the document is required to be published (s 21(1)(a))
 - if the document has been prepared for presentation to Parliament or for the purpose of being made available to a particular person or body, or with the intention that it should be so made available — until the expiration of a reasonable period after its preparation for it to be so presented or made available (s 21(1)(b))
 - if the premature release of the document would be contrary to the public interest — until an event occurs or the period of time expires after which the release of the document would not be contrary to the public interest¹⁰³ (s 21(1)(c))
 - if a minister considers that the document is of such general public interest that the Parliament should be informed of the contents of the document before the document is otherwise made public — until the expiration of 5 sitting days of either House of Parliament (s 21(1)(d)).
- 3.178 A decision under s 21 does not empower an agency or minister to defer deciding whether to grant access to requested documents. Rather, it authorises a decision to grant access with deferral of the operation of that decision.¹⁰⁴
- 3.179 The agency or minister must inform the applicant of the reasons for deferring access and, as far as practicable, indicate how long the deferment period will be (s 21(2)).

¹⁰³ For example, see *Robinson and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations* [2002] AATA 715 in which the AAT was not satisfied that release of a submission to the Remuneration Tribunal was contrary to the public interest. See also, *Wellard Rural Exports Pty Ltd and Department of Agriculture* [2014] AICmr 131 in which it was decided that disclosure of the documents at issue might prejudice an investigation. Access to those documents was deferred until the conclusion of the investigation.

¹⁰⁴ Re *Dr Geoffrey W Edelsten and Australian Federal Police* [1985] AATA 350 [35]–[36].

- 3.180 A decision to defer access is an access refusal decision that is reviewable by the Information Commissioner (other than where a minister considers that Parliament should first be informed of the contents of the document) (s 53A(d)).

Refusing to confirm or deny existence of a document

- 3.181 The act of confirming or denying the existence of a document can sometimes cause damage similar to disclosing the document itself. For example, knowing that an agency possesses a particular document, coupled with knowledge that the document could originate from only one source, might disclose a confidential source resulting in the effective loss of important information. Another example could involve a person being able to confirm, through an FOI request refusing access to information about a telephone intercept, that an agency has a current telecommunications interception warrant in connection with a specific telephone service. This would be sufficient warning to a suspect who could modify their behaviour and possibly undermine an investigation into serious criminal activity.
- 3.182 Section 25(2) allows an agency or minister to give an FOI applicant a notice in writing that neither confirms nor denies the existence of a document but instead tells the applicant that, if it existed, such a document would be exempt under ss 33, 37(1), 45A(1), 45A(2) or 45A(3).
- 3.183 Section 25 is not framed as an ‘exception’¹⁰⁵ or an ‘exemption’.¹⁰⁶ It operates in relation to the FOI Act as a whole to protect, in a particular and exceptional way, certain information ‘that the Parliament has specifically identified as meriting protection’.¹⁰⁷
- 3.184 The agency or minister does not have to search for the requested document because a decision as to whether s 25 applies can be made based on the form of the request.¹⁰⁸ Section 25(2) requires only an assessment of whether a document of the kind requested is, or would be, an exempt document under ss 33 (documents affecting national security, defence or international relations), 37(1) (documents affecting enforcement of law and protection of public safety) or 45A (Parliamentary Budget Office documents).¹⁰⁹
- 3.185 In making a decision, the decision-maker must first turn their mind to whether the requested document is of such a kind that it would be an exempt document under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A. A decision-maker must then think about the kind of document that would fall within the scope of the request.¹¹⁰
- 3.186 Subsection 25(2) does not require the agency or minister to determine that the requested document, if it does exist, would be exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A.¹¹¹ Nor does the agency or minister have to consider whether there are, in fact, documents which are exempt under

¹⁰⁵ *Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Ltd* [2010] FCA 1442 [53]; (2010) 191 FCR 573 [53].

¹⁰⁶ *Brooks and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 258 [27].

¹⁰⁷ *Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Ltd* [2010] FCA 1442 [64]; (2010) 191 FCR 573 [64].

¹⁰⁸ *Secretary Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Limited* [2010] FCA 1442 [8]; *Paul Farrell and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 113 [35]. It is important to note that it is only in relation to s 25 that the FOI Act permits a decision to be made without searching for and collating relevant documents. In contrast, a decision under s 26(2) (see [3.190] and [3.191]) can only be made after document searches have been undertaken and it is determined that including information about those documents would make the s 26(1) notice itself an exempt document - see *Secretary Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Limited* [2010] FCA 1442 [60].

¹⁰⁹ *Paul Farrell and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 113 [35].

¹¹⁰ *Paul Farrell and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 113 [36].

¹¹¹ *Brooks and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 258 [29].

ss 33, 37(1) or 45A.¹¹² It is enough that a response confirming or denying the existence of the requested documents would itself be exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A.¹¹³

- 3.187 Agencies and ministers should only use s 25 if they conclude that the notional document referred to in s 25(1) would genuinely give rise to the relevant exemption applying (on the basis that if the notional document referred to in s 25(1) is exempt then the underlying document to which it relates would also be exempt). For the purposes of an IC review, a notice under s 25 is deemed to be notice of a decision to refuse access on the grounds that the document sought is exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A as the case may be (s 25(2)).
- 3.188 Circumstances may arise where a notice under s 25(2) is given after the expiry of the statutory timeframe for notifying the FOI applicant of a decision. When a notice is given under s 25 of the FOI Act, s 25(3)(b) operates to deem the making of a decision to refuse to grant access to the requested document because the document would, if it existed, be an exempt document by virtue of s 33, 37(1) or s 45A of the FOI Act. Such a decision does not indicate, expressly or by implication, whether or not such a document exists. The statutory context in which such a decision arises indicates that no searches have been undertaken. In contrast, a deemed decision under s 15AC(3), being a refusal to give access to a document, may be taken to indicate that such a document exists or does not exist, and therefore giv[ing] information as to the existence or non-existence of [the requested] document' for the purposes of s 25(1). The statutory context suggests that in circumstances where s 15AC(3) has operated to deem a decision to refuse access to the document, and where subsequently the agency invokes s 25 in a valid way (noting that no timeframe is stipulated for the issuing of a s 25 notice) the resulting decision under s 25(3)(b) subsumes the deemed decision under s 15AC(3). Therefore, if the FOI applicant applies for IC review, the IC reviewable decision is the decision made under s 25(3)(b).¹¹⁴ This interpretation is consistent with the Parliamentary intention and the express purpose and operation of s 25(1).¹¹⁵
- 3.189 When a decision is made to refuse access to a document in accordance with a request, agencies and ministers should be careful not to inadvertently disclose in its reasons for decision the existence of a document where that disclosure would reveal exempt matter (s 26(2)).¹¹⁶ The other requirements of a notice under s 26 still apply (see [3.282]–[3.300] below).
- 3.190 As noted above, s 26(2) provides that a notice under s 26 is not required to contain any matter that is of such a nature that its inclusion in a document of an agency would cause that document to be an exempt document. As a result, s 26(2) ensures that any notice of a decision to refuse access does not contain information that is of such a nature that the s 26 notice itself would become an exempt document. Importantly, s 26(2) is not limited in its application to ss 33, s 33A and s 37(1) as s 25 is.¹¹⁷ Any matter that is exempt is not required to be included in a s 26 notice of reasons.¹¹⁸

¹¹² *Brooks and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 258 [30].

¹¹³ *Brooks and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 258 [29]. See also 'ABP' and *Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 51 [18].

¹¹⁴ *Jeremy Kirk and the Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AICmr 61 [6]–[7].

¹¹⁵ *Jeremy Kirk and the Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AICmr 61 [footnote 2 to [6]].

¹¹⁶ *TFS Manufacturing Pty Limited and Department of Health* [2016] AICmr 73.

¹¹⁷ *Secretary, Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Ltd* [2010] FCA 1442 [17]; (2010) 191 FCR 573.

¹¹⁸ *Josh Taylor and the Commonwealth Ombudsman (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 44 [17].

- 3.191 An example where s 26(2) may apply includes where confirming the existence or non-existence of documents relating to a third party would of itself unreasonably reveal personal or business information about that third party

Refusing access when a practical refusal reason exists

- 3.192 An agency or minister may refuse an FOI request if satisfied that a ‘practical refusal reason’ exists. There are of 2 types of practical refusal:

- an FOI request that does not sufficiently identify the requested documents (s 24AA(1)(b))
- the resource impact of processing the FOI request would be substantial and unreasonable (s 24AA(1)(a)).

In both cases, the agency or minister must first follow a ‘request consultation process’ before refusing the request. Further information about the request consultation process can be found at [3.223]—[3.234].

- 3.193 The requirement for an agency or minister to be ‘satisfied’ for the purposes of s 24(1) means that not only must there be a mathematical calculation as to the hours involved in processing the FOI request, but also that the decision-maker genuinely believes that the work involved in processing the request would substantially and unreasonably divert the agency’s resources from its other operations (or unreasonably interfere with the performance of a minister’s functions).¹¹⁹ This means that the decision-maker must feel an actual persuasion that the relevant practical refusal reason exists before refusing the FOI request.

Request does not sufficiently identify documents

- 3.194 One formal requirement for an FOI request is that the FOI request must provide ‘such information as is reasonably necessary to enable a responsible officer of the agency, or the Minister, to identify’ the document that is requested (s 15(2)(b)). This differs from other formal requirements, in that a failure to comply with this requirement is classified by the FOI Act as a ‘practical refusal reason’ for which a request consultation process is required.

- 3.195 An agency or minister should not wait until the practical refusal stage to help an FOI applicant clarify their FOI request.¹²⁰ The following considerations should also be borne in mind before a request consultation process is commenced:

- An FOI request can be described quite broadly and must be read fairly by an agency or minister, being mindful not to take a narrow or pedantic approach to its construction.¹²¹
- An FOI applicant may not know exactly what documents exist and may describe a class of documents, for example, all documents relating to a particular person or subject matter; all documents of a specified class that contain information of a particular kind; or all documents held in a particular place relating to a subject or person. Where the FOI applicant has requested a class of documents it may be useful for the agency or minister to explain to the applicant the information that is contained in those

¹¹⁹ ‘ACW’ and Australian National Maritime Museum (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 4 [14].

¹²⁰ Agencies have a duty to take reasonable steps to assist a person make an FOI request that complies with the formal requirements of ss 15(2) and 15(2A) (s 15(3)).

¹²¹ Re Anderson and AFP [1986] AATA 79; ‘BI’ and Professional Services Review [2014] AICmr 20.

documents because this may assist them narrow the scope of their FOI request to a specific set of documents, resulting in less time spent processing irrelevant matter.

- Although a request under the FOI Act must be for ‘documents’ rather than ‘information’, an FOI request may be phrased with reference to the information that a document contains. This may be an effective and concise way for an FOI applicant to identify documents.
- An FOI request does not need to quote a file or folio number.

3.196 The ‘Note’ to s 15(3) makes it clear that an agency or minister may refuse to deal with an FOI request that does not meet the formal requirements in s 15(2) (in this case, the identification requirements in s 15(2)(b)) only if satisfied that a practical refusal reason exists after undertaking a request consultation process. Failure to satisfy s 15(2)(b) is a practical refusal ground in s 24AA(1)(b). As a result, agencies cannot refuse to deal with an FOI request on the basis that it is invalid because it does not meet the identification requirements in s 15(2)(b) – they must undertake a request consultation process under s 24AB before doing refusing the access sought.¹²²

Resource impact of processing a request would be substantial and unreasonable

3.197 A ‘practical refusal reason’ exists if:

- in the case of an agency — the work involved in processing the FOI request would substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the agency from its other operations (s 24AA(1)(a)(i))
- in the case of a minister — the work involved in processing the request would substantially and unreasonably interfere with the performance of the minister’s functions (s 24AA(1)(a)(ii)).

3.198 An important similarity in both tests (for agencies and for ministers) is that they require consideration of whether processing an FOI request would have both a ‘substantial’ and an ‘unreasonable’ effect.

3.199 Another similarity between the 2 tests is that the FOI Act specifies the same non-exhaustive list of matters that must be considered, as well as matters that cannot be considered. An important textual difference between the tests is that for agencies it is whether a request would divert an agency’s resources from its other operations whereas for ministers it is whether a request would interfere with the performance of the Minister’s functions.¹²³ This means that different considerations may arise in applying the tests.

3.200 In deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists, an agency or minister must have regard to the resources required to perform the following activities specified in s 24AA(2):

- identifying, locating or collating documents within the filing system of the agency or office of the minister
- examining the documents
- deciding whether to grant, refuse or defer access

¹²² See for example, *‘AUC’ and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 34.

¹²³ *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 [14].

- consulting with other parties¹²⁴
- redacting exempt material from the documents
- making copies of documents
- notifying an interim or final decision to the applicant.

3.201 Other matters that may be relevant in deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists include:¹²⁵

- the staffing resources available to an agency or minister for FOI processing
- whether processing the request requires the specialist attention of a minister or senior officer, or can only be undertaken by one or more specialist officers in an agency who have competing responsibilities
- the impact that processing a request may have on other work in an agency or minister's office, including FOI processing
- whether the FOI applicant has cooperated in framing a request to reduce the processing workload
- whether there is a significant public interest in the documents requested
- other steps taken by an agency or minister to publish information of the kind requested by the applicant
- as to a request to a minister — other responsibilities of the minister and demands on the minister's time, and whether it is open to the minister to obtain assistance from an agency in processing the request.

3.202 The FOI Act also specifies matters that an agency or minister must not have regard to in deciding if a practical refusal reason exists:

- any reasons that the FOI applicant gives for requesting access
- the agency's or minister's belief as to the FOI applicant's reasons for requesting access
- any maximum amount, specified in the regulations, payable as a charge for processing a request of that kind (s 24AA(3)).

3.203 Not all of the matters identified in the paragraphs above will be relevant in all cases in which a practical refusal decision is being considered. As noted in the IC review decision of *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre*,¹²⁶ the need to consult affected third parties under ss 27 and 27A will not arise if the agency or minister has already decided that a document, or part of a document, is exempt from disclosure.¹²⁷ As a result, in such cases it will not be appropriate to include the time that it would take to consult third parties when calculating the resources needed to process an FOI request for the purpose of deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Consultation is only required if a consultation requirement arises under the FOI Act. Including consultation in an agency's or minister's estimate of time if the requirement to do so does not arise under the FOI Act would defeat the purposes of the FOI Act. See *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 [15].

¹²⁵ See *Davies and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2013] AICmr 10; *Fletcher and Prime Minister of Australia* [2013] AICmr 11; and *Langer v Telstra Corporation Ltd* [2002] AATA 341.

¹²⁶ *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 6 [25]–[31].

¹²⁷ *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 6 [26]–[27].

¹²⁸ *Chris Drake and Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 6 [31].

- 3.204 Whether consultation is needed will depend on the information contained in the requested documents. Where the third-party information is limited and generalised it may be that staff with knowledge of the subject matter can adequately assess whether an exemption applies from reviewing the documents (without third party input).¹²⁹
- 3.205 The evident purpose of the practical refusal ground is to ensure that the capacity of agencies and ministers to discharge their usual functions is not undermined by processing FOI requests that are unreasonably large or complex. On the other hand, it is implicit in the objects of the FOI Act that agencies and ministers must ensure appropriate resources are allocated to deal with FOI requests. This may include assigning additional temporary resources to handle an increase in the number or complexity of requests, or to overcome inadequate administrative procedures. Poor record keeping or inefficient filing systems will not of themselves be grounds for a claim that processing an FOI request would involve a substantial and unreasonable diversion of resources.¹³⁰ Similarly, although a broadly worded request is more likely to constitute an unreasonable diversion of resources than a request that is narrowly focused,¹³¹ the fact that a large number of documents are within the scope of a request may not be determinative if the documents can be easily identified, collated and assessed.
- ‘Substantially’
- 3.206 The first element to consider when deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists is whether the work involved in processing the FOI request would ‘substantially’ divert the resources of agency from its other operations or ‘substantially’ interfere with the performance of a minister’s functions.
- 3.207 The word ‘substantial’ is not defined in the FOI Act and therefore should bear its ordinary meaning ‘of ample or considerable amount, quantity, size, etc’.¹³²
- 3.208 Whether a practical refusal reason exists will be a question of fact in the individual case. Bearing in mind the range of matters that must and can be considered (see [3.200]–[3.202]), it is not possible to specify an indicative number of hours of processing time that would be ‘substantial’ for the purpose of a practical refusal reason. Agencies should not adopt a ‘ceiling’ in relation to processing time. For example, deciding that a practical refusal reason exists if the estimated processing time exceeds 40 hours.¹³³ Rather, each FOI request should be assessed on its own merits and the findings in individual ART and IC review decisions which discuss estimated processing times should be viewed in that light.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ See for example, *Josh Taylor and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 164 [18].

¹³⁰ See *‘AP’ and Department of Human Services* [2013] AICmr 78 [38]; and *Paul Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 116 [38].

¹³¹ *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Health and Ageing* [2013] AICmr 49 [35] and *‘AMT’ and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 170.

¹³² Macquarie Dictionary Online.

¹³³ *Aloysia Brooks and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 66.

¹³⁴ For examples of relevant factors in IC review and AAT/ART decisions affirming practical refusal reasons see: *Tate and Director, Australian War Memorial* [2015] AATA 107 (estimate of 150 hours to process a request of 1,003 pages in the context of a small agency with one staff member available as an FOI resource and assigning staff from other areas of the agency to assist with processing the request would effectively mean that resources would be diverted from important priority operations and projects); *‘FF’ and Australian Taxation Office* [2015] AICmr 25 (estimate of 94.16 hours to process a request of approximately 6,500 pages); *Gurjit Singh and Attorney-General’s Department* [2015] AICmr 20 (estimate of 74 hours to process a request of 1800 pages where the documents sought related to a financial grant to a University and processing the request would not cast light on a decision that had a significant personal impact on the applicant). For examples of relevant factors where practical refusal reasons were set aside see: *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 (estimate of 228–630 hours to process a request for the Attorney-General’s diary was found to be

- 3.209 An estimate of processing time is only one consideration to be taken into account when deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists.¹³⁵ It is recommended that agencies and ministers examine a sample of the documents to assess the complexity of the material to determine whether the work involved in processing the request would constitute a substantial and unreasonable diversion of resources from the agency's other operations or would substantially and unreasonably interfere with the performance of a minister's functions. The sample needs to be large enough for it to be representative of the documents within the scope of the request.¹³⁶ Previous guidance has been to the effect that a representative sample of between 10 to 15% of the documents¹³⁷ is appropriate for the purposes of calculating processing time when deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists.¹³⁸ However a representative sample may be smaller than this in certain circumstances, for example where the number of documents within scope of the request is very large and a 10% sample may not be practicable.¹³⁹ A person with appropriate knowledge or expertise should assess the sample, looking at each document as if they were making a decision on access, including by indicating the number of documents that could be released in an edited form.¹⁴⁰ The assessment of the sample will provide an indication of the complexity of the potential decision, that is, the number of exemptions required, the topic and content of the documents, the number of consultations required, and the effort required to contact third parties based on available contact details.¹⁴¹
- 3.210 It is nevertheless expected that an agency or minister will provide a breakdown of the time estimated for each stage in processing an FOI request. As discussed in [Part 4](#) of the Guidelines, a commonly used tool for estimating processing time is a 'charges calculator'. Some versions of charges calculators contain a number of predetermined parameters based on assumptions as to how long an FOI request should take to process. However, agencies should interpret the information used in charges calculators within the context of their own agency — how long does it usually take to search for documents given the systems and storage options used within the agency? Agencies should be mindful that the use of a 'charges calculator' with these predetermined parameters only provides a rough estimate of

unrealistic as there was no rational basis upon which it could appear that every person named in the diary might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention for the purposes of consultation under ss 27 and 27A); *JH' and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2016] AICmr 55 (where the agency was willing to process a separate but identical request in exchange for a charge, they would not be able to continue to claim that a practical refusal reason exists); *Paul Farrell and Prime Minister of Australia (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 44 (where it was not established that the documents were sufficiently complex or voluminous to justify the existence of a practical refusal reason).

¹³⁵ *'JC' and Department of Health* [2016] AICmr 47; and *'FX' and Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 39.

¹³⁶ *Cash World Gold Buyers Pty Ltd and Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 20 [30].

¹³⁷ Where the number of documents is not high, it may be appropriate for a sample of more than 20% of the documents be conducted. See *Paul Farrell and Prime Minister of Australia (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 44 where the sample size used for estimating processing time was small and the Information Commissioner was not satisfied that the estimated processing time was reasonable.

¹³⁸ *'GD' and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 46; *Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection (No. 2)* [2014] AICmr 121; *'DC' and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 106; *'AP' and Department of Human Services* [2013] AICmr 78.

¹³⁹ *Cash World Gold Buyers Pty Ltd and Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 20 [30].

¹⁴⁰ *Paul Farrell and Prime Minister of Australia (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 44 [25].

¹⁴¹ See *Paul Farrell and Prime Minister of Australia (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 44 [26].

how long FOI decision-making will take and is not suitable for estimating the processing time for the purposes of a practical refusal decision.¹⁴²

- 3.211 Agencies and ministers should also take care to ensure estimates of the number of documents within the scope of the request are accurate and that their calculations are correct. Agencies and ministers need to ensure that their estimates of processing time reflect the actual processing time, based on the actual documents within scope of the request.¹⁴³ Agencies and ministers should also keep records of the searches conducted so they are able to verify that their estimate of the number of documents is correct (in their statement of reasons and, when required, on internal and IC review).

‘Unreasonably’

- 3.212 As well as specifying that the work involved in processing an FOI request must be substantial, s 24AA(1) requires the work involved in processing the request to either unreasonably divert an agency’s resources from its other operations, or to unreasonably interfere with the performance of a minister’s functions, for a practical refusal reason to exist.
- 3.213 An agency or minister’s decision to rely on s 24 to refuse access to documents for a practical refusal reason is discretionary. In considering whether the work involved in processing a request would involve an unreasonable diversion of resources, agencies and ministers need to balance the objects of the FOI Act, which are to make documents and information available to the public so there can be increased public participation leading to better-informed decision-making, and increased scrutiny and review of the government’s activities, against the public interest in ensuring that government functions effectively and efficiently.¹⁴⁴
- 3.214 There may be circumstances where processing an FOI request would have a substantial effect on the agency or minister, but that effect may not necessarily be unreasonable in the circumstances. For example, an agency that is particularly large may not necessarily find the processing of an FOI request to be unreasonable, even though processing the request would have a substantial effect on the agency. Such agencies are likely to have dedicated resources to ensure they can appropriately handle requests and thereby reduce the impact of processing the request on other business areas of the agency through the establishment of a permanent FOI team, as well as by assigning additional temporary resources to handle peaks in the number or complexity of FOI requests.¹⁴⁵
- 3.215 In *Farrell; Chief Executive Officer, Services Australia and (Freedom of information)*,¹⁴⁶ the AAT did not accept that the work involved in processing an FOI request would substantially and unreasonably divert Services Australia’s resources from its other operations. While the AAT

¹⁴² *Cash World Gold Buyers Pty Ltd and Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 20; *‘KT’ and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 15; *‘JC’ and Department of Health* [2016] AICmr 47; and *Rita Lahoud and Department of Education and Training* [2015] AICmr 41.

¹⁴³ See for example, *‘ANO’ and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 197 [18] in which the Department’s calculations were incorrect and did not reflect the work that would be needed to process the request (a 109 page document was listed 8 times with the same estimate of time to examine, redact and consult each of the 8 documents, when no additional time was needed to examine, redact and consult with respect to the 7 copies). See also, *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (No. 6) (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 184; *Diane Lee and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (No. 2) (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 179; and *‘AMX’ and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 177.

¹⁴⁴ *Morgan and Australian Building and Construction Commissioner* [2020] AATA 651.

¹⁴⁵ *‘AP’ and Department of Human Services* [2013] AICmr 78 [54].

¹⁴⁶ [2020] AATA 2390.

described the resources involved in processing the request as ‘not insignificant’, the Tribunal was satisfied that it was well within the capacity of the agency to process the request given its size and the resources available to it.

- 3.216 Similarly, where there is significant public interest value in the disclosure of the information in the documents, or where an individual has been significantly personally affected by government decisions, the agency or minister may find it difficult to justify that a practical refusal reason exists on the basis that processing the request would have an unreasonable effect on the agency even where the FOI processing burden is substantial.¹⁴⁷

Multiple requests

- 3.217 In deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists, 2 or more FOI requests may be treated as a single request if the agency or minister is satisfied that:

- the requests relate to the same document or documents (s 24(2)(a))
- the subject matter is substantially the same for the requests (s 24(2)(b)).

- 3.218 The most common circumstance in which FOI requests may be combined under s 24(2) is likely to be multiple requests from a single applicant. However, s 24(2) can also apply to 2 or more requests from different applicants. An example is where different applicants made more than 100 requests for documents relating to individual incidents reported on a single spread sheet published on an agency’s disclosure log.¹⁴⁸

- 3.219 Multiple requests can only be combined as a single request under s 24(2) if there is a clear connection between the subject matter of the requested documents. Straightforward examples are where one request is for folios 1–100 of a file, and another request for folios 101–200 on the same file; or where 3 requests relate to 3 different chapters of one report.

- 3.220 When a decision on the FOI request is not made within the statutory processing period, the agency or minister is deemed to have made a decision refusing access. Once there is a deemed refusal decision, it is not open to an agency or minister to combine an FOI request with another under s 24(2).¹⁴⁹

- 3.221 Where multiple FOI requests from different applicants are being treated as a single request, an agency or minister must still follow the request consultation process with each applicant, unless an applicant has agreed to another arrangement. An agency’s or minister’s power to treat 2 or more requests as a single request for the purpose of making a practical refusal reason decision does not override the legally enforceable right of each applicant under s 11 to obtain access to documents in accordance with the FOI Act.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, agencies and ministers are obliged to deal individually with each request that is not withdrawn or revised before the end of the consultation period.

- 3.222 If an FOI applicant requests access to multiple documents, an agency or minister can choose to undertake a practical refusal consultation process in relation to some but not all of the documents, while still processing the remainder of the request.¹⁵¹ But the agency or minister cannot undertake a consultation process in relation to all the requested

¹⁴⁷ See for example, ‘AGN’ and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information) [2024] AICmr 10 [87]–[94].

¹⁴⁸ Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2014] AICmr 74 [3]–[5] and [19].

¹⁴⁹ Paul Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information) [2017] AICmr 116 [9].

¹⁵⁰ Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2014] AICmr 74 [24]–[26].

¹⁵¹ See *Fist and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2014] AICmr 14 [10]–[11].

documents and then, if the applicant does not withdraw or revise the request, unilaterally decide to give access under the FOI Act to some of the requested documents and refuse access to others for a practical refusal reason. It is open to an agency to give administrative access to a document that was part of a request refused for a practical refusal reason, but that decision is not a decision under the FOI Act and FOI review rights do not apply.¹⁵²

Request consultation process

- 3.223 Where an agency or minister considers that a practical refusal may reason exist, they must undertake a request consultation process with the FOI applicant before making a decision to refuse the request (s 24AB).
- 3.224 Before commencing a formal request consultation process, agencies and ministers' offices are encouraged to discuss the request with the FOI applicant. This is often a more efficient way of obtaining further information to help the FOI applicant refine a request that is too large or vague. However, if the FOI applicant cannot be contacted promptly, or the discussion does not elicit information that allows relevant documents to be identified, the request consultation process should be commenced.
- 3.225 The agency or minister must give the applicant a written notice that states:
- an intention to refuse access to a document in accordance with a request
 - the practical refusal reason
 - the name and contact details of an officer with whom the applicant may consult during the process, and details of how the applicant may contact them¹⁵³
 - that the consultation period during which the applicant may consult the contact person is 14 days after the day the applicant is given the notice (s 24AB(2)).
- 3.226 Agencies should also ensure that all the relevant steps specified in s 24AB are followed when undertaking a request consultation process, including by ensuring that the contact person, as far as possible, is available for the entire consultation period specified in the request consultation notice (s 24AB(2)(e)), and by ensuring that the contact person is aware of their obligation to take all reasonable steps to assist the applicant revise their request so that a practical refusal reason no longer exists (s 24AB(3)). Failure to adhere to the requirements in s 24AB amounts to a procedural defect and may invalidate the practical refusal decision.¹⁵⁴ An FOI request should not be treated as withdrawn when the FOI applicant has responded to the request consultation notice in one of the ways outlined in s 24AB(6). That is, where the applicant revises their request or declines to revise their request. A request should only be treated as withdrawn when the applicant explicitly states this, or the applicant fails to consult the contact person or provide a response to the agency or minister during the consultation period (s 24AB(7)).
- 3.227 An agency or minister may wish to state how an FOI applicant is to consult the contact person, for example, by telephone or email. However, agencies should adopt a flexible

¹⁵² See 'AR' and Australian Federal Police [2013] AICmr 80.

¹⁵³ In 'AOR' and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information) [2024] AICmr 219 [12] a request consultation notice was found to be inconsistent with ss 24AB(2)(c) and (d) (name and contact details of contact person and how they may be contacted) because the notice did not name a contact person and as a result did not provide details of how the applicant may contact that person.

¹⁵⁴ See Maria Jockel and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2015] AICmr 70 [31]–[32].

approach. The consultation period may be extended with agreement between the contact officer and applicant, in which case the contact officer must give the applicant written notice of the extension (s 24AB(5)). The request consultation process period is disregarded in calculating the time for making a decision on the request (s 24AB(8)). That is, the request consultation process ‘stops the clock’.

- 3.228 Agencies and ministers are only obliged to undertake a request consultation process once for any particular request (s 24AB(9)). However the fact that an agency or minister has received a revised request does not absolve them of the obligation to undertake ‘reasonable steps’ for the purposes of s 24AB(3) of the FOI Act. As has been discussed in IC review decisions, where an applicant has made a revised request that does not remove a practical refusal reason, the agency may be required to take further steps to satisfy the ‘reasonable steps’ obligation.¹⁵⁵
- 3.229 Where an access refusal decision is deemed to have been made, the agency or minister is still able to process the request and provide a statement of reasons. If a practical refusal reason arises during the processing of the request, but after the decision is deemed to have been made, the agency or minister still needs to follow the consultation process in s 24AB before providing a statement of reasons based on a practical refusal reason.¹⁵⁶ However, the agency or minister cannot use ss 24AB(7) and 24AB(8) of the FOI Act to treat the request as withdrawn if it receives no response from the applicant to its request consultation notice (s 24AB(7)), or to extend the processing period as a result of the request consultation process (s 24AB(8)), because it has already exceeded the statutory timeframe for processing the request. In some instances, agencies have been incorrectly telling FOI applicants in the request consultation notice, where the decision is deemed, that a failure to respond to the agency will be taken as a withdrawal of the FOI request by the applicant.

Assisting the applicant during a request consultation process

- 3.230 If an applicant contacts a contact officer during the consultation period, the contact officer must take reasonable steps to help them revise their request so the practical refusal reason no longer exists (s 24AB(3)). For example, a contact officer could provide a breakdown of the time estimated for each step of the process, explain the difficulties the agency would have dealing with the request and suggest what would be a reasonable request in the circumstances.¹⁵⁷
- 3.231 What constitutes ‘reasonable steps’ to assist the applicant revise their request to remove the practical refusal reason will depend on the factual circumstances. It may include providing a date range to reduce the number of documents within scope, suggesting key words that can be used to undertake electronic searches and pointing to information already publicly available. However, where an applicant revises their request in accordance with suggestions made by the contact officer but the estimate of processing time remains unchanged it may be that the contact person has not taken reasonable steps as required by

¹⁵⁵ *Alcoa of Australia Limited and Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 137 [22] and *Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 22 [40].

¹⁵⁶ See *‘AVQ’ and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2025] AICmr 85 [11]-[15]. In this decision, the agency undertook consultation under s 24AB during an IC review. The steps taken were considered to be reasonable steps that complied with s 24AB.

¹⁵⁷ See *‘AP’ and Department of Human Services* [2013] AICmr 78 [21]-[25]; *Maria Jockel and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 70 [31] and *‘AOR’ and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 219 [13].

s 24AB(3).¹⁵⁸ Similarly, where an applicant adopts the agency's suggestions regarding the scope of their request but the agency continues to maintain that processing the request would involve a substantial and unreasonable diversion of its resources, it may be that the agency has not given the reasonable assistance required to be given under s 15(3) and the request consultation process is invalid.¹⁵⁹

Consultation outcome

3.232 Before the end of the consultation period the applicant must by written notice to the agency or minister:

- withdraw the request
- revise the request or
- indicate that they do not wish to revise the request (s 24AB(6)).

3.233 The request¹⁶⁰ is taken to have been withdrawn if the applicant does not consult the contact person during the consultation period to discuss revising the scope or provide the required written notice during the consultation period (s 24AB(7)). This includes where a verbal agreement is reached with the applicant to revise the request but the applicant does not do so in writing. An agency may choose to transcribe a verbal agreement as to revised scope and send it to the applicant, asking that the applicant confirm in writing that what is written accurately sets out their revised request. The agency may then treat that confirmation as compliance with s 24AB(6). However, if the applicant has taken steps to consult the contact person about revising scope and the agency or minister does not respond, the request is not taken to be withdrawn.

3.234 Where an agency has treated multiple requests as a single request under s 24(2), (see [3.217]–[3.222]), they must deal individually with any requests that have not been withdrawn or revised at the end of the consultation period. This could include refusing any or all of these requests because a practical refusal reason exists.¹⁶¹

Information stored in electronic form

3.235 Section 17 requires an agency to produce a written document of information that is stored electronically and not in a discrete written form, if it does not appear from the request that the applicant wishes to be provided with a computer tape or disk on which the information is recorded.¹⁶² Examples include a transcript of a sound recording, a written compilation of information held across various agency databases, or the production of a statistical report from an agency's dataset. The obligation to produce a written document arises if:

- the agency could produce a written document containing the information by using a 'computer or other equipment that is ordinarily available' to the agency for retrieving

¹⁵⁸ See 'AOR' and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information) [2024] AICmr 219 [13]–[14].

¹⁵⁹ AVN' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information) [2025] AICmr 83 [16]–[18].

¹⁶⁰ Section 4 of the FOI Act provides that a 'request' means an application made under s 15(1). This does not include an application for internal review or IC review.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, Farrell and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2014] AICmr 74 [28]–[30].

¹⁶² For discussion of s 17 not applying because the applicant requested an edited copy of an agency's database rather than a new document containing information from the database, see Diamond and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [2013] AICmr 57 [19]–[22].

or collating stored information (s 17(1)(c)(i)), or making a transcript from a sound recording (s 17(1)(c)(ii)) and

- producing a written document would not substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the agency from its other operations (s 17(2)).

If those conditions are met, the FOI Act applies as if the applicant had requested access to the written document and it was already in the agency's possession.

- 3.236 The reference in s 17 to information recorded on a 'computer tape or disk' should be taken to include information recorded in an email or on electronic storage media.
- 3.237 In *Collection Point Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Taxation* the Full Federal Court held that the 2 conditions specified in [3.235] are distinct and to be applied sequentially.¹⁶³ That is, a computer may not be ordinarily available to an agency even though it could be obtained without an unreasonable diversion of agency resources and, conversely, an agency may encounter an unreasonable diversion of resources to produce a written document using a computer that is ordinarily available.
- 3.238 The Federal Court further held that the reference in s 17(1)(c)(i) to a 'computer or other equipment that is ordinarily available' means 'a functioning computer system including software, that can produce the requested document without the aid of additional components which are not themselves ordinarily available ... [T]he computer or other equipment ... must be capable of functioning independently to collate or retrieve stored information and to produce the requested document.'¹⁶⁴ This will be a question of fact in the individual case, and may require consideration of 'the agency's ordinary or usual conduct and operations'.¹⁶⁵ For example, new software may be ordinarily available to an agency that routinely commissions or otherwise obtains such software, but not to an agency that does not routinely do such things. Similarly, where additional hardware and/or software adaption or creation is required to produce a document that is intelligible, such work may go beyond what s 17 obliges.¹⁶⁶
- 3.239 Applying that test, the Full Federal Court in *Collection Point* held that the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) did not ordinarily have the required software to satisfy the applicant's request to produce a document containing consolidated details of persons listed in 2 unclaimed money registers maintained electronically by the ATO. A new computer program would have to be produced by the ATO to transfer the information from the database into a discrete written format. Accordingly, as new software was necessary to produce the requested document, the ATO was not able to do so by the use of a computer that was ordinarily available to it, and therefore the obligation under s 17(1) did not arise.¹⁶⁷
- 3.240 Having regard to the current strong policy emphasis on digitisation of Australian Government records, agencies are encouraged to develop guidelines and procedures for the

¹⁶³ [2013] FCAFC 67 [39]-[40].

¹⁶⁴ [2013] FCAFC 67 [43]-[44].

¹⁶⁵ [2013] FCAFC 67 [48].

¹⁶⁶ *Stephen Cox and Australian Federal Police* [2015] AICmr 45. However, see the decision '*ANN*' and *Comcare* (*Freedom of information*) [2024] AICmr 196 [25]-[31] in which computer equipment was considered 'ordinarily available' for the purposes of s 17(1)(c)(i) even though the agency was required to create a new Structured Query Language query to retrieve the relevant information from the database.

¹⁶⁷ [2013] FCAFC 67 [53]. See also *Neilson and Secretary, Services Australia* (*Freedom of Information*) [2020] AATA 1435 in which the Tribunal affirmed the agency's decision to refuse to produce a written document pursuant to s 17 of the FOI Act, on the basis that the documents sought were not 'ordinarily available' by reason that access to the documents would involve a departure from the agency's ordinary or usual conduct and operations.

efficient storage and retrieval of information held on servers, hard disks, portable drives and mobile devices. Agencies are encouraged to consult applicants about administrative release on a flexible and agreed basis of information extracted from databases.

- 3.241 As noted at [3.235] above, an agency is not required to produce a written document using a computer or other equipment ordinarily available if doing so would substantially and unreasonably divert the agency's resources from its other operations. This means that the agency must engage in a request consultation process under s 24AB if it intends to refuse the request for a practical refusal reason. However, before taking this step, agencies may choose to engage with the applicant informally, to clarify requests that will require processing under s 17 and suggest ways in which the request can be revised so that it does not substantially and unreasonably divert the agency's resources from its other operations.
- 3.242 The provisions set out at s 17 of the Act apply only to agencies. Ministers and their offices must, however, have regard to s 20 (discussed above at [3.319]–[3.323]) when considering the form of access to be given.

Timeframe for notifying a decision

Default period for requests for access

- 3.243 The obligation on an agency or minister to notify an applicant that a request has been received, and to make and notify a decision on the request within the statutory timeframe, commences on receipt of a request that meets the formal requirements in ss 15(2) and (2A) (see [3.33]). These Guidelines refer to this period as the processing period.
- 3.244 An agency or minister must, as soon as practicable, and within 14 days of receiving an FOI request, take all reasonable steps to enable the applicant to be notified that the request has been received (s 15(5)(a)).¹⁶⁸ This requirement will be met by sending a notice of receipt to the contact address provided by the applicant. The 14-day timeframe commences on the day after the request is received by or on behalf of an agency or minister's office (s 15(5)(a)).
- 3.245 An agency or minister must, as soon as practicable, and no later than 30 days after receiving a request, take all reasonable steps to enable the applicant to be notified of a decision on the request (s 15(5)(b)). The 30-day processing period commences on the day after the day the agency or minister is taken to have received a request that meets the formal requirements of s 15(2) and (2A). Table 2 below sets out the time of receipt.
- 3.246 An agency should act promptly to assist an applicant whose FOI request does not meet the formal requirements in the FOI Act, in keeping with its obligations under s 15(3). If the request does not satisfy the requirement in s 15(2)(b) (identification of documents) the request consultation process in s 24AB needs to be followed.
- 3.247 The processing period refers to calendar days, not business (or working) days. This will include any public holidays,¹⁶⁹ or agency shutdown periods, that fall within the processing period.¹⁷⁰ If the last day for notifying a decision falls on a Saturday, Sunday or a public

¹⁶⁸ A sample acknowledgement letter can be found on the OAIC website: [Sample freedom of information notices | OAIC](#).

¹⁶⁹ This includes public holidays in the State or Territory in which the decision is to be made (see ss 36(2) and (3) of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*).

¹⁷⁰ See [Public holidays and agency shutdown periods: calculating the processing period](#).

holiday, the timeframe for notifying the decision will expire on the first business day following that day.¹⁷¹

3.248 The 30-day processing period does not include:

- the time that an applicant may take in a request consultation process to make a revised request or indicate in writing that they do not wish to revise the request (s 24AB(8))
- the time elapsing between an applicant being notified that a charge is payable and either the applicant paying the charge (or a deposit on account of the charge) or the agency varying the decision that a charge is payable (s 31).

In summary, the time spent on those matters is to be disregarded in calculating the processing period.

3.249 The OAIC has developed a calculator to assist FOI practitioners calculate the period during which they are required to process FOI requests.¹⁷² The calculator takes into account all the factors that may change the default processing period in s 15(5)(b) of the FOI Act.

3.250 In some instances, agencies have incorrectly altered the statutory processing timeframe to commence from the date the scope of the FOI request is clarified with the FOI applicant. Where an agency or minister receives a request that meets the formal requirements of s 15(2), the statutory processing timeframe commences from the next calendar day, regardless of any steps the agency or minister may wish to take to clarify the precise scope of a request with an applicant.

¹⁷¹ *Acts Interpretation Act* s 36. Note: the statutory timeframe of 30 days for processing an FOI request is not extended under s 36, but rather the timeframe to notify the decision is extended to the next business day due to s 36 of the *Acts Interpretation Act* (s 36(2)). A matter which has deemed is a 'state of affairs' that is a criterion relevant to whether an extension of time under s 15AA or 15AB is valid. The decision in [Minister for Immigration and Border Protection v Kumar & Ors](#) ([2017] HCA 11 [25]) provides that s 36(2) of the *Acts Interpretation Act* does not operate to deem a state of affairs that existed on a weekend or public holiday to instead be in existence on the later date. This means that an applicant needs to agree to an extension of time under s 15AA, or the agency needs to apply for an extension of time under s 15AB, on or before the due date (even if that is a Saturday, Sunday or public holiday) because it is only notification of the decision that is taken to be done on the next day that is not a Saturday, Sunday or public holiday.

¹⁷² The FOI processing period calculator is available on the OAIC's website: [Freedom of Information processing period calculator](#) | OAIC.

Table 2: Time of receipt based on mode of delivery

Mode of delivery	Time of receipt (processing period commences on following day)
Pre-paid post to a specified address of the agency or minister	The date the letter is delivered in the ordinary course of post ¹⁷³
Delivery to a central or regional office	The date of delivery
Electronic communication to a specified email or fax address	The date the communication is capable of being retrieved by the agency at the specified email or fax address

3.251 An email or similar electronic communication is received at the time it is capable of being retrieved by the addressee.¹⁷⁴ This is assumed to be the time it reaches the addressee's nominated electronic address¹⁷⁵ (this day could be a weekend or public holiday). This rule may be varied by a voluntary and informed agreement between the sender (the applicant) and the addressee (the agency or minister).

Extending the decision notification period

- 3.252 The FOI Act requires agencies and ministers to comply with a 30-day statutory timeframe for processing FOI requests (s 15(5)(b)). However in some limited circumstances the statutory timeframe may be extended, for example, with the agreement of the applicant or with the approval of the Information Commissioner. The extension of time provisions are set out in Table 3 below.¹⁷⁶
- 3.253 Agencies and ministers are encouraged to build into their FOI process an early and quick assessment of whether an extension of time may be required, to ensure that decisions are made within the statutory processing period.

¹⁷³ *Acts Interpretation Act* s 29.

¹⁷⁴ *Electronic Transactions Act 1999* s 14A.

¹⁷⁵ This does not require the addressee to open the communication for it to be taken to have been received. In general, an electronic communication should be taken to have been received by the addressee on the same day it was sent, as may be nominated by the applicant under s 15(2)(c).

¹⁷⁶ Further guidance is available in the OAIC agency resource [‘Apply for an extension of time to process a freedom of information request’](#).

Table 3: Extension of time provisions

Reason for extension	Extension period	Determined by	Notification requirement
Third party consultation: consultation with a state, or a person or business concerning personal or business information (s 15(6))	30 days	by default if agency or minister determines ss 26A, 27 or 27A apply	agency or minister must inform FOI applicant of extension as soon as practicable (s 15(6)(b))
Consultation with foreign entity required to determine if 33(a)(iii) or 33(b) exemptions apply (s 15(7), (8))	30 days	by default if agency or minister determines consultation is needed	agency or minister must inform applicant of extension as soon as practicable (s 15(8)(b))
By agreement between applicant and agency or minister (s 15AA)	up to 30 days, as either a single extension or a series of shorter extensions. This may be in addition to an extension for third party consultation	agency or minister but only with written agreement of applicant	agency or minister must give written notice of the extension to the Information Commissioner as soon as practicable (s 15AA(b))
Complex or voluminous request (s 15AB)	30 days or other period	Information Commissioner, upon request from agency or minister	Commissioner must inform applicant and agency or minister of an extension period as soon as practicable where a decision is made to grant the extension (s 15AB(3))
Following a deemed refusal (s 15AC(4))	as determined by the Information Commissioner	Information Commissioner, upon request from agency or minister	no legislative requirement but Commissioner may require agency or minister to notify applicant or third party as a condition of granting the extension (s 15AC(6))

3.254 The extension of time provisions outlined above only apply to the processing time available to an agency or minister in deciding an FOI request. There are no extension of time provisions available under the FOI Act for alternative purposes, including to meet a timeframe stipulated by the Information Commissioner in a s 55K decision. An agency or minister must comply with a decision of the Information Commissioner, including any timeframes stipulated in the IC review decision under s 55K (s 55N). If an agency or minister fails to comply with s 55N, an application may be made by the Information Commissioner or the IC review applicant to the Federal Court of Australia for an order directing the principal officer of an agency or minister to comply. Further information about compliance with the Information Commissioner's decision is available in [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines.

Extension of time with agreement under s 15AA

3.255 An agency or minister may extend the timeframe for dealing with a request by a period of no more than 30 days if:

- the applicant agrees to the extension in writing and
- the agency or minister gives written notice of the extension to the Information Commissioner as soon as practicable after the agreement is made. It is desirable that a copy of the applicant's written agreement is provided to the OAIC with the written notice.

3.256 To validly extend the processing period under s 15AA agencies and ministers must:

- seek the FOI applicant's agreement to extend the time to make a decision on the request (this must be done before the processing period has expired)¹⁷⁷
- receive the applicant's written agreement to the extension of time¹⁷⁸
- send the applicant's written agreement to the OAIC.¹⁷⁹

3.257 The agency or minister can also ask the FOI applicant for further extensions under s 15AA, as long as the combined length of all agreed extensions does not exceed 30 days.

3.258 A s 15AA agreement cannot be made when an FOI request has become a deemed refusal under s 15AC.

Applying to the Information Commissioner for an extension of time under s 15AB

3.259 An agency or minister applying to the Information Commissioner for an extension of time under s 15AB should explain why the applicant's FOI request is complex or voluminous, including details about:

- the scope of the request and the range of documents covered
- the work already undertaken on the request
- any consultation with the applicant concerning length of time
- whether other agencies or parties have an interest in the request
- measures to be taken by the agency or minister to ensure a decision is made within the extended time and to keep the applicant informed about progress of the request.¹⁸⁰

3.260 An application for an extension of time under s 15AB may only be made in relation to a specific FOI request. The complexity or volume described in a s 15AB application relates to

¹⁷⁷ An agreement under s 15AA cannot be made after an FOI request has become a deemed refusal under s 15AC.

¹⁷⁸ Some agencies have, during shutdown periods, inappropriately extended the processing period under s 15AA to reflect the impact of the shutdown period without first obtaining the FOI applicant's written agreement. An extension under s 15AA is invalid in these circumstances.

¹⁷⁹ The OAIC accepts notification of s 15AA agreements by way of webform: [OAIC Web Form](#). If the agency or minister does not notify the Information Commissioner of the FOI applicant's written agreement under s 15AA, the extension is invalid.

¹⁸⁰ For guidance about applying for an extension of time see the OAIC agency resource '[Apply for an extension of time to process a freedom of information request | OAIC](#)'.

the particular request for which an extension of time is sought. It does not relate to the complexity and volume of the aggregated FOI caseload of the agency or minister. The discretion in s 15AB cannot be exercised to provide a ‘blanket’ extension of time to a cohort of cases; each request needs to be considered on its individual merits.

- 3.261 In considering an application to extend the processing time under s 15AB, the Information Commissioner may share the agency’s or minister’s submission with the FOI applicant and any other affected third parties.
- 3.262 Where an agency or minister intends to apply for an extension of the timeframe for processing the applicant’s FOI request under s 15AB, the application to the Information Commissioner must be made before the expiry of the processing period referred to in s 15(5)(b). The processing period under s 15AB can be extended even if the Information Commissioner decides to grant the application after the date in which the request was originally due to expire, as long as the application was made within the period referred to in s15(5)(b).
- 3.263 Staff absences due to public holidays or agency shutdown periods may be relevant to whether an extension should be granted if the particular staff members have skills or knowledge that may be required to process the request in the normal statutory timeframe. However a lack of staff because of inadequate allocation of resources to FOI processing or failure to assign additional temporary resources to FOI processing at peak times will not normally justify an extension in the absence of other extenuating circumstances.
- 3.264 An extension of time under s 15AB cannot be granted after an extension of time under s 15AC(5) has been granted.

Deemed decisions

- 3.265 A ‘deemed refusal’ decision occurs when the statutory time for making a decision on an FOI request has expired and the FOI applicant has not been given a notice of decision. If this occurs, the principal officer of the agency or the minister is taken to have personally made a decision refusing to give access to the document on the last day of the ‘initial decision’ period (s 15AC(3)).
- 3.266 A notice of the deemed decision under s 26 is taken to have been given on the last day of the decision period (s 15AC(3)(b)).
- 3.267 The consequence of a deemed refusal is that the FOI applicant may apply for IC review (s 54L(2)(a)). An applicant or third party can also apply for IC review of a deemed affirmation of a decision on internal review (ss 54L(2)(b), 54M(2)(b)). In addition, once the statutory time to make a decision has expired and there is a deemed refusal decision, the agency or minister cannot impose a charge for access (see [Part 4](#) of these Guidelines). It is not open to an agency or minister to conduct an internal review of a deemed decision.
- 3.268 Processing timeframes should be clearly communicated at all stages of an FOI request, including on receipt of the request and when the timeframe has changed (for example, due to consultation or an extension of time). In some cases, FOI applicants will not be aware that a deemed access refusal decision has been made and that they can apply for IC review of the refusal. It is good practice for agencies and ministers to include information in their

s 15(5)(a) acknowledgement letters that advises FOI applicants about their right to seek IC review if their FOI request is not processed within the statutory timeframe.¹⁸¹

- 3.269 Agencies and ministers should consider notifying FOI applicants if their FOI request has become deemed so they can apply for IC review within the statutory timeframe. If an FOI applicant applies for internal review of a deemed access refusal, agencies should advise them of the IC review process. Further, agencies should advise FOI applicants that although the agency is deemed to have refused their request and that the applicant may apply for IC review, they will continue to process the request and provide a statement of reasons.
- 3.270 Where an access refusal decision is deemed to have been made, the agency or minister is still able to process the request and provide a statement of reasons. If the applicant applies for IC review, the decision under review by the Information Commissioner will be the deemed access refusal decision. The statement of reasons will be taken as submissions in the IC review. Alternatively, the agency may choose to apply to the OAIC for an extension of time under s 15AC(4) to make a decision on the request.
- 3.271 As noted at [3.229], where a request consultation process is initiated after the expiry of the statutory timeframe, the FOI applicant is not subject to the requirements of s 24AB(6), or to the legal consequences of not responding as outlined in s 24AB(7), which provides that the applicant is taken to have withdrawn their FOI request if they do not respond in one of the ways identified in s 24AB(6).

Information Commissioner's power to grant an extension of time following a deemed decision (s 15AC)

- 3.272 Where there has been a deemed decision, the decision-maker may apply to the Information Commissioner in writing for further time to deal with the request (s 15AC(4)). The Information Commissioner may allow further time for the decision-maker to deal with the request (s 15AC(5)). If the Information Commissioner allows further time to deal with the request under s 15AC(5), it is not open to the agency to further extend the processing time under s 15(6) (to undertake third party consultation). Any application under s 15AC(4) should include the time required to undertake any consultation with affected third parties.
- 3.273 In considering what further time may be appropriate, the Information Commissioner will take into account the details in the agency's application, which should address the scope and complexity of the request, the reasons for delay in making an initial decision, the extension sought, the estimated total processing time, and whether discussions with the applicant about the delay and extension application have occurred. The Information Commissioner will also consider the total elapsed processing time and the desirability of the decision being decided by the agency or minister rather than through IC review.
- 3.274 There is no obligation on the Information Commissioner to seek the views of the applicant about an application for an extension of time under s 15AC following a deemed decision.¹⁸² However, the Information Commissioner is not precluded from seeking the views of the applicant where it is a relevant consideration in deciding whether to grant an application for an extension of time.

¹⁸¹ See a sample acknowledgement letter on the OAIC's website which includes this information: [Sample freedom of information notices | OAIC](#).

¹⁸² *O'Donoghue v Australian Information Commissioner (No. 3)* [2012] FCA 1244 [23].

- 3.275 In allowing further time the Information Commissioner may impose conditions (s 15AC(6)). For example, the Commissioner may require the decision-maker to:
- notify the applicant of the further time allowed
 - provide regular progress reports to the Information Commissioner and the applicant
 - provide a copy of the notice of decision when made to the Information Commissioner.
- 3.276 If a decision is made in the further time allowed and any conditions imposed by the Information Commissioner are met, the deemed refusal decision no longer applies and is taken never to have applied (s 15AC(7)). However, if this occurs the agency or minister remains unable to impose charges (reg 5(2) of the [Freedom of Information \(Charges\) Regulations 2019](#)).
- 3.277 If a decision is not made within the extended time, or any imposed conditions are not met, the deemed access refusal decision continues to apply (s 15AC(8)). The Information Commissioner cannot provide further time for the decision-maker to make the decision or comply with the conditions (s 15AC(9)). The FOI applicant can seek IC review of the deemed access refusal (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).
- 3.278 If a person applies for IC review of a deemed decision and the Information Commissioner allows the decision-maker further time under s 15AC and a decision is made within that further time, that decision is substituted for the deemed decision under review (s 54Y(2)).¹⁸³
- 3.279 Alternatively, at any time during an IC review, an agency or minister may substitute a deemed access refusal decision with a decision to favour the FOI applicant by:
- giving access to a document in accordance with the request (s 55G(1)(a)) or
 - relieving the IC review applicant from liability to pay a charge (s 55G(1)(b)) (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).
- 3.280 The agency or minister must notify the Information Commissioner in writing of the substituted decision as soon as practicable, and that substituted decision becomes the decision under review (s 55G(2)) (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).

Statement of reasons

- 3.281 An agency or minister must give the FOI applicant written notice of the decision that contains reasons and other particulars of the decision (referred to in these Guidelines as a 'statement of reasons') if they refuse any aspect of the FOI request or defer access to documents (s 26(1)). Specifically, a statement of reasons must be provided to the FOI applicant for a decision where:
- access to a requested document is refused, including when:
 - o a requested document is exempt from release ([Part 4](#) of the FOI Act)
 - o the document has not been sufficiently identified in the request (s 15(2))
 - o the document does not exist or cannot be found (s 24A)
 - o a practical refusal reason exists (s 24)

¹⁸³ While an agency can technically request an extension of time under s 15AC after an applicant has sought IC review, it may be more practical for requests for additional processing time to be addressed within the IC review process.

- o the access provisions do not apply to the document (for example, it is a document to which ss 12 or 13 apply, or the requested document is not a document of an agency or an official document of a minister as defined under s 4(1))
- o access to the requested document is deferred (s 21)
- o access will be given in a different form to that requested by the FOI applicant (s 20)
- o a request to amend or annotate a record is refused (s 51D)
- o any of the above decisions is made on internal review (ss 53A and 54C(4)).

Content of a s 26 statement of reasons

3.282 A statement of reasons is a notice in writing of:

- the decision
- the findings on any material questions of fact
- the evidence or other material on which those findings are based
- the reasons for the decision (including any public interest factors taken into account in deciding to refuse access to a conditionally exempt document)
- where the decision relates to a document of an agency, the name and designation of the person making the decision
- information about the FOI applicant's rights to make a complaint or seek a review and the procedure for doing so (s 26(1)).

3.283 As outlined above, s 26 requires agencies to include the name and designation of the person who made the decision in their statement of reasons (s 26(1)(b)). Clearly, providing both the given name and family name of a decision-maker satisfies this requirement. However, providing the given name of the decision-maker and their designation may satisfy this requirement if there is sufficient information to allow the FOI applicant to identify the decision-maker and thereby verify that person's authority to make a decision.¹⁸⁴ Further information, such as an FOI or case management database reference number or position number, may assist in verifying decision-making authority.

3.284 This requirement exists separately to s 26(2), which provides that a statement of reasons should not include any information that, if it were in a document, would cause that document to be exempt.¹⁸⁵ Section 26(2) does not enable the requirements outlined in s 26(1) to be disregarded or invalidated.

3.285 There is no specified form for a statement of reasons. A letter to the applicant may be sufficient as long as it contains all the required information. Where the FOI request involves numerous documents or complex issues relating to exemptions, a statement of reasons and a schedule of documents attached to a letter to the FOI applicant may be more appropriate.

¹⁸⁴ See *Paul Farrell and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 41 [24].

¹⁸⁵ See *News Corporation Ltd v National Companies and Security Commission* [1984] AATA 144; (1984) 57 ALR 550; and *TFS Manufacturing Pty Limited and Department of Health* [2016] AICmr 73.

The OAIC has developed a checklist and a sample notice to assist agencies and ministers with the content of a statement of reasons.¹⁸⁶

- 3.286 Section 26(2) provides that a s 26 notice is not required to contain any matter that is of such a nature that its inclusion in a document of an agency would cause the document to be exempt (for further information about s 26(2) see [3.189]—[3.191] above).

The decision

- 3.287 The statement of reasons must set out the decision made in relation to each document (or part of document) and address all relevant legislative provisions. The ARC suggests that decision-makers should quote from the actual legislative provisions rather than paraphrasing to avoid inadvertently changing the meaning.¹⁸⁷
- 3.288 The decision needs to identify clearly the documents considered by the decision-maker for release (without disclosing exempt material if exemptions are claimed). Preparing a schedule of documents is often helpful in the decision-making process. When the decision is made, the schedule (minus any exempt mater considered during the process) can be attached to the statement of reasons.

Findings of fact and the evidence or other material on which they are based

- 3.289 The notice of decision should make it clear how the decision was reached, based on findings of fact. General points about evidence and findings of fact are set out at [3.127]—[3.131]. The documents that are the subject of an FOI request will often contain evidence that will need to be considered. For example, a decision-maker considering whether to release a document that contains information about Commonwealth-State relations will need to consider whether releasing the document may damage those relations.
- 3.290 When referring to material or evidence it is important to describe it so it can be easily identified. Merely providing a list of documents that the decision-maker considered is unlikely to be sufficient.¹⁸⁸ The decision-maker needs to explain how each finding was rationally based on the evidence.
- 3.291 The statement of reasons should also set out how any conflicting evidence was considered, which evidence was preferred and why.¹⁸⁹ If the decision-maker considered recommendations or reports in making their decision, references to those should also be included.

Relevant and irrelevant considerations

- 3.292 In considering the evidence to make findings of fact, a decision-maker must examine and weigh all relevant considerations. For many FOI decisions, the FOI Act sets out the relevant considerations. For example, in making a decision about whether a document is exempt

¹⁸⁶ See the following agency resources on the OAIC website (www.oaic.gov.au) ‘[Statement of reasons checklist](#)’ and ‘[Sample freedom of information notices](#)’.

¹⁸⁷ See [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 4 - Reasons | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#) p 7.

¹⁸⁸ See *ARM Constructions Pty Limited v Deputy Commissioner of Taxation* [1986] FCA 97 [18]; (1986) 65 ALR 343.

¹⁸⁹ See [Administrative Review Council Best Practice Guide 4 - Reasons | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#) p 8 and *Dornan v Riordan* [1990] FCA 264 [7], [18]; (1990) 95 ALR 451.

because it is subject to legal professional privilege, a decision-maker must consider whether that privilege has been waived (s 42(2)).

- 3.293 The decision-maker must also ensure they do not take into account any irrelevant considerations. The FOI Act specifies irrelevant considerations in relation to some decisions, including the public interest test that applies to conditionally exempt documents (s 11B(4) — see [Part 6](#) of these Guidelines). Similarly, the FOI applicant's reason(s) for making a request are also irrelevant in making a practical refusal decision (s 24AA(3)(a)).

The reasons for the decision

- 3.294 The notice of decision must state the reasons for the decision (s 26(1)(a)). The reasons should show a rational connection between the findings of material fact, the decision-maker's understanding of the relevant statutory provisions and the decision itself. Where a statutory provision requires an agency to be satisfied that disclosure of a document would result in a substantial adverse effect, it is not sufficient for an agency to simply declare that a substantial adverse effect will occur without any further details or reasons. Similarly, it is not enough for the decision-maker to state that he or she is satisfied that a document or part of a document is exempt. Agencies must provide adequate justification as to why an exemption applies by reference to the provisions in the FOI Act, having regard to these Guidelines. In an IC review, s 55D places the onus on the agency or minister in establishing that its decision in relation to a request or application is justified, or that the Information Commissioner should give a decision adverse to the IC review applicant. Similarly, where an application for review is made to the ART, s 61 places the onus on the agency or minister to establish that the decision is (or is not) justified and that the ART should give a decision adverse to the applicant (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).
- 3.295 If the decision is to refuse access to a conditionally exempt document, the reasons must include any public interest factors the decision-maker took into account (s 26(1)(aa)). In considering the public interest factors, the decision-maker must weigh factors for and against disclosure to determine whether access would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest (see [Part 6](#) of these Guidelines). Evidence of the harm that may result from release would need to be considered as part of that process.
- 3.296 When explaining the reasons, the decision-maker should refer to the specific documents requested and set out the reasoning process that led to the decision based on the material findings of fact. They must explain the relevant legislative provisions and, if appropriate, can refer to these Guidelines or IC review, AAT/ART and court decisions in support of their interpretation of the provisions.
- 3.297 Where a document is released with deletions under s 22, the grounds on which the deletions have been made should be provided, setting out the findings on material questions of fact and referring to the evidence or other material on which those findings were based (see [3.176]—[3.191] above).
- 3.298 A draft statement of reasons may be prepared by someone other than the decision-maker. However, the decision-maker must carefully consider the draft to ensure that it is satisfactory and that they personally endorse the reasoning and conclusions.

Other required information

- 3.299 The statement of reasons should also include:

- the name and designation of the decision-maker (where the decision relates to a document of an agency) (s 26(1)(b) and [3.263]). Information about the authorisation should also be included (see [3.111]—[3.117])
- the applicant's review rights, including how to apply for internal and IC review (see [Parts 9](#) and [10](#) of these Guidelines)
- the applicant's right to complain to the Information Commissioner (see [Part 11](#) of these Guidelines).

3.300 The notice of decision should also explain (if applicable) that the document will be published or notified on a disclosure log (see [Part 14](#)).

Other notices of decision

3.301 Other provisions of the FOI Act require that notices of particular kinds be given to applicants and third parties. Some of these provisions expressly require the decision-maker to give reasons for the decision under either s 26 of the FOI Act or s 25D of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*.¹⁹⁰ If no express requirement of that kind applies, a decision-maker may nevertheless be guided by s 26 in deciding the nature of the information to include in a notice.

3.302 The provisions of the FOI Act that require a notice of decision are:

- to the applicant:
 - o a notice that an applicant is liable to pay a charge (s 29(1))
 - o a notice of decision to an applicant as to the charge payable, following a submission by the applicant that a charge should be reduced or not imposed (s 29(6)). If the decision is to reject the applicant's contention in whole or part, the notice must provide a statement of reasons that complies with *Acts Interpretation Act* s 25D (s 29(8) and (9))
 - o a notice of decision to provide access to a document following consultation with the Commonwealth or a State about whether the document would be exempt under s 47B (Commonwealth-State relations) (s 26A(3)(b))
 - o a notice of decision to provide access to a document following consultation with a person or organisation about whether the document would be exempt under s 47 or 47G (trade secrets, business information) (s 27(6)(b))
 - o a notice of decision to provide access to a document following consultation with a person about whether the document would be exempt under s 47F (personal information) (s 27A(5)(b))
- to a third party:
 - o a notice of decision to the Commonwealth or a State that a document about which either was consulted is not exempt under s 47B (Commonwealth-State relations) (ss 26A(3)(a))

¹⁹⁰ Section 25D of the *Acts Interpretation Act* requires that the statement of reasons must give the reasons for the decision and set out the findings on material questions of fact and refer to the evidence or other material on which those findings were based.

- o a notice of decision to a person or organisation that a document about which the person or organisation was consulted is not exempt under s 47 or 47G (trade secrets, business information) (s 27(6)(a))
- o a notice of decision to a person that a document about which the person was consulted is not exempt under s 47F (personal information) (s 27A(5)(a)).

3.303 It is also open to an applicant or third party (in relation to any of the decisions above) to request a statement of reasons under s 13 of the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977*.

Giving applicants access to documents

3.304 Where a decision has been made to give an FOI applicant access to a requested document, access should be given as soon as practicable, but only after:

- any charges the applicant is liable to pay are paid (s 11A(1)(b) and reg 11, [Freedom of Information \(Charges\) Regulations 2019](#)) and
- all opportunities a third party may have to seek review of the decision have run out, and the decision stands or is confirmed (ss 26A(4), 27(7) and 27A(6)).

3.305 Where a third party has review rights in relation to only some of the documents falling under the access grant decision, an agency or minister should provide the FOI applicant with access to the remaining documents as soon as practicable. Similarly, if a third party has a review right in relation to multiple documents but seeks review of the decision to release only some of those documents, the agency or minister should release the remaining documents to the FOI applicant as soon as practicable once the third party's opportunity to seek review has run out.

3.306 Delay in providing access to documents is considered an access refusal decision under s 53A(c) and the applicant may apply for internal review or IC review.

3.307 An agency or minister may choose to add an FOI reference number or page numbers to a document before it is released to the FOI applicant. If an agency does this, it is important that those additions are included in the margins or other clear space in the document, so they do not obscure the text. If an agency or minister chooses to add a watermark (for example, to indicate that the document is being released under the FOI Act) it is important that the watermark does not impact the ability of a reader to read all of the document.

3.308 Section 15(2)(c) requires FOI applicants to provide details of how notices may be sent to them; it does not specify how documents released under the FOI Act may be dispatched.¹⁹¹ Although FOI applicants cannot dictate how access is to be provided, if an applicant specifies a postal address (rather than an email address) agencies should do what they can to satisfy the applicant's request that documents be sent by post.

3.309 Filesharing portals, such as SIGBOX, can be an efficient way of despatching FOI documents, particularly large files. Filesharing portals are more secure than unencrypted email and regular post. However agencies and ministers need to be mindful of the Australian Privacy

¹⁹¹ Section 20 of the FOI Act allows the FOI applicant to specify the form of access (inspection, provision of a copy of the requested document, provision of arrangement to hear or view sounds or visual images and written transcripts). Access must then be given in the form requested, unless doing so would unreasonably interfere with the agency's operations or performance of a Minister's functions, would be detrimental to preserving a document or would involve copyright infringement. There is no provision FOI applicant.

Principles, in particular, if using file sharing/delivery systems necessitates people providing additional personal information and creating accounts with filesharing providers, or when the method of transmission may increase privacy risks, including the intentional or inadvertent collection of personal information.

Charges

- 3.310 The applicant must pay all charges before being given access, except where the charge relates to supervisory time for the applicant to inspect documents (reg11(2) of the [Freedom of Information \(Charges\) Regulations 2019](#)). Where a charge was notified, but the decision on the request was not made within the statutory time limit, the charge cannot be imposed (regs 5(2) and 5(3)). More information about charges is in [Part 4](#) of these Guidelines.

Third party review opportunities

- 3.311 The review rights of a third party depend on the provision under which they were consulted. A third party who was consulted about the release of a document affecting Commonwealth-State relations (s 26A) may seek internal review or IC review of a decision to grant access (ss 53B, 53C, 54A and 54M).
- 3.312 Similarly, a third party who was invited to make a submission about the release of a document affecting business information (s 27) or documents affecting personal privacy (s 27A) and who made a submission in support of the relevant exemption contention may seek internal review or IC review of a decision to grant access (ss 53B, 53C, 54A and 54M).
- 3.313 A business entity or person who was invited to make a submission under s 27 or s 27A but did not do so, is neither required to be notified of an access grant decision nor entitled to apply for internal review or IC review of that decision.
- 3.314 A third party who was not invited to make a submission, but believes they should have been invited under s 27 or s 27A, may complain to the Information Commissioner (s 70 — see [Part 11](#) of these Guidelines).
- 3.315 ‘Run out’ times are defined in s 4(1), as set out in Table 4 below.

Table 4: When time runs out for third party review

Circumstances	When time runs out	Maximum time period for third party to apply (in calendar days)
Third party does not apply for either internal or IC review	The latest time for applying for internal review or IC review has ended	i) 30 days to apply for internal review from notification of initial decision (or deemed notification) (agency can extend s 54B(1)) ii) 30 days to apply for IC review from notification of initial decision (the Information Commissioner can extend s 54T(2))
Third party applies for internal review	Internal review has ended (review either completed or decision deemed) and time for applying for IC review has ended	Internal review must be completed within 30 days (decision deemed to have been affirmed after 30 days s 54D), unless Information Commissioner grants an extension (s 54D(4)) 30 days from that point to apply for IC review (s 54S(2)) (Information Commissioner can extend s 54T(2))

Circumstances	When time runs out	Maximum time period for third party to apply (in calendar days)
Third party applies for IC review	IC review has concluded and the time for applying to the ART (for review) and appealing to the Federal Court (on a question of law) has ended, and the person has not applied or appealed	Must apply to ART and Federal Court within 28 days after the IC review decision is given to the IC review applicant (s 5(3) of the Administrative Tribunal Rules 2024 and s 56(2) FOI Act)
Third party applies for ART review	ART proceedings have concluded, and i) the time for appealing to the Federal Court has ended and the person has not appealed, or ii) if an appeal has been instituted, the proceedings have concluded	28 days after the ART's decision is given to the third party applicant (s 174 ART Act), or if an appeal has been lodged, when appeal proceedings have concluded

3.316 Agencies and ministers are encouraged to check directly with any affected third parties if the agency or minister has not received notice that a third party intends to apply for internal, IC or AAT review. Noting that the FOI applicant has the legally enforceable right to access the documents they requested when the time to apply for review has run out, the agency or minister should include a date by which the third party should respond and advice that if the affected third party does not respond by that date, the agency or minister will proceed to give the FOI applicant access to the documents on the basis that the affected third party has not applied for internal or IC review. It is suggested that 3 working days is an appropriate timeframe to give the affected third party to respond.

Providing access in stages

3.317 Where the request relates to a large number of documents, it is open to an agency or minister and an FOI applicant to consult and agree on a staged approach to the release of the documents.¹⁹² A staged approach may also be appropriate if access to some (but not all) documents is to be deferred under s 21 (see [3.177]—[3.180]). Where an agency or minister agrees with the applicant that the documents at issue are to be released in stages, it is recommended they obtain the appropriate extensions of time under the FOI Act for processing the request. For example, the agency or minister would need to obtain a written agreement from the applicant and to provide written notice of the extension to the Information Commissioner in accordance with s 15AA. If necessary, an agency or minister may also consider applying to the Information Commissioner under s 15AB for an extension of time, providing evidence of the agreement between the parties in its application.

3.318 A staged approach can assist agencies and ministers manage their resources and avoid a practical refusal reason from arising by allowing more time to consider and process the request. For example, the agency or minister may propose to process part of the request by

¹⁹² See *Re Eastman and Department of Territories* [1983] AATA 141; (1983) 5 ALD 182 and *Re William Richard Clifford Geary and Australian Wool Corporation* [1987] AATA 370.

a certain date, and the remainder of the request by a date agreed between the agency or minister and the FOI applicant.

Forms of access

3.319 Subject to limited exceptions, an applicant who requests access to a document in a particular form has a right to be given access in that form (s 20(2)). Available forms of access are:

- providing a copy of the document (the most common form of access)
- giving a reasonable opportunity to inspect the document
- where the document is an article or thing from which sounds or visual images are capable of being reproduced, making arrangements for the person to hear or view those sounds or images
- where words are recorded in a manner capable of being reproduced in the form of sound or where words are in the form of shorthand writing or in code, providing a written transcript of the words recorded or contained in the document (s 20(1)).

3.320 The right to access a document in a particular form may be refused and access given in another form in the following circumstances:

- where access would interfere unreasonably with the agency's operations or the performance of a minister's functions (s 20(3)(a)) — for example, if an applicant asks to inspect documents that an agency requires for everyday operations or where the applicant is subject to a restricted access arrangement and allowing them to inspect the documents would conflict with the restricted access arrangement and prejudice the agency's ability to meet its obligations under the [Work Health and Safety Act 2011](#).¹⁹³
- if it would be detrimental to the preservation of the document or not appropriate given the physical nature of the document (s 20(3)(b)) — for example, if a document is fragile or if giving access outside its normal environment might result in damage, or the document cannot be photocopied due to its condition or because it is a painting, model or sculpture.
- if giving an applicant access to a document in a certain form would, but for the FOI Act, involve an infringement of copyright in relation to the matter contained in the document (s 20(3)(c)). This provision does not apply where the matter contained in the document relates to the affairs of an agency or department of state or if the copyright holder is the Commonwealth, an agency, or a State.

3.321 Agencies and ministers are expected to make reasonable use of available technology to facilitate access to documents — for example, by providing copies by electronic transmission, or to provide access in a particular form that is possible only through technology. Access to documents by means that do not require physical inspection in an agency office should generally be preferred.

3.322 The FOI Act gives a legally enforceable right of access to documents that already exist, and an agency is not required to create a new document to satisfy an FOI request. However,

¹⁹³ 'AQP' and Services Australia (*Freedom of information*) [2024] AICmr 250 [13].

agencies and ministers should consult an applicant as to the most effective way of providing access to the information they seek, including by administrative release of information that has been compiled from documents or a database (see [3.5]—[3.12]).

- 3.323 An FOI applicant can seek internal or IC review of a decision not to provide access in the form requested by the applicant where all documents to which the request relate have not been provided (s 53A(c)).

Charges for alternative forms of access

- 3.324 If an agency or minister decides to provide a document in a form different to that requested by the applicant, the charge payable cannot exceed the charge that would have applied if access had been given in the form the applicant requested (s 20(4)).

Protections when access to documents is given

- 3.325 The FOI Act provides protection from civil action and criminal prosecution for those involved in giving access to documents under the Act. These protections are designed to ensure that potential legal action does not impede the Act's operation.

Actions for defamation, breach of confidence or infringement of copyright

- 3.326 Section 90 of the FOI Act provides that no action for defamation or breach of confidence or infringement of copyright lies against the Commonwealth, a minister, an agency or an agency officer solely on the ground of having given access, or having authorised access, to a document. The protection applies only in the context of the operation of the FOI Act and requires a decision-maker to act in good faith with a genuine belief that publication or access is either required or permitted under the Act. Similar protections applying in particular situations (noted below) are given by s 91.
- 3.327 The protections afforded by ss 90 and 91 extend to:
- giving access in response to an FOI request under the FOI Act (s 90(1)(b))
 - publishing information under s 11C (disclosure log) and as part of the IPS (s 90(1)(a))
 - publishing or giving access to a document 'in the belief that the publication or access is required or permitted otherwise than under this Act (whether or not under an express legislative power)' (s 90(1)(c))
 - showing a document to a third party in the course of consultation under ss 26A, 27 or 27A (s 91(1C)).
- 3.328 If a document is disclosed in any of the ways mentioned in [3.327], protections in respect of that disclosure also extend to the person who supplied the document to the agency or minister (s 90(2)). If consultation under ss 26A, 27 or 27A occurs, protection extends to the author of the document and to any other person because of that author or other person having shown the document (s 91(1C)).
- 3.329 Disclosure of a document to a person under the FOI Act (whether to an applicant or during consultation) does not, for the purpose of the law of defamation or copyright, constitute an authorisation or approval to republish the document or to do an act comprised within the copyright in the document (s 91(2)). That is, an FOI applicant who disseminates defamatory

or copyright material in any document received following an FOI request has no FOI Act protection against an action for defamation or breach of copyright.

- 3.330 A decision-maker who is aware that a document released under the FOI Act contains defamatory material is encouraged to draw this to the applicant's attention. Similarly, an agency or minister may advise an applicant that copyright permission may be needed from another party for any reuse of the material. A statement such as the following could be used:

To the extent that copyright in some of this material is owned by a third party, you may need to seek their permission before you can reuse or disseminate that material.

- 3.331 For further guidance on agency copyright notices in connection with the IPS and the disclosure log, see [Parts 13](#) and [14](#) of these Guidelines.

Offences

- 3.332 Section 92 operates in a similar way to s 90 to provide that neither a minister nor a person authorising access to a document, or being involved in providing access, is guilty of a criminal offence by reason only of that action. For example, where a secrecy provision in other legislation would otherwise prohibit the disclosure of a document, s 92 will relieve any minister or authorised officer of an agency from criminal liability if they authorise or give access under the FOI Act.¹⁹⁴ This immunity extends to disclosures for the purposes of undertaking consultation under ss 26A, 27 or 27A of the FOI Act (s 92(2)). To benefit from the immunity, the minister or authorised officer must act in good faith with a genuine belief that disclosure is required or permitted under the FOI Act.

¹⁹⁴ Secrecy provisions that are listed in Schedule 3 of the FOI Act or are expressed to be applicable for the purposes of s 38 of the FOI Act operate as an exemption under s 38 — see [Part 5](#) of these Guidelines.

Part 4 — Charges for providing access

Version 1.8, February 2021

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- 4.1 An agency or minister may impose a charge in respect of a request for access to a document or for providing access to a document, under s 29 of the FOI Act. The charge must be assessed in accordance with the *Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 2019* (Charges Regulations).
- 4.2 The Information Commissioner has published guidance and advice that helps decision makers identify the steps in calculating a charge. The guidance is available at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/calculating-and-imposing-charges-for-foi-access-requests/>

Guiding principles

- 4.3 Under s 8 of the Charges Regulations, an agency or minister has a discretion to impose or not impose a charge, or impose a charge that is lower than the applicable charge. In exercising that discretion, the agency or minister should take account of the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ objective stated in the objects of the FOI Act (s 3(4)):

... functions and powers given by this Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.¹

- 4.4 Agencies and ministers should interpret the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ objective broadly in imposing any charge under the FOI Act. That is, an agency or minister should have regard to the lowest reasonable cost to the applicant, to the agency or minister, and the Commonwealth as a whole. Where the cost of calculating and collecting a charge might exceed the cost to the agency of processing the request, it may generally be more appropriate not to impose a charge.²
- 4.5 Further, an agency or minister should keep in mind that under s 55D(1) of the FOI Act, if an applicant applies for Information Commissioner review (IC review) of a decision to impose a charge, the agency or minister bears the onus, and therefore bears the cost, of establishing that:
- a. its decision in relation to the FOI request is justified, or
 - b. the Information Commissioner should make a decision adverse to the IC review applicant.

Ultimately, the amount of any charge imposed should be:

- determined bearing the objects of the FOI Act in mind
 - reasonable, taking into account all relevant factors
 - proportionate to the cost of making a decision and providing access, as well as any general public interest supporting release of the requested documents (see s 29(5)(b) of the FOI Act).
- 4.6 The objects of the FOI Act provide the basis for the following principles relevant to charges under the FOI Act:
- A charge must not be used to unnecessarily delay access or to discourage an applicant from exercising the right of access conferred by the FOI Act.

¹ An assessment of charges based on the maximum rates outlined in Schedule 1 to the Charges Regulations can be consistent with the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ objective: see *McBeth and Australian Agency for International Development* [2012] AICmr 24 [15].

² *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65 [31] and *Emmanuel Freudenthal and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 15 [46].

- A charge should fairly reflect the work involved in providing access to documents.
- Charges are discretionary and should be justified on a case by case basis.
- Agencies should encourage administrative access at no charge, where appropriate.
- Agencies should assist applicants to frame FOI requests (s 15(3) of the FOI Act).
- Agencies should draw an applicant's attention to opportunities to obtain free access to a document or information outside the FOI Act (s 3A(2)(b)).
- A decision to impose a charge should be transparent.

4.7 An agency should ensure that the notice to an applicant of a charge fully explains and justifies the charge. Implicit in the 'lowest reasonable cost' objective is the requirement for sound record keeping so that an agency's documents can be readily identified and found when an FOI request is received (see [4.29] below).

Charges framework

The FOI Act and the Charges Regulations

4.8 The FOI Act and Charges Regulations set out the process when an agency or minister decides to impose a charge for processing an FOI request or for providing access to a document to which a request relates.

4.9 If an agency or minister decides to impose a charge, the agency or minister must provide the applicant with a written notice outlining the preliminary assessment of the charge and all the matters listed in s 29(1) of the FOI Act (see [4.55] below).³

4.10 In notifying an applicant of a charge or estimated charge, the agency or minister may require the applicant to pay a deposit (see [4.84] below). Where an applicant receives a notice of preliminary assessment advising that a charge is payable, and does not object to the estimated charge, they may decide to pay a deposit or the full estimated charge. An applicant may also object to the estimated charge *and* pay the deposit or full estimated charge to progress a decision on the FOI request while the charge is disputed (see [4.12] and [4.63]–[4.65] below).⁴

4.11 Where the applicant objects to the estimated charge, they may contend that the charge has been wrongly assessed, or should be reduced or not imposed (s 29(1)(f)). The application must:

- be made in writing (s 29(1)(f))
- be made within 30 days of receiving the notice or such further period as the agency or minister allows (s 29(1)(f))
- set out the applicant's reasons for contending that the charge has been wrongly assessed or should otherwise be reduced or not imposed (s 29(1)(f)(ii)).

4.12 An applicant may, in objecting to the estimated charge:

- postpone payment of the deposit or estimated charge until the agency makes a decision on the amount of charge payable, or
- pay the deposit or the estimated charge pending a decision on reduction or waiver of the estimated charge. This action requires the agency to continue processing the FOI request while considering the application for reduction or waiver of the charge. If the agency or

³ For further information about the steps required to estimate and notify a charge, see <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/calculating-and-imposing-charges-for-foi-access-requests/>

⁴ Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (*Freedom of information*) [2018] AICmr 16 [35]–[40].

minister decides to reduce or waive the charge, the deposit should be reduced or refunded.

- 4.13 If the applicant does not respond in writing to the agency or minister's notice of the preliminary assessment of the charge within 30 days, or such other period allowed by the agency or minister, the FOI request is taken to have been withdrawn (s 29(2)).
- 4.14 On receiving the applicant's reasons for contesting the charge, the agency or minister must, within 30 days, or earlier if practicable (s 29(6)), provide a written notice of decision to the applicant as to whether the charge will be imposed, reduced or waived. In making its decision, the agency or minister must take into account whether payment of the charge will cause financial hardship, or whether giving access without charge or at a reduced charge, will be in the public interest (ss 29(4)–(5)) (see [4.95]–[4.113] below).⁵
- 4.15 Where the agency or minister does not provide its decision to the applicant within 30 days, the agency is taken to have made a decision to impose the charge specified in the notice of preliminary assessment (s 29(7)).
- 4.16 If the decision is to impose or reduce the charge, the notice of the charge decision must also set out the reasons for the decision (s 29(8)) and:
- the applicant's right to seek internal review or IC review of the decision
 - the applicant's right to complain to the Information Commissioner
 - the procedure for exercising these rights (s 29(9)).
- 4.17 Where the agency or minister is deemed to have affirmed the preliminary assessment of the charge under s 29(7), or deemed to have affirmed the original decision under s 54D, the agency or minister continues to have an obligation to provide a statement of reasons. This obligation to provide a statement of reasons continues until any IC review of the deemed decision is finalised.
- 4.18 Other relevant provisions in the FOI Act and Charges Regulations concerning the imposition of charges are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Charges – summary of main legislative provisions

Legislative provision	Operation
Section 6 of the Charges Regulations	Charges for making a decision on a request for access to a document are set out in Part 1 of Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations. Charges for providing access to a document are set out in Part 2 of Schedule 2.
Section 7 of the Charges Regulations	There is no charge for providing access to an applicant's personal information, or for providing access outside the statutory processing period, unless the Information Commissioner has extended that period under s 15AB of the FOI Act or the applicant has agreed to extend the time under s 15AA (see [4.47]–[4.48] below).
Section 8 of the Charges Regulations	An agency or minister may decide that an applicant is liable to pay a charge in respect of a request for access to a document, or in respect of the provision of access to a document.

⁵ For further information about the steps required to process an application for reduction or waiver of a charge, after an applicant contests a charge, see <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/calculating-and-imposing-charges-for-foi-access-requests/>

Legislative provision	Operation
Section 9 of the Charges Regulations	In issuing a notice of a charge under s 29 of the FOI Act, an agency or minister may provide an estimate (based on Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations) if the agency or minister has not taken all steps necessary to make a decision on the request.
Section 10 of the Charges Regulations	After taking all steps necessary to make a decision on a request, an agency or minister: • must adjust an estimated charge to a lower amount where the actual amount of the charge is lower than the estimated amount (s 10(2)); or • may adjust an estimated charge to a higher amount (s 10(3)).
Section 11A of the FOI Act and s 11 of the Charges Regulations	An applicant must pay the required charge before being given access to a document, except if the charge relates to an officer supervising inspection, or in hearing or viewing the document.
Section 12 of the Charges Regulations	An agency or minister may require an applicant to pay a deposit of \$20 for an estimated charge of between \$25 and \$100, or 25 percent of the estimated charge if greater than \$100.
Section 31 of the FOI Act	If an applicant is notified during the statutory processing period that a charge is payable, the processing period is extended until the applicant pays the charge or is notified by the agency following a review that no charge is payable.

Charges are discretionary

4.19 Agencies and ministers have a discretion:

- not to impose a charge for the staff time and resources expended in processing an FOI request (s 8 of the Charges Regulations), independently of an applicant contending that a charge be reduced or waived
- to impose a charge lower than the charge specified in the Charges Regulations (s 8)
- to reduce or waive a charge after an applicant contests a charge (s 29(4)) (see [4.95]–[4.114] below).

4.20 Agencies and ministers should be guided by the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ objective in s 3 of the FOI Act in deciding whether a charge specified in the Charges Regulations is warranted; there is no obligation on an agency to charge for access. Agencies and ministers may need to balance a number of factors in reaching decisions concerning access to documents and related charges. The overall impact of charges in recovering costs to government does not, of itself, justify imposing a charge for an individual request.⁶ Further, imposing a charge can deter members of the public from seeking access to documents and can delay access.

4.21 It is suggested that agencies develop internal guidance to assist staff to decide whether it is appropriate to impose a charge in relation to an FOI request. Situations in which it may not be appropriate include when a request has been outstanding for a long period of time (for example, when the request has been the subject of an IC review).

Charges that may be imposed

⁶ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 131 [30] and *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [2018] AICmr 13 [34].

4.22 The charges that may be imposed by an agency or minister with respect to a request for access to a document are specified in Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations. While the decision to impose a charge is discretionary, calculation of the charge must be in accordance with the amounts specified in Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations. Part 1 of Schedule 1 specifies charges related to making a decision on a request and Part 2 specifies charges for giving access to a document. The charges are listed in Table 2 below.

4.23 There is no charge for making:

- a request to an agency or minister for access to a document under Part III of the FOI Act
- an application for amendment or annotation of a personal record under Part V of the FOI Act
- an application for internal review of a decision under Part VI of the FOI Act
- an application for review by the Information Commissioner under Part VII of the FOI Act
- a complaint to the Information Commissioner under Part VIIB of the FOI Act.

4.24 An agency or minister cannot impose a charge:

- for giving access to an individual's own personal information (s 7(1) of the Charges Regulations)
- if it fails to make a decision on the request within the statutory processing period – the statutory period includes any extensions of time under ss 15(6), 15(8), 15AA and 15AB, but not s 15AC of the FOI Act (ss 7(2) and (3) of the Charges Regulations); s 12(3)(b) of the Charges Regulations provides that the agency or Minister must refund any deposit paid in these circumstances
- for making an internal review decision.⁷

This is discussed further at [4.43]–[4.49].

Table 2: Charges listed in Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations

Activity item	Charge	Schedule 1
Search and retrieval: time spent searching for or retrieving a document	\$15 per hour	Part 1, Item 1
Decision making: time spent deciding to grant or refuse a request , including examining documents, consulting other parties, making deletions, or notifying any interim or final decision on the request	First five hours: Nil Subsequent hours: \$20 per hour	Part 1, Item 4
Electronic production: provision of information not available in a discrete form in a document by using a computer or other equipment ordinarily used for retrieving or collating stored information	An amount not exceeding the actual cost incurred in producing a document or copy	Part 1, Item 2 Part 2, Items 4, 5 and 7

⁷ On internal review, an agency or minister can only impose a charge for *providing access* to a document using the charges listed under Part 2 of Schedule 1. This is because s 4(1) the FOI Act defines 'request' as a request for access to a document under s 15(1) of the FOI Act. Charges under the Charges Regulations only apply with respect to 'a request for access to a document' (s 6). As a result, charges cannot be imposed with respect to an application for internal review under s 54 (or s 54A) of the FOI Act.

Transcript: preparing a transcript from a sound recording, a document written in shorthand or similar codified form	\$4.40 per page of transcript	Part 1, Item 3 Part 2, Item 8
Photocopy: a photocopy of a written document	\$0.10 per page	Part 2, Item 3
Other copies: a copy of a written document other than a photocopy	\$4.40 per page	Part 2, Item 3
Replay: replaying a sound or film tape	An amount not exceeding the actual cost incurred in replaying	Part 2, Item 6
Inspection: supervision by an agency officer of an applicant's inspection of documents or the hearing or viewing of an audio or visual recording	\$6.25 per half hour (or part thereof)	Part 2, Items 1 and 2
Delivery: posting or delivering a copy of a document at the applicant's request	Cost of postage or delivery	Part 2, Item 9

Charge at hourly rate

- 4.25 The Charges Regulations set out an hourly rate that applies regardless of the classification or designation of the officer who undertakes the work (s 94(2)(b) of the FOI Act) for:
- search or retrieval (\$15 per hour)
 - decision making (\$20 per hour).
- 4.26 The Charges Regulations do not specify a method for charging for part of an hour of search or retrieval or decision-making time. If such a charge is to be imposed, it should be calculated on a proportionate basis, for example, 30 minutes work should be charged at 50 percent of the hourly rate.

Charge for search or retrieval time

- 4.27 An agency or minister can charge for 'the time spent ... in searching for, or retrieving, the document' (Charges Regulations, Schedule 1, Part 1, Item 1). This encompasses time spent:
- consulting relevant officers to determine if a document exists
 - searching a digital database or hardcopy file index for the location of a document
 - searching a digital or hardcopy file to locate a document
 - physically locating a digital or hardcopy document and removing it from a file.
- 4.28 An underlying assumption in calculating search or retrieval time is that the agency or minister maintains a high quality record system. Search or retrieval time is to be calculated on the basis that a document will be found in the place indicated in the agency or minister's filing system (s 5(2)(a) of the Charges Regulations) or, if no such indication is given, in the place that reasonably should have been indicated in the filing system (s 5(2)(b)). The 'filing system' of an agency or minister should be taken to include central registries as well as other authorised systems used to record the location of documents.
- 4.29 Time spent by an officer searching for a document that is not where it ought to be, or that is not listed in the official filing system, cannot be charged to an applicant.⁸ In summary,

⁸ *Fingal Head Community Association Inc and Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development* [2014] AICmr 70 [19] and *Ben Butler and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 18 [16].

applicants cannot be disadvantaged by poor or inefficient record keeping by agencies or ministers.

- 4.30 Decision making time does not include time spent by agency officers, other than the decision maker, discussing and reviewing between themselves the results of search or retrieval activities. It is assumed that the decision maker has the skills and experience needed to make a decision on the request.

Charge for decision making time

- 4.31 An agency or minister can charge for the time spent by the decision maker:⁹

... in deciding whether to grant, refuse or defer access to the document or to grant access to a copy of the document with deletions, including the time spent:

- a. examining the document
- b. consulting with any person or body
- c. making a copy with deletion
- d. notifying any interim or final decision on the request (Charges Regulations, Schedule 1, Part 1, Item 4(d)).

- 4.32 Item 4 further provides there is no charge for the first five hours of decision-making time.

- 4.33 Other actions not specifically listed in Part 1, Item 4 can also be included in the charge for decision making. Examples include the time spent by an agency preparing a schedule of documents or a recommendation for the authorised decision maker. On the other hand, the time of other officers the decision maker consults in the course of making a decision will not ordinarily fall within that definition, because the authorised decision maker is expected to have the necessary skills and understanding to decide access issues.

- 4.34 An underlying assumption in calculating decision making time is that the officers involved in this process are skilled and efficient. For example, it is assumed that an officer who is deciding whether an exemption applies has appropriate knowledge of the FOI Act and the scope of the exemption provisions.

Charge for actual costs incurred by agency

- 4.35 An agency or minister can impose a charge that does not exceed the actual cost incurred by the agency or minister in:

- producing a document containing information that is not available in a discrete form in documents of an agency by using a computer or other equipment ordinarily used for retrieving or collating stored information to make a decision on a request (Charges Regulations, Schedule 1, Part 1, Item 2)
- applying deletions to a document produced using a computer or other equipment in response to a request for information that is not available in a discrete form in a document of the agency or minister (Schedule 1, Part 2, Item 4)
- producing a computer tape or disk (Schedule 1, Part 2, Item 5)
- arranging for an applicant to hear a recording or view a stored image (Schedule 1, Part 2, Item 6)
- producing a copy of a recording, film or videotape (Schedule 1, Part 2, Item 7)

⁹ Charges Regulations, Schedule 1, Part 1, Item 4.

- posting or delivering a document to an applicant, as requested by the applicant (Schedule 1, Part 2, Item 9).

- 4.36 Item 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 1 provides for a charge for the actual cost of using a computer or other equipment to produce a document containing information that is not available in a discrete form in documents of an agency.¹⁰ This item may include staff costs incurred in writing a computer program to generate the information sought, but does not permit an agency to charge for staff costs for search or retrieval (to ascertain whether the requested information is available in a discrete form in documents of the agency), because search and retrieval costs are limited to an hourly rate of \$15 per hour under Item 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 1.
- 4.37 Digital technology has greatly reduced the cost of producing and copying electronically stored documents, recordings and visual images. This should be reflected in an agency's decision making in relation to considering if or how charges should apply. Agencies and ministers should, as far as practicable, use the latest technology to give applicants access to documents promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.
- 4.38 An agency or minister must keep a full and accurate record of actual costs incurred to enable the Information Commissioner, when undertaking an IC review, to examine whether a charge is justified.

Charge for access in an alternative form

- 4.39 An applicant who requests access in a particular form is entitled to receive it in that form, unless any of the exceptions in s 20(3) of the FOI Act apply (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). If an alternative form of access is given in accordance with s 20(3), a higher charge cannot be imposed than if access had been given in the form requested by the applicant (s 20(4)).
- 4.40 If access to a document can be provided in two or more forms and an applicant does not specify a particular form of access, the charge imposed cannot be higher than if access was given in the form to which the lowest charge applies.

Charge for access to exempt document

- 4.41 It is open to an agency or minister, in response to an FOI request, to provide access to a document to which the applicant is not entitled under the FOI Act. For example, an agency can provide access to a document for which an exemption claim can be made (s 3A(2)(b) of the FOI Act). If access is given in response to a request, the Charges Regulations apply as though the applicant was entitled to be given access (s 94(3) of the FOI Act), noting that it is always open to an agency or minister to use their discretion not to impose a charge.

Exceptions to imposition of charges

Applicant's personal information

- 4.42 No charge is payable if an applicant is seeking access to a document that contains their own personal information (s 7(1) of the Charges Regulations). The same rule applies under Australian Privacy Principle 12 of the *Privacy Act 1988* (Privacy Act), which requires an entity that holds personal information about an individual to give the individual access to the information on request, and further provides that the entity cannot impose a charge for providing access.¹¹
- 4.43 Section 4(1) of the FOI Act says that 'personal information' has the same meaning as in the Privacy Act, which provides in s 6:

¹⁰ For example, installing a computer program that can create a single document containing information from different data sets.

¹¹ See Chapter 12 of the Information Commissioner's APP Guidelines at oaic.gov.au

personal information means information or an opinion about an identified individual, or an individual who is reasonably identifiable:

- a. whether the information or opinion is true or not; and
- b. whether the information or opinion is recorded in a material form or not.

- 4.44 In essence, personal information is information about an identified or identifiable individual. The information may also be publicly known. (See Part 6 of these Guidelines for further discussion of the definition of ‘personal information’.)
- 4.45 A document that contains the personal information of an applicant can fall within this exception even if the document also contains non-personal information. An example is given in the decision of *‘CN’ and Australian Customs and Border Protection Service*, where the Information Commissioner found that no charge could be imposed in relation to a request for CCTV footage that clearly identified the applicant.¹² If the personal information forms a small part of a document and an agency or minister can reasonably be expected to expend extra time or resources providing access to the entire document, it may be appropriate for the agency or minister to impose a charge for providing access to the portion of the document that does not contain personal information.¹³ Before doing so, the agency or minister should consult the applicant about narrowing the scope of the request to that part of the document that contains only the applicant’s personal information.

Decision not made within statutory time limit

- 4.46 Section 15(5)(b) of the FOI Act provides that an applicant is to be notified of a decision on a request not later than 30 days after the agency or minister received the request. This period can be extended by:
- an agency or minister to facilitate consultation with an affected third party, foreign government or organisation (ss 15(6) and (8))
 - agreement with the applicant (s 15AA), or
 - the Information Commissioner (s 15AB).
- 4.47 If an applicant is not notified of a decision on a request within the statutory time limit (including any extension of time listed above), the agency or minister cannot impose a charge for providing access, even if the applicant was earlier notified that a charge was payable (ss 7(2) and (3) of the Charges Regulations). If the applicant paid a deposit it must be refunded (s 12(3)).
- 4.48 If an agency or minister fails to make a decision within the applicable statutory time limit, resulting in a deemed access refusal decision, the Information Commissioner may grant an extension of time under s 15AC on the agency or minister’s application. In these circumstances, the agency or minister must proceed to make an actual decision but cannot impose a charge because the decision is still regarded as out of time for charging purposes (ss 7(2) and (3)).

Decision making time

- 4.49 There is no charge for the first five hours of time spent making a decision (Charges Regulations, Schedule 1, Part 1, Item 4). There is no equivalent provision for searching or retrieving documents.

The Goods and Services Tax

¹² [2014] AICmr 87 [12]–[13].

¹³ *‘CK’ and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 93.

- 4.50 The Goods and Services Tax (GST) is not payable on FOI charges. Section 81-10 of *A New Tax System (Goods and Services Tax) Act 1999* provides that GST applies to payments of Australian taxes, fees and charges, *except* those involving a fee or a charge paid to an Australian government agency if the fee or charge relates to ‘recording information; copying information; modifying information; allowing access to information; receiving information, processing information and searching for information’.

Charging procedures

- 4.51 Agencies may develop and publish on their website their own internal procedures for imposing charges, consistent with the FOI Act, the Charges Regulations and these Guidelines. This will assist the public understand the agency’s approach to imposing charges, and the supporting evidence the agency requires from applicants who apply for a reduction or waiver of a charge.
- 4.52 Agencies should give applicants an early indication of the likely cost of processing their request and an opportunity to modify or withdraw the request if they wish. The option of providing administrative access to information without payment of a charge can also be discussed with an applicant.¹⁴
- 4.53 Agencies should assist applicants to identify the specific documents they are seeking to enable them to focus their request on the documents required and minimise potential charges.¹⁵ This approach will also help agencies avoid unnecessarily expending resources searching for and retrieving documents the applicant does not want. Where the information requested is freely available elsewhere (such as on the agency’s website or in a publicly released report), agencies should draw the applicant’s attention to the location of this information and check whether this satisfies the applicant’s request (see [4.6] above).

Making a decision to impose a charge

Notifying a charge

- 4.54 Section 29(1) of the FOI Act provides that an applicant must be given a notice in writing when an agency or minister decides the applicant is liable to pay a charge set out in Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations. The notice must specify:
- a. that the applicant is liable to pay a charge
 - b. the agency or minister’s preliminary assessment of the charge and the basis for the calculation
 - c. the applicant’s right to contend that the charge has been wrongly assessed or should be reduced or not imposed
 - d. that the agency or minister, in considering any contention, must take into account whether payment of the charge would cause financial hardship to the applicant or the person on whose behalf the application was made, and whether giving access to the document would be in the public interest
 - e. the amount of any deposit payable by the applicant (see also s 12(1) of the Charges Regulations)
 - f. the applicant’s obligation to notify in writing within 30 days that they:
 - i) agree to pay the charge

¹⁴ *Australian Pain Management Association and Department of Health* [2014] AICmr 49 [35]. See also the discussion of administrative access in Part 3 of these Guidelines.

¹⁵ This is reflected in s 3(4) of the FOI Act, which provides that the functions and powers given under the FOI Act are to be performed or exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

- ii) dispute the charge, including seeking waiver or reduction, or
 - iii) withdraw the FOI request
 - g. that the FOI request will be taken to have been withdrawn if the applicant fails to respond within 30 days (or such further period as the agency or Minister allows).
- 4.55 To assist an applicant, an agency or minister may include other information in a notice, for example, that:
- the agency or minister, in deciding whether to not impose or reduce a charge, can take into account matters other than financial hardship and the public interest in disclosure (s 29(5))
 - a deposit paid by an applicant is not refundable unless the agency or minister decides not to impose the charge or fails to make a decision on the applicant's FOI request within the statutory time limit, including any extension (s 12(3) of the Charges Regulations)
 - the applicant is not entitled to access any document until all charges are paid (s 11A(1)(b) of the FOI Act and s 11(1) of the Charges Regulations). This rule does not apply to a supervision charge unless the applicant has received an estimate of the charge (s 11(2) of the Charges Regulations).
- 4.56 Agencies and ministers could include payment options in the preliminary assessment notice to enable efficient payment by applicants in the event that they do not wish to contest the charge. Applicants must agree to pay the charge and/or contest the charge within 30 days (s 29(1)(f)). Notification of agreement to pay the charge does not need to take a specific form. The OAI recommends that agencies and ministers adopt a flexible approach and accept payment of the charge as agreement to pay the charge. This approach minimises delay and promotes the objects of the FOI Act, which include facilitating and promoting public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

Disputing a preliminary estimate of a charge

- 4.57 The assessment notice must also inform applicants that they can still contest the preliminary costs assessment even if they have paid (an option that allows processing of the FOI request to continue while the charge is being contested). The preliminary assessment notice is not itself a reviewable decision. To contest the preliminary costs assessment an applicant must, within 30 days, apply in writing to the agency or minister for the charge to be corrected, reduced or not imposed (s 29(1)(f)(ii)). After receiving the applicant's written application, the agency or minister has a discretion to reduce or not impose the charge or to maintain the charge. The agency or minister must consider the applicant's views and notify the applicant about its final decision on the amount of charge payable within 30 days (s 29(6)). This is a reviewable decision.

Applicant's right to seek review and/or make complaint

- 4.58 If the agency or minister decides not to exercise its discretion to reduce or not impose a charge (an access refusal decision under s 53A(e) of the FOI Act), the applicant may seek review of the decision (but only *after* disputing a preliminary estimate of a charge issued under s 29(1) of the FOI Act) by applying for:
- internal review by the agency or minister (s 54), or
 - IC review (s 54L).

An applicant may apply for IC review of either:

- a decision on internal review of an access refusal decision about a charge (s 54C), or

- an access refusal decision about a charge under s 29 (without first seeking internal review).
- 4.59 The Information Commissioner is of the view that it is usually better for an applicant to seek internal review of an agency or minister's decision before applying for IC review. Internal review can be quicker than external review and enables an agency to take a fresh look at its original decision.
- 4.60 An applicant may also make a written complaint to the Information Commissioner under s 70 of the FOI Act. However, as noted at [11.4] of the FOI Guidelines, the Commissioner is of the view that making a complaint is not appropriate when IC review is available, unless there is a special reason to undertake an investigation and the matter can be dealt with more appropriately and effectively that way.
- 4.61 However, an applicant cannot seek IC review of a preliminary estimate of a charge issued under s 29(1) until they have notified the agency or minister, in writing, of one of the three things in s 29(1)(f) and the agency has made a decision on the amount of the charge payable under s 29(6), or the agency or minister has not notified the applicant of a decision under s 29(6) on the amount of the charge payable within 30 days (when the agency or minister is deemed to have made a decision that the amount of charge payable is the amount of the preliminary estimate of the charge).
- 4.62 For more information about:
- applying for internal review, see Part 9 of these Guidelines
 - applying for IC review, see Part 10 of these Guidelines
 - making a complaint to the Information Commissioner, see Part 11 of these Guidelines.

Payment of a charge while seeking internal or IC review of charges decision

- 4.63 An applicant may apply to the agency or minister for a charge to be corrected, reduced or not imposed *and* also pay the charge (or deposit) so that the agency or minister continues processing the FOI request while a decision on the charge is made.
- 4.64 Payment of the charge does not necessarily indicate the applicant agrees with the imposition or calculation of the charge, nor does it prevent the applicant from seeking internal review or IC review of the charge (regardless of whether the applicant has sought internal review).¹⁶ An FOI applicant may apply for internal review or IC review either before¹⁷ or after¹⁸ paying the charge as long as the application is made within the relevant statutory timeframe after the charges decision is made under s 29:
- 30 days for internal review (s 54C) or
 - 60 days for IC review (s 54S).
- 4.65 If the decision to impose the charge is overturned on either internal or IC review, the agency is required to refund the amount paid by the applicant (s 12(3)(a) of the Charges Regulations and s 55N of the FOI Act).

Estimating a charge

¹⁶ *Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 16 [35], [39]–[40]. See also *Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (No 2) (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 17 [17]–[19].

¹⁷ See *Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (No 2) (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 17.

¹⁸ See *Justin Warren and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 16.

- 4.66 The notice to an applicant under s 29(1) of an agency or minister's preliminary assessment of a charge can include an estimated charge, if all steps necessary to make a decision on the request have not yet been taken (ss 9(1), (2) and (3) of the Charges Regulations). In practice, the preliminary assessment may be based on two elements:
- a charge (based on Part 1 of Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations) for work already done by the agency or minister, for example, search and retrieval of documents
 - an estimated charge for work still to be done.
- 4.67 An estimate based on work still to be done can relate to any item listed in Schedule 1 of the Charges Regulations, for example:
- a charge for further action that may be required to make a decision; such as search or retrieval, examination of documents, and consultation with affected third parties
 - a charge for providing access other than by personal inspection; such as photocopying, postage and supervision of an applicant by agency personnel while inspecting, hearing or viewing a document.
- 4.68 An estimated charge must be as fair and accurate as possible. An agency or minister should be mindful not to set an unreasonably high estimate which may hinder or deter the applicant from pursuing their FOI request because this is not in keeping with the objects of the FOI Act to facilitate and promote access at the lowest reasonable cost.
- 4.69 Furthermore, as discussed at [4.29]-[4.30] above, the estimate should be based on an assumption that the agency or minister maintains a well-organised record keeping system that enables easy identification and location of documents.
- 4.70 It is wise for an agency or minister, in estimating a charge, to be guided by previous experience dealing with FOI requests of a similar nature. Where the agency or minister has not dealt with FOI requests of a similar nature, it is recommended that the agency or minister obtain an estimate of the processing time by sampling the documents at issue.

Charges calculators

- 4.71 A commonly used tool for estimating charges under s 29 is a 'charges calculator'. Calculators come in different forms, but often contain a number of predetermined parameters based on assumptions about how long an FOI request should take to process.
- 4.72 A charges calculator cannot produce an accurate estimate without accurate inputs and caution is required when using such a resource. Some documents may contain complex material which may justify longer processing times, while others may be quite straightforward and require significantly less time to review.
- 4.73 A common parameter included in a charges calculator is that examining relevant pages for decision making will take five minutes per page, and for exempt material, an additional five minutes per page is needed for review. However, unless the document at issue is particularly complex, it may be difficult for an agency or minister to adequately justify an estimate that it will take 10 minutes to process each page of the relevant documents.¹⁹

Sampling

- 4.74 Where a decision is made to use a charges calculator to estimate a charge, the agency or minister should examine a sample of the relevant documents and adjust the parameters of the charges calculator accordingly.
- 4.75 Generally, where a large number of documents have been identified in response to an FOI request and the agency or minister decides it is appropriate to impose a charge, there is an

¹⁹ 'GD' and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [\[2015\] AICmr 46](#) [21].

expectation that the agency or minister will obtain an accurate estimate by sampling a reasonable selection of the relevant documents.

- 4.76 A representative sample of at least 10 percent of the documents is generally considered an appropriate sample size to assess processing time.²⁰ This provides the agency or minister with an indication of the time that may be required to make a decision on the request. However where the request involves a large number of documents, a smaller sample size may be appropriate. In all cases, a representative sample is required.
- 4.77 Agencies and ministers should assess the amount of time it will take to search for and/or retrieve the documents held in the representative sample, as well as the amount of time it will take to examine, consider any exemptions that may apply, and prepare a decision for those documents. The figures derived from the representative sample should then be used to calculate the total processing time for the documents within the scope of the applicant's request. See Part 3 of these Guidelines for further discussion of sampling in the context of practical refusals under s 24AA(1)(a) of the FOI Act.

Adjusting an estimated charge

- 4.78 After making a decision on an FOI request where a charge was estimated under s 9 of the Charges Regulations, an agency or minister is required to calculate the final charge based on the actual time taken to process the request, using the applicable charges in Schedule 1 (s 10(1)). The new charge may be different to the estimated charge. If the new charge is less than the amount already paid by an applicant, a refund of the difference *must* be made (s 10(5)(a)). If the new charge is higher than the amount already paid, that payment will be treated as a deposit on account of the charge (s 10(5)(b)).
- 4.79 The 2019 Charges Regulations introduce new provisions allowing for adjustment of an estimated charge after the FOI request has been processed — see ss 10(2) and (3).
- 4.80 Section 10(2) provides that if the estimate of the charge is *more* than the actual amount the applicant is liable to pay (when all the work has been done on the request), the agency or minister *must* decrease the charge payable to reflect the actual cost of processing the request. For example, if the initial request is for a large number of documents and the estimated charge is therefore high, but the applicant then reduces the scope of the request which reduces actual processing costs, the agency or minister *must* reduce the charge to the actual cost of processing the request.
- 4.81 Section 10(3) provides that if the estimate of the charge is *less* than the actual amount the applicant is liable to pay (when all work has been done on the request), the agency or minister *may* increase the charge payable to the actual amount of the charge. However, an agency or minister cannot increase the charge under s 10 if the agency or minister decides to refuse access to the requested document (s 10(3)(b)). For example, if a request is for access to two documents and a decision is made to refuse access to one document, a charge increased under s 10 can only include the cost of processing the document to which access was given. Similarly, if a decision is made to refuse access to parts of a document, an increased charge under s 10 can only include the cost of processing that part of the document to which access has been granted.
- 4.82 Consistent with the objects of the FOI Act, situations where it may be appropriate for an agency or minister to exercise the discretion not to increase the charge under s 10(3) include:
- where the amount payable is substantially higher than the estimated charge

²⁰ For example, in *Tager and Department of the Environment* [2014] AICmr 59 [24], a 10 percent sample of the documents was used to estimate the cost of processing the applicant's request.

- where the charge was underestimated due to agency error or poor record keeping or
- inefficient FOI processing practices mean that accessing documents or processing the request takes longer than anticipated.

4.83 It is open to an agency or minister, when processing an FOI request, to give interim advice to an applicant that a charge may be higher than the estimated charge and the reasons why it may be higher; it is good administrative practice to do so. The applicant can be invited to revise either the scope of the request or the preferred form of access, with a view to reducing the charge.

Deposits

4.84 An agency or minister, in notifying an applicant under s 29(1) of the FOI Act of a liability to pay a charge or estimated charge, may require the applicant to pay a deposit (s 29(1)(e) of the FOI Act, s 12(1) of the Charges Regulations). The deposit cannot be higher than \$20 if the notified charge is between \$25 and \$100, or 25 percent of a notified charge that exceeds \$100 (s 12(2)). The agency or minister can defer work on the applicant's request until the deposit is paid or a decision is made not to impose the charge following an application by the applicant (s 31(2)).

Refunds of deposits

4.85 A deposit paid by an applicant does not have to be wholly or partly refunded unless the agency or minister:

- decides to reduce (to an amount lower than the deposit paid) or not impose a charge following an application by the applicant under s 29(4) (see also s 12(3)(a) of the Charges Regulations)
- fails to make a decision on the applicant's FOI request within the statutory time limit, including any extension (s 12(3)(b)), or
- sets a final charge, after making a decision on the FOI request, that is lower than the amount already paid as a deposit (s 10(5)(a)).

4.86 Section 10(3)(b) of the Charges Regulations provides that an agency or minister cannot increase a charge for a document if access is refused. It is open to the agency or minister to refund a deposit paid for access to a document if access is refused in full.

4.87 The agency should refund the deposit in the same way the deposit was paid (for example, direct credit into a bank account). The FOI Act does not provide for the issuing of a 'credit note' to offset potential charges for future FOI requests.

Collecting a charge generally

4.88 Section 3(4) of the FOI Act provides that functions and powers given under the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost. In keeping with this object, the method of payment required by an agency should facilitate prompt access to documents.²¹ Requiring payment of a charge by cheque or money order, without giving the option of electronic payment, does not facilitate and promote access to documents at the lowest reasonable cost and is therefore inconsistent with the objects of the FOI Act.

4.89 Further, requiring payment by cheque involves additional handling to process and clear funds; it can also attract fees. Cheques usually take at least three business days to clear and this delays the provision of prompt access to documents. Payment by electronic funds transfer, credit or debit card, or online payment (for example, BPAY) is faster, more efficient and less

²¹ 'ND' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information) [2017] AICmr 119 [25].

costly for both the applicant and the agency and gives best effect to the FOI Act object of facilitating and promoting access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

- 4.90 If an applicant is liable to pay a charge, the charge must be paid before access to documents can be given (s 11A(1)(b) of the FOI Act and s 11(1) of the Charges Regulations). An exception applies if the charge is for supervising an applicant's personal inspection of documents or hearing or viewing an audio or visual recording (s 11(2)). Payment of the charge cannot be required in advance of inspection or viewing, unless the agency or minister has made a decision under ss 9(1)(c), (2) and (3)(c) of the Charges Regulations estimating the probable length of the period of inspection or viewing.
- 4.91 The Information Commissioner is of the view that a charge assessed by an agency under the Charges Regulations is not a debt due to the Commonwealth that can be recovered by the agency. Although the FOI Act states that an agency may decide 'that an applicant is liable to pay a charge' and an applicant may signify agreement to pay the charge (s 29(1)), other elements necessary to create a debt due to the Commonwealth are absent. For example, neither the FOI Act nor the Charges Regulations state that an assessed charge is a debt due to the Commonwealth, nor do they confer jurisdiction on any court to enforce a debt. Further, an assessed charge is not necessarily a settled amount and the FOI Act provides its own limited mechanism to ensure assessed charges are paid before access is granted.

Collecting the remainder of a charge where deposit paid

- 4.92 The FOI Act does not set a time limit for an applicant to pay the remaining balance of a charge after a decision is made on the FOI request. If the applicant fails to pay the remainder of a charge after being notified of a decision on the request, or cannot be contacted, the request could be on hand indefinitely. This is because s 11 of the Charges Regulations provides that any charge in respect of the request must be paid before access can be given to documents. If the applicant does not pay the charge, the requested documents cannot be released and there is no mechanism in the FOI Act to finalise the request. Further, as noted at [4.92], a charge assessed by an agency under the Charges Regulations lacks many features of a debt due to the Commonwealth that can be recovered by an agency.
- 4.93 Good administrative practice would have the agency or minister ask the applicant to respond within a specified timeframe after receiving written notice of a decision and reasons with respect to the request by doing one of the following:
- paying the balance of the charge
 - seeking internal review or IC review, or
 - withdrawing the FOI request.
- 4.94 The agency should advise the applicant that if they do not receive the remaining balance within the specified timeframe, the FOI request will be taken to have been withdrawn. While the FOI Act does not specify a timeframe for the applicant's response, noting that an applicant has 60 days in which to seek IC review of a decision relating to the imposition of a charge or the amount of a charge, 60 days can be regarded as a reasonable period.

Correction, reduction or waiver of charges

- 4.95 As outlined in [4.11]–[4.13] above, after receiving a preliminary estimate of the charge under s 29(1), it is open to the applicant to apply for reduction or waiver of the charge. Where the applicant contends that the charge has been wrongly assessed, the central issue to be considered is whether relevant provisions of the FOI Act and the Charges Regulations have

been correctly understood and applied.²² If an applicant contends that a charge should be reduced or waived, the agency or minister has a general discretion to decide that question. Two matters set out under s 29(5) of the FOI Act must be considered:

- a. whether payment of the charge, or part of it, would cause financial hardship to the applicant or to a person on whose behalf the application was made, and
- b. whether giving access to the document in question is in the general public interest or in the interest of a substantial section of the public.

4.96 In addition to considering these two matters, an agency or minister may consider any other relevant matter and, in particular, should give genuine consideration to any contention or submission made by an applicant as to why a charge should be reduced or not imposed. An agency or minister cannot fetter the discretion conferred by s 29(4) of the FOI Act by adopting a rule that confines the matters that can be considered or the circumstances in which a charge will be reduced or not imposed. For example, where the applicant agreed to pay a charge in a previous FOI request, an agency or minister cannot rely on this fact to impose a charge for all subsequent FOI requests by the same applicant without considering the merits of each request for reduction or waiver.²³

4.97 Moreover, an agency or minister should always consider whether disclosure of a document will advance the objects of the FOI Act, even if the applicant has not expressly framed a submission on that basis. The objects of the FOI Act include promoting better informed decision making, and increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the Government's activities (s 3).

4.98 Section 29(5) mandates what a decision maker must take into account when determining whether to reduce or not impose a charge. The section does not require the applicant to establish both financial hardship *and* that the giving of access to the document is in the general public interest or in the interest of a substantial section of the public.

4.99 An agency or minister is also entitled to consider matters that weigh against those relied on by an applicant. For example, an agency may decide it is appropriate to impose an FOI charge where:

- the applicant can be expected to derive a commercial or personal benefit or advantage from being given access and it is reasonable to expect the applicant to meet all or part of the charge²⁴
- the documents are primarily of interest only to the applicant and are not of general public interest or of interest to a substantial section of the public²⁵
- the information in the documents has already been published by an agency and the documents do not add to the public record
- the applicant has requested access to a substantial volume of documents and significant work will be required to process the request.

4.100 An agency or minister may decide not to impose a charge wholly or in part, but where the charge is only partially reduced, it should fully explain and justify the reduced charge (s 29(8)). If an agency or minister accepts that disclosure of a document will be in the general public

²² For example, see *Tager and Department of the Environment* [2014] AICmr 59 and *'DL' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 119.

²³ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65.

²⁴ However, the fact that the document might form the basis of a journalistic article is not enough to demonstrate that the applicant can be expected to derive a commercial or personal benefit from being given access to the documents, because not all articles researched will be written or published: see *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65.

²⁵ For example, see *Tennant and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2014] AATA 452.

interest or that there will be financial hardship to the applicant, it may be difficult for it to justify why a charge has been reduced instead of not imposed.²⁶ This is discussed further below.

Financial hardship

4.101 Whether payment of a charge will cause financial hardship to an applicant is primarily concerned with the applicant's financial circumstances and the amount of the estimated charge. Financial hardship means more than an applicant having to meet a charge from his or her own resources. The decision in *'AY' and Australian Broadcasting Corporation*²⁷ referred to the definition of financial hardship in guidelines issued by the Department of Finance for the purpose of debt waiver decisions:

Financial hardship exists when payment of the debt would leave you unable to provide food, accommodation, clothing, medical treatment, education or other necessities for yourself or your family, or other people for whom you are responsible.

4.102 Different hardship considerations may apply if the request is made by an incorporated body or an unincorporated association.²⁸ The mere fact that costs for FOI requests have not been budgeted for has been held to be a commercial decision, rather than a matter of a lack of funds.²⁹

4.103 An applicant relying on this ground will ordinarily be expected to provide some evidence of financial hardship.³⁰ For example, the applicant may rely on (and provide evidence of) receipt of a pension or income support payment, or provide evidence of income, debts or assets. However, an agency should be cautious about conducting an intrusive inquiry into an applicant's personal financial circumstances. Agencies need to have regard to the objects of the Privacy Act, which include minimising the collection of personal information to that required for the particular function or activity. For example, in this case, to make a decision whether to waive or reduce a charge.

4.104 Where an applicant demonstrates that payment of the charge will cause financial hardship, it may be difficult for the agency to justify why the imposition of a charge would be appropriate.³¹

Public interest

4.105 The FOI Act requires an agency or minister to consider 'whether the giving of access to the document in question is in the general public interest or in the interest of a substantial section

²⁶ See *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 584; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65 and *'CK' and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 83.

²⁷ [2014] AICmr 7 [20]. The definition has been retained in Finance guidelines that replace those referred to in the decision, see <https://www.finance.gov.au/resource-management/discretionary-financial-assistance/waiver-debt-mechanism/information-applicants/>

²⁸ *Australian Pain Management Association and Department of Health* [2014] AICmr 49.

²⁹ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65.

³⁰ For example, see *'CK' and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 83 [13]–[14]; *'AY' and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2014] AICmr 7 [18]–[24] and *'DL' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 119 [21]–[25].

³¹ For example, in *'CK' and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 83, the Acting Freedom of Information Commissioner was satisfied that payment of a charge would cause financial hardship to the applicant and decided that the charge should be waived in full.

of the public' (s 29(5)(b)).³² This test is different to, and can be distinguished from, public interest considerations that may arise under other provisions of the FOI Act.

- 4.106 Specifically, the public interest in s 29(5)(b) is different to the public interest test in s 11A(5) that applies to conditionally exempt documents. Nor will s 29(5)(b) be satisfied only by a contention that it is in the public interest for an individual with a special interest in a document to be granted access to it, or that an underlying premise of the FOI Act is that transparency is in the public interest.
- 4.107 An applicant relying on s 29(5)(b) should identify or specify the 'general public interest' or the 'substantial section of the public' that will benefit from this disclosure (s 29(1)(f)(ii)). This may require consideration of both the content of the documents requested and the context in which their public release would occur. Matters to be considered include whether the information in the documents is already publicly available, the nature and currency of the topic of public interest to which the documents relate, and the way in which a public benefit may flow from the release of the documents.³³
- 4.108 There is no presumption that the public interest test is satisfied by reason only that the applicant is a Member of Parliament, a journalist, or a community or non-profit organisation. It is necessary to go beyond the status of the applicant and to look at all the circumstances. The fact that a media organisation may derive commercial benefit from publication of a story based on an FOI request is a relevant consideration, but it is not by itself a basis for declining to reduce or waive a charge.³⁴ Nor is an applicant required to show that they will publish the document,³⁵ although the applicant may be expected to draw a link between being granted access to the documents and a derivative benefit to either the general public interest or a substantial section of the public.
- 4.109 The 'public interest' is a broad concept that cannot be exhaustively defined. When considering the public interest, it is important that the agency or minister direct its attention to the advancement of the interests or welfare of the public, and this will depend on each particular set of circumstances.³⁶ Further, the public interest is not a static concept confined or defined by strict reference points.³⁷ The following examples nevertheless illustrate circumstances in which the giving of access may be in the general public interest or in the interest of a substantial section of the public:
- The document relates to a matter of public debate, or to a policy issue under discussion within an agency, and disclosure will assist public comment on, or participation in, the debate or discussion.³⁸ For example, the regulation of firearms in the context of the Australian economy and public safety (*Jon Patty and Attorney-General's Department*

³² This question is considered in a number of IC review and AAT decisions. See, for example, *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 584; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 54; *Rita Lahoud and Department of Education and Training* [2016] AICmr 5; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65 and *'DL' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 119.

³³ *Tennant and Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [2014] AATA 452 [21].

³⁴ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65.

³⁵ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65 [22].

³⁶ *McKinnon v Secretary, Department of Treasury* [2005] FCAFC 142 [9].

³⁷ *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 945 [54].

³⁸ Such as Australia's humanitarian refugee resettlement program and deaths in immigration detention: see *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65 and *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 100.

(Freedom of information) [2018] AICmr 28 [29]); coal mining by an Australian business in Papua New Guinea (*Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 13 [32]) and ASIC's regulation of major corporate financial institutions (*Ben Butler and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 18 [28]–[29]).

- The document relates to an agency decision that has been a topic of public interest or discussion, and disclosure of the document will better inform the public as to why or how the decision was made, including highlighting any problems or flaws that occurred in the decision making process.³⁹
- The document will add to the public record on an important and recurring aspect of agency decision making.⁴⁰
- The document is to be used for research that is to be published widely or that complements research being undertaken in an agency or elsewhere in the research community.⁴¹
- The document is to be used by a community or non-profit organisation in preparing a submission to a parliamentary or government inquiry, for example, on a law reform, social justice, civil liberty, financial regulation, or environmental or heritage protection issue.⁴²
- The document is to be used by a member of Parliament in parliamentary or public debate on an issue of public interest or general interest in the member's electorate.⁴³
- The document is to be used by a journalist to prepare a story for publication that is likely to be of general public interest.⁴⁴

4.110 In applying these and related examples, an agency or minister may also consider whether the range or volume of documents requested by an applicant can be considered reasonably necessary for the purpose of contributing to public discussion or analysis of an issue.

³⁹ Such as the use of Commonwealth resources and expenditure of public funds: see *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 584; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 54; *Tasmanian Special Timbers Alliance Inc and Department of the Environment and Energy (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 124 and *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 131.

⁴⁰ Such as the expenditure of taxpayer money by contractors funded to provide overseas development assistance on behalf of the Australian Government: see *Emmanuel Freudenthal and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 15 [40]. Note also 'CF' and *Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 73 and 'CW' and *Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 99 on the issue of debt waiver. See also *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 131 [33] regarding how 'taxpayer money is being spent in the ... context of international travel for overseas visitors or delegations'.

⁴¹ See *McBeth and Australian Agency for International Development* [2012] AICmr 24 and *Knapp and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2014] AICmr 58.

⁴² See *Fingal Head Community Association Inc and Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development* [2014] AICmr 70 and *Australian Pain Management Association and Department of Health* [2014] AICmr 49.

⁴³ See *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 584 and *Fletcher and Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (No. 3)* [2012] AICmr 15.

⁴⁴ See *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 65; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 54; *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 131 and *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 13.

- 4.111 The AAT decision of *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)*⁴⁵ explains that an agency should compare the number of documents within the scope of an FOI request and the cost of processing against the subject matter of the request when deciding whether to exercise its discretion to waive a charge on public interest grounds.⁴⁶ The decision in *Tasmanian Special Timbers Alliance Inc and Department of the Environment and Energy (Freedom of information)*⁴⁷ applied the balancing exercise in *MacTiernan* to decide whether the discretion to waive a charge on public interest grounds should be exercised.⁴⁸ To apply the *MacTiernan* balancing exercise, it is not necessary for the subject matter of the FOI request to be readily quantifiable in financial terms.⁴⁹
- 4.112 Where an agency accepts that giving access to the document in question would be in the general public interest but decides not to waive the charge, the agency should adequately justify why it is appropriate for the charge to be imposed in the circumstances. The agency or minister should also consider whether imposing the charge would be at odds with the 'lowest reasonable cost' objective in s 3 of the FOI Act.⁵⁰
- 4.113 An agency or minister cannot exercise the discretion in s 29(4) solely on the basis that, if the charge is not paid in full, the applicant would not be meeting the reasonable cost of processing their FOI application.⁵¹ Nor should an agency or minister take into account whether an applicant may use a document in a manner that may lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding in public debate.⁵²

Other grounds for reduction or waiver

- 4.114 An agency or minister has a general discretion to reduce or not impose a charge, and this discretion is not limited to financial hardship or public interest grounds. The following non-exhaustive list of examples illustrates circumstances in which it may be appropriate to reduce or not impose a charge:
- The cost of calculating and collecting a charge might exceed the cost to the agency of processing the request.⁵³

⁴⁵ [\[2015\] AATA 584](#) [30].

⁴⁶ The Tribunal compared the number of documents identified (88 documents, comprising 498 pages) and the cost of processing the FOI request (\$2,291.36) against the subject of the FOI request (a proposed \$1 billion (plus) government (taxpayer) funded infrastructure project) and found that giving access to the documents in question would be in the general public interest or at the very least, in the interest of a substantial section of the public.

⁴⁷ [\[2017\] AICmr 124](#) [33]–[34].

⁴⁸ The Information Commissioner compared the number of documents identified (510 documents, comprising 2,035 pages) and the cost of processing the FOI request (\$3,154) against the subject of the FOI request (departmental oversight of significant grants, including a \$2.2 million dollar grant to a non-profit organisation) and found that giving access to the documents in question would be in the general public interest.

⁴⁹ See '*MR*' and *Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of information)* [\[2017\] AICmr 102](#) [35]–[36]; *David Albuquerque and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [\[2017\] AICmr 67](#) [24] and '*KW*' and *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [\[2017\] AICmr 21](#) [25]–[28].

⁵⁰ This consideration is particularly relevant 'where the charge was based on an inefficient records management system and therefore the charge would transfer the cost of that inefficiency to the FOI applicant': *Ben Butler and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [\[2017\] AICmr 18](#) [30].

⁵¹ *Baljurda Comprehensive Consulting Pty Ltd and the Australian Agency for International Development* [\[2011\] AICmr 8](#) [28].

⁵² *Real Health Care Reform Pty Ltd and Department of Health and Ageing* [\[2013\] AICmr 60](#) [28].

⁵³ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [\[2015\] AICmr 65](#) [31].

- A member of Parliament has requested access on behalf of a constituent to a document containing personal information, for which the constituent would not have been required to pay a charge.
- The applicant needs the document for a pending court or tribunal hearing.
- Giving access to the document could assure the agency that it has accorded procedural fairness to the applicant in an administrative proceeding the agency is conducting.
- The document is required for research purposes for which no commercial benefit will flow to the applicant.⁵⁴
- Reduction or waiver of the charge would enhance the agency-client relationship.
- The agency was able to identify and retrieve the document easily and at minimal cost.
- The Information Commissioner or AAT has decided in similar circumstances that charges should not be imposed.

4.115 It may also be appropriate to reduce or waive a charge if the applicant responds to a charge notice by revising the terms of their request so that it requires less work to process.⁵⁵ However, where an agency or minister decides only to reduce rather than waive a charge in these circumstances, it will generally be appropriate to provide the applicant with a re-calculated charge estimate before making a final decision about the charge. Given the object of the FOI Act to provide prompt access at the lowest reasonable cost, agencies should be particularly careful to justify imposing a charge where it has previously been decided that a practical refusal reason exists, but either through consultation or on IC review, the practical refusal reason no longer exists or is found not to exist.⁵⁶

Agencies may retain charges collected

4.116 Charges imposed under the FOI Act are prescribed as a received amount for the purposes of s 27 of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014*. Agencies may retain such charges under s 74(1) of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. For further details see Resource Management Guide No. 307: Retainable receipts, dated December 2017, which is available on the Department of Finance's website at www.finance.gov.au.

Review of decision to charge

4.117 A decision under the FOI Act declining to reduce a charge or not impose a charge is an access refusal decision and therefore subject to internal review, IC review and review by the AAT (ss 54, 54L and 57A). Each is a merit review process, in which the review authority will review whether the charge was correctly assessed, whether the charge should be reduced or waived on financial hardship or public interest grounds, or more generally whether the discretion to impose the charge should be exercised differently. For further guidance on internal review and review by the Information Commissioner, see Parts 9 and 10 of these Guidelines.

Notifying the internal review applicant of an affirmed charges decision

4.118 The FOI Act does not set a time limit for an applicant to respond after the applicant has contested a charge and the agency has carried out an internal review. If the applicant fails to pay the new or reaffirmed charge or cannot be contacted, the request could be on hand indefinitely.

⁵⁴ *Knapp and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2014] AICmr 58 [41].

⁵⁵ *Rita Lahoud and Department of Education and Training* [2016] AICmr 5 [32]-[33].

⁵⁶ *Rita Lahoud and Department of Education and Training* [2016] AICmr 5 [38].

4.119 Good administrative practice would have the agency ask the applicant to respond to the written notice of an internal review decision (s 54C(4)) within a specified timeframe by doing one of the following:

- paying the charge or any deposit specified by the agency
- seeking an IC review of the charge, or
- withdrawing the FOI request.

4.120 The agency should advise the applicant that if they do not receive a response within the specified timeframe, the FOI request will be taken to have been withdrawn. While the FOI Act does not specify a timeframe for the applicant's response, 60 days can be regarded as a reasonable period because this is the time period during which the applicant can apply for IC review.

PART 5 — EXEMPTIONS

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PART 5 — EXEMPTIONS

Introduction

5.1 Part 5 of the FOI Guidelines sets out the exemptions in Division 2 of Part IV of the FOI Act and explains the criteria that must exist before refusing access to a document in response to an FOI request.

5.2 It is important to recognise that agencies and ministers retain a discretion to provide access to a document where the law permits, even if the document meets the criteria for one of the exemptions in Division 2 of Part IV (s 3A). In each case, agencies and ministers should consider whether an exempt document can be released, to allow access wherever possible. Sections 90, 91 and 92 of the FOI Act provide protection against civil and criminal liability when documents are disclosed or published in good faith in the belief that publication or disclosure is required or permitted under the FOI Act or otherwise than under the FOI Act (whether or not under an express legislative power).

5.3 As noted in *‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency*,¹ agencies [and ministers] are not legally bound to refuse access if a document is exempt and may consider disclosure of a document if this is not otherwise legally prohibited. Such an approach is consistent with the pro-access parliamentary intention underpinning the FOI Act.

5.4 Where an FOI request for a document has been made and any required charges have been paid, an agency or minister must give access to the document unless the document at that time is an exempt document (s 11A). An exempt document is:

- (a) a document of an agency which is exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in whole or in part (see Part 2 of these Guidelines)
- (b) an official document of a minister that contains some matter not relating to the affairs of an agency or a Department of State (see Part 2) or
- (c) exempt for the purposes of Part IV of the FOI Act — that is, it meets the criteria for an exemption provision (s 4(1)).

5.5 An agency or minister can withhold access to a document under Part IV only if the document is exempt at the time the FOI request is determined. A document that was exempt at one point in time may not necessarily be exempt at a later time because circumstances may have changed.

5.6 A ‘document’ includes any part of a document that is relevant to the terms of the FOI request. Consequently, a decision maker should consider whether it is practicable to delete exempt matter and provide the balance of the document to the FOI applicant. If it is practicable to delete the exempt matter and prepare a meaningful non-exempt copy, an agency or minister must do so (s 22).

5.7 Where the FOI applicant seeks access only to that part of a document that does not contain exempt matter, and the exempt matter can be easily separated from the

¹ *‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 3 [89] and [90].

remainder of the document, it is practicable to treat the exempt matter as outside the scope of the FOI request.

5.8 The decision maker must provide a statement of reasons under s 26 if any aspect of an FOI request is refused or if access is deferred (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

Documents exempt under Part IV

5.9 Exempt documents under Part IV of the FOI Act fall into 2 categories:

- exempt under Division 2
- conditionally exempt under Division 3, where access to the document must be given unless disclosure would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest (s 11A(5)).

5.10 Exempt documents in Division 2 of Part IV are:

- documents affecting national security, defence or international relations (s 33)
- Cabinet documents (s 34)
- documents affecting enforcement of law and protection of public safety (s 37)
- documents to which secrecy provisions of enactments apply (s 38)
- documents subject to legal professional privilege (s 42)
- documents containing material obtained in confidence (s 45)
- Parliamentary Budget Office documents (s 45A)
- documents disclosure of which would be contempt of Parliament or in contempt of court (s 46)
- documents disclosing trade secrets or commercially valuable information (s 47)
- electoral rolls and related documents (s 47A).

5.11 The exemptions in Division 2 of Part IV are not subject to an overriding public interest test. If a document meets the criteria to establish a particular exemption, it is exempt. There is no additional obligation to weigh competing public interests to determine if the document should be released.

5.12 By contrast, an agency or minister cannot refuse access to a document that is conditionally exempt under Division 3, Part IV without first applying a public interest test (s 11A(5)) (see Part 6 of these Guidelines).

5.13 Table 1 is extracted from s 31A of the FOI Act and summarises how the FOI Act applies to exempt and conditionally exempt documents.

Table 1: Access to exempt and conditionally exempt documents

Item	If ...	then ...	because of ...
1	a document is an exempt document under Division 2 (exemptions) or under paragraph (b) or (c) of the definition of exempt document in s 4(1) (s 7 or an official document of a minister that contains some matter not relating to agency affairs)	access to the document is not required to be given	s 11A(4)
2	a document is a conditionally exempt document under Division 3 (public interest conditional exemptions)	access to the document is required to be given, unless it would be contrary to the public interest	s 11A(5) (see also s 11B (public interest factors))
3	a document is an exempt document as mentioned in item 1, and also a conditionally exempt document under Division 3	access to the document is not required to be given	ss 11A(4) and (6), and s 32 (interpretation)
4	access to a document is refused because it contains exempt matter, and the exempt matter can be deleted	(a) an edited copy deleting the exempt matter must be prepared (if reasonably practicable); and (b) access to the edited copy must be given	s 22
5	a document is an exempt document because of any provision of this Act	access to the document may be given apart from under this Act	s 3A (objects – information or documents otherwise accessible)

Commonly used terms

5.14 Certain expressions in the FOI Act are common to several exemptions and conditional exemptions. They are explained below.

Would or could reasonably be expected to

5.15 The test ‘would or could reasonably be expected’ appears in the following exemptions and conditional exemptions:

- national security, defence or international relations (s 33(a))
- public safety and law enforcement (ss 37(1)-(2))
- commercially valuable information (s 47(1)(b))
- Commonwealth-State relations (s 47B)

- certain operations of agencies (ss 47E(a)-(d))
- business affairs (ss 47G(1)(a)-(b)).

5.16 The test requires the decision maker to assess the likelihood of the predicted or forecast event, effect or damage occurring after disclosure of a document.²

5.17 The use of the word ‘could’ in this qualification is less stringent than ‘would’ and requires analysis of the reasonable expectation rather than certainty of an event, effect or damage occurring. It may be a reasonable expectation that an effect has occurred, is presently occurring, or could occur in the future.³

5.18 The mere risk, allegation, possibility, or chance of prejudice does not qualify as a reasonable expectation.⁴ There must, based on reasonable grounds, be at least a real, significant or material possibility of prejudice.⁵

Prejudice

5.19 Some exemptions and conditional exemptions⁶ require the decision maker to assess whether the potential disclosure of a document would be prejudicial. The FOI Act does not define prejudice. The Macquarie Dictionary definition of ‘prejudice’ requires:

- (a) disadvantage resulting from some judgement or action of another
- (b) resulting injury or detriment.

5.20 A prejudicial effect is one which would cause a bias or change to the expected results leading to detrimental or disadvantageous outcomes. There is no need to establish a ‘substantial adverse effect’ and proof of prejudice is sufficient.⁷

Documents affecting national security, defence or international relations (s 33)

5.21 Section 33 exempts from disclosure documents that affect Australia’s national security, defence or international relations. The exemption comprises 2 distinct categories of documents. A document is exempt if disclosure:

- (a) would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the Commonwealth’s security, defence or international relations or

² The test ‘would or could reasonably be expected’ has been discussed in various decisions. For example see *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 494 [37]; *Xenophon and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 3667 [98]–[103].

³ *Re Maksimovic and Australian Customs Service* [2009] AATA 28 [28].

⁴ *Re News Corporation Limited v National Companies and Securities Commission* [1984] FCA 400; (1984) 5 FCR 88; per Fox and Woodward JJ; *Re Maher and Attorney-General’s Department* [1985] AATA 180 [41]; [1985] 7 ALD 731 at 742.

⁵ *Chemical Trustee Limited and Ors and Commissioner of Taxation and Chief Executive Officer, AUSTRAC (Joined Party)* [2013] AATA 623 [79].

⁶ Sections 37(1)(a), 37(2)(a), 37(2)(c), 47E(a), 47E(b) and 47G(1)(b).

⁷ See *Re James and Ors and Australian National University* [1984] AATA 501; (1984) 6 ALD 687, per President Hall on the operation of s 32 of the FOI Act.

- (b) would divulge information or matter communicated in confidence to the Commonwealth by a foreign government, an agency of a foreign government or an international organisation.

5.22 In claiming the exemption, decision makers must examine the content of each document within the scope of the FOI request and come to a conclusion about whether disclosure of that content would cause, or could reasonably be expected to cause, the damage specified in s 33(a)(i)–(iii). The context of each document is also relevant because, while the information in the document may not itself cause harm, in combination with other known information it may contribute to a complete picture which results in harm (the ‘mosaic theory’). See [5.43] – [5.44] below for more detail on the mosaic theory.

5.23 The classification markings on a document (such as ‘secret’ or ‘confidential’) are not of themselves conclusive of whether the exemption applies (see also [5.45] – [5.50] below in relation to information communicated in confidence).⁸

Would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the Commonwealth’s security, defence or international relations (s 33(a))

Reasonably expected

5.24 The term ‘reasonably expected’ is explained in greater detail at [5.15] – [5.18] above. There must be ‘real’ and ‘substantial’ grounds for expecting the damage to occur which can be supported by evidence or reasoning.⁹ A mere allegation or possibility of damage is insufficient to meet the ‘reasonable expectation’ test.¹⁰ Davies J said in *Re Maher and Attorney-General’s Department* that ‘there must be a cause and effect that can be reasonably anticipated’:

But if it can be reasonably anticipated that disclosure of the document would lessen the confidence which another country would place on the Government of Australia, that is a sufficient ground for a finding that the disclosure of the document could reasonably be expected to damage international relations. Trust and confidence are intangible aspects of international relations.¹¹

Damage

5.25 ‘Damage’ for the purposes of this exemption is not confined to loss or damage in monetary terms. The relevant damage may be intangible, such as inhibiting future negotiations between the Australian Government and a foreign

⁸ *Re Anderson and Department of Special Minister of State* [1984] AATA 478; *Aldred and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [1990] AATA 833.

⁹ *Attorney-General’s Department and Australian Iron and Steel Pty Ltd v Cockcroft* [1986] FCA 35; (1986) 10 FCR 180.

¹⁰ See *Re O’Donovan and Attorney-General’s Department* [1985] AATA 330; *Re Maher and Attorney-General’s Department* [1985] AATA 180; *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 39 [30].

¹¹ *Re Maher and Attorney-General’s Department* [1985] AATA 180 [41]. Also see *Xenophon and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 3667.

government, or the future flow of confidential information from a foreign government or agency.¹²

5.26 In determining whether damage is likely to result from disclosure of a document it is relevant to consider whether the content of the document is already in the public domain. If the content of a document is already in the public domain, it is unlikely that disclosure under the FOI Act will cause damage. Deputy President Britten-Jones observed in *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information)* that:

I accept the contention from both parties that it is critical to consider the disclosure of the Disputed Material in the context of ... information ... that is publicly available. If the information in the Disputed Material is largely similar to the publicly available information then that will be an important factor in my consideration as to whether the Disputed Material would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the defence of the Commonwealth. It is axiomatic that if the Disputed Material discloses information that is already publicly available then it would not have, or could not reasonably be expected to have, the required causative effect. However, I accept the Secretary's submission that the Disputed Material must be seen in its context and that the information in the Disputed Material is not all of the same character.¹³

5.27 In some circumstances, such as the deliberate leak of official records, the fact that the information is in the public domain does not diminish the damage that may be done to Australia by further releasing that information. There is a difference between a document being leaked or accidentally released and a document being formally released by an Australian Government entity.

5.28 In determining whether damage is likely to result from disclosure of the document in question, a decision maker could have regard to the relationships between individuals representing respective governments.¹⁴ A dispute between individuals may have sufficient ramifications to affect relations between governments. It is not a necessary consequence in all cases, but a matter of degree to be determined on the facts of each particular case.¹⁵

Security of the Commonwealth (s 33(a)(i))

5.29 To establish an exemption on the basis of s 33(a)(i) a decision maker needs to establish that disclosure of the document:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage
- to the security of the Commonwealth.

¹² See the FOI Guidelines applied in *'SA' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 17 [13]–[26].

¹³ *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information)* [2020] AATA 4964 [48].

¹⁴ See *Re Laurence William Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1985] AATA 180 and *Re Aldred and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [1990] AATA 833.

¹⁵ See *Arnold v Queensland* [1987] FCA 148; (1987) 73 ALR 607.

- 5.30 The term ‘security of the Commonwealth’ broadly refers to:
- (a) the protection of Australia and its population from activities that are hostile to, or subversive of, the Commonwealth’s interests
 - (b) the security of any communications system or cryptographic system of any country used for defence or the conduct of the Commonwealth’s international relations (see definition in s 4(5)).
- 5.31 A decision maker must be satisfied that disclosure of the information under consideration would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the security of the Commonwealth.
- 5.32 The meaning of ‘damage’ has 3 aspects:
- i. that of safety, protection or defence from something that is regarded as a danger. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) has given financial difficulty, attack, theft and political or military takeover as examples.
 - ii. the means that may be employed either to bring about or to protect against danger of that sort. Examples of those means are espionage, theft, infiltration and sabotage.
 - iii. the organisations or personnel providing safety or protection from the relevant danger are the focus of the third aspect.¹⁶
- 5.33 The claim has been upheld in the following situations:
- (a) Where release of a document would prevent a security organisation from obtaining information about those engaged in espionage, it could reasonably be expected to cause damage to national security.¹⁷
 - (b) The disclosure of a defence instruction on the Army’s tactical response to terrorism and procedures for assistance in dealing with terrorism would pose a significant risk to security by revealing Australia’s tactics and capabilities.¹⁸
 - (c) Documents revealing, or which would assist in revealing, the identity of an ASIO informant were found to be exempt under a similar provision in the Archives Act.¹⁹

5.34 It is well accepted that securing classified government information forms part of the security of the Commonwealth.²⁰ The assessment that s 33(a)(i) requires must be conducted at the time the decision is made and in the environment that exists at that time.²¹ Where a request is received for classified government information, the documents must be considered both individually and collectively.

Defence of the Commonwealth (s 33(a)(ii))

- 5.35 To establish an exemption on the basis of s 33(a)(ii) a decision maker needs

¹⁶ As per Forgie DP in *Prinn and Department of Defence (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 445 [65].

¹⁷ *Re Slater and Cox (Director-General of Australian Archives)* [1988] AATA 110.intangible

¹⁸ *Re Hocking and Department of Defence* [1987] AATA 602.

¹⁹ *Re Throssell and Australian Archives* [1987] AATA 453.

²⁰ *Aldred and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [1990] AATA 833.

²¹ *Prinn and Department of Defence (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 445 [66].

to establish that disclosure of the document:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage
- to the defence of the Commonwealth.

5.36 The FOI Act does not define ‘defence of the Commonwealth’. Previous AAT decisions indicate that the term includes:

- meeting Australia’s international obligations
- ensuring the proper conduct of international defence relations
- deterring and preventing foreign incursions into Australian territory
- protecting the Defence Force from hindrance or activities which would prejudice its effectiveness.²²

5.37 Damage to the defence of the Commonwealth is not necessarily confined to monetary damage (see [5.25] above). However, in all cases, there must be evidence upon which the expectation could reasonably be based.

International relations (s 33(a)(iii))

5.38 To establish an exemption on the basis of s 33(a)(iii) a decision maker needs to establish that disclosure of the document:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage
- to the international relations of the Commonwealth.

5.39 The phrase ‘international relations’ has been interpreted as meaning the ability of the Australian Government to maintain good working relations with other governments and international organisations and to protect the flow of confidential information between them.²³ The exemption is not confined to relations at the formal diplomatic or ministerial level. It also covers relations between Australian Government agencies and agencies of other countries.²⁴

5.40 The mere fact that a government has expressed concern about disclosure is not enough to satisfy the exemption, but the phrase does encompass intangible or speculative damage, such as loss of trust and confidence in the Australian Government or one of its agencies.²⁵ The expectation of damage to international relations must be reasonable in all the circumstances, having regard to the nature of the information; the circumstances in which it was communicated; and the nature and extent of the relationship.²⁶ There must also be real and substantial grounds for the exemption that are supported by evidence.²⁷ These grounds are not fixed in

²² See for example, *Re Dunn and the Department of Defence* [2004] AATA 1040.

²³ *Re McKnight and Australian Archives* [1992] AATA 225; (1992) 28 ALD 95.

²⁴ *Re Haneef and Australian Federal Police* [2009] AATA 51; (2009) 49 AAR 395.

²⁵ *Re Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1985] AATA 180 as applied in *Maksimovic and Attorney-General's Department* [2008] AATA 1089. See also *Kellie Tranter and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 44 [28].

²⁶ *Re Slater and Cox (Director-General of Australian Archives)* [1988] AATA 110.

²⁷ *Whittaker and Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [2004] AATA 817 [48].

advance, but vary according to the circumstances of each case.²⁸

5.41 However, the AAT has accepted evidence of a long-standing convention and practice of confidentiality with respect to correspondence between the Australian Government and the Queen.²⁹ This convention preserves the effective functioning of the relationship between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Monarch, including relations with the Queen personally and members of the Royal Household, including the Queen's private secretary. In these circumstances, the AAT found that disclosure of letters between Australian Prime Ministers and the Queen could reasonably be expected to damage the international relations of the Commonwealth.³⁰

5.42 For example, disclosure of a document may diminish the confidence which another country would have in Australia as a reliable recipient of its confidential information, making that country or its agencies less willing to cooperate with Australian agencies in future.³¹ On the other hand, the disclosure of ordinary business communications between health regulatory agencies revealing no more than the fact of consultation will not, of itself, destroy trust and confidence between agencies.³²

The mosaic theory

5.43 When evaluating the potential harmful effects of disclosing documents that affect Australia's national security, defence or international relations, decision makers may take into account not only the contents of the document but also the intelligence technique known as the 'mosaic theory'. This theory holds that individually harmless pieces of information, when combined with other pieces of information, can generate a composite — a mosaic — that can damage Australia's national security, defence or international relations.³³ Therefore, decision makers may need to consider other sources of information when considering this exemption.

5.44 The mosaic theory does not relieve decision makers from evaluating whether there are real and substantial grounds for the expectation that the claimed

²⁸ See, for example, the grounds considered in *Nick Xenophon and Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 20 [20]–[24] and *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Summers (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 5537 in relation to correspondence between the Australian Government and the Queen in which the AAT found that disclosure of letters between Australian Prime Ministers and the Queen could reasonably be expected to damage the international relations of the Commonwealth.

²⁹ *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Summers (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 5537 [100].

³⁰ *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Summers (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 5537 [97].

³¹ *Re Maksimovic and Attorney-General's Department* [2008] AATA 1089. See also *O'Sullivan and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [2013] AICmr 36 [13]; *'AA' and Bureau of Meteorology* [2013] AICmr 46 [27]–[29] and *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Summers (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 5537 [116]–[119].

³² *Re Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Department of Community Services and Health and Searle Australia Pty Ltd (No 2)* [1991] AATA 723.

³³ *Re McKnight and Australian Archives* [1992] AATA 225; (1992) 28 ALD 95.

effects will result from disclosure.³⁴

Information communicated in confidence (s 33(b))

5.45 Section 33(b) exempts information communicated in confidence to the Australian Government or an Australian Government agency by another government or one of its authorities, or by an international organisation.³⁵ One example is the confidential exchange of police information or information received in confidence from a foreign defence force agency.³⁶

5.46 The test is whether information is communicated in confidence between the communicator and the agency to which the communication is made — it is not a matter of determining whether the information is of itself confidential in nature.³⁷ Information is communicated in confidence by or on behalf of another government or authority, if it was communicated and received under an express or implied understanding that the communication would be kept confidential.³⁸ Whether the information is, in fact, confidential in character and whether it was communicated in circumstances importing an obligation of confidence are relevant considerations.³⁹ They may assist the decision maker determine whether, on the balance of probabilities, the information was communicated in confidence.⁴⁰

5.47 The relevant time for the test of confidentiality is the time of communication of the information, not the time of the FOI request.⁴¹ The exemption will still apply even if the document is no longer confidential.⁴² However, as noted at [5.2] — [5.3] above, agencies and ministers are not legally bound to refuse access if a document is exempt and may consider disclosure, if this is not otherwise legally prohibited. Such an approach is permitted by s 3A and is consistent with the pro-access parliamentary intention underpinning the FOI Act.⁴³

5.48 An agreement to treat documents as confidential does not need to be

³⁴ It is a question of fact whether the disclosure of the information, alone or in conjunction with other material, could reasonably be expected to result in the claimed effect, *Re Nitas and Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs* [2001] AATA 392.

³⁵ This exemption is distinct from the s 45 ‘material obtained in confidence’ exemption. Section 33(b) applies only to information communicated to the Australian Government in confidence by, or on behalf of a foreign government, authority of a foreign government or an international organisation.

³⁶ *‘W’ and the Australian Federal Police* [2013] AICmr 39 [17]–[20]. See the application of the FOI Guidelines in *Friends of the Earth Australia and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 69 [32]–[65].

³⁷ *Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet v Haneef* (2010) 52 AAR 360; [2010] FCA 928 [11]; [2010] 52 AAR 360.

³⁸ *Re Maher and Attorney-General’s Department* [1985] AATA 180. In *Luchanskiy and Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information)* [2016] AATA 184 at [32], Frost DP accepted that a communication from Interpol was exempt under s 33(b) on the basis that the redacted information was ‘the type’ of information seen regularly by the experienced FOI decision maker.

³⁹ For an example of the application of these considerations, see *Friends of the Earth Australia and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 69 [32]–[65].

⁴⁰ *Re Environment Centre NT Inc and Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories* [1994] AATA 301.

⁴¹ *‘FM’ and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* [2015] AICmr 31 [24].

⁴² *Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs v Whittaker* [2005] FCAFC 15 [25]; (2005) 143 FCR 15.

⁴³ *‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 3 [89] and [90].

formal. A general understanding that communications of a particular nature will be treated in confidence will suffice. The understanding of confidentiality may be inferred from the circumstances in which the communication occurred, including the relationship between the parties and the nature of the information communicated.⁴⁴

5.49 Section 4(10) of the FOI Act confirms that the exemption applies to any documents communicated pursuant to any treaty or formal instrument on the reciprocal protection of classified information between the Australian Government and a foreign government (and their respective agencies) or an international organisation.

5.50 Information communicated by an Australian Government agency to a foreign government may also fall under s 33(b) if it restates information the foreign government previously communicated to the agency in confidence.⁴⁵

Classification markings

5.51 Classification markings on a document (such as secret or confidential) are not in themselves conclusive of a confidential communication. An agency still needs to produce evidence supporting the claim that information was communicated in confidence by a foreign entity. The decision maker must make an independent assessment of that claim in light of the available evidence. Similarly, even where a foreign government or agency has identified a document as secret or confidential, the decision maker is still required to make an independent assessment that the information was communicated in confidence.⁴⁶

Consulting foreign entities

5.52 The standard statutory timeframe for making a decision on an FOI request is 30 days (see Part 3). When a document may be exempt under ss 33(a)(iii) or 33(b), a decision maker may decide to extend the timeframe for making a decision by 30 days to consult the foreign government or authority or international organisation to assist them decide whether the document is exempt (ss 15(7)-(8)). This decision must be in writing and the FOI applicant must be notified as soon as practicable (ss 15(7)-(8)(b)). Although the decision maker should consider any views expressed during consultation, the final decision whether to grant access to the document lies with the decision maker.

5.53 The form of consultation with a foreign government, authority or organisation will depend on the nature of the relationship between the Australian Government entity and the foreign entity. For example, there may be agreed procedures for consultation, or informal communication between officers may suffice. If the agency is not the primary point of contact for the matter requiring consultation, it should seek the assistance of the agency with that responsibility. In some cases, the appropriate action may be to transfer the request, either in full or in part to that other agency.

⁴⁴ *Re Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1986] AATA 16; *Refugee Advice & Casework Service and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 16 [26]–[28].

⁴⁵ *Mentink and Australian Federal Police* [2014] AICmr 64 [33]–[34].

⁴⁶ *Re Anderson and Department of Special Minister of State* [1984] AATA 478.

5.54 If consultation is undertaken, the decision maker should seek information from the foreign entity for the purpose of establishing whether the grounds for an exemption are met. This information may be used to support and explain a claim for an exemption in a statement of reasons to the FOI applicant. It will not be appropriate for the agency to suggest to a foreign entity that the exemption applies and for the foreign entity to simply agree with that proposition. The foreign entity must explain, from its perspective, whether the requisite damage would result from disclosure of the requested document. In all cases, the person consulted should have authority to speak for the foreign entity.

Refusal to confirm or deny existence of a document

5.55 In some instances, the act of confirming or denying that a document exists can cause harm. For example, knowing that an agency possesses a copy of a particular document, coupled with the knowledge that the document could originate from only one source, might disclose a confidential source resulting in the effective loss of important information.

5.56 Section 25 of the FOI Act provides that agencies do not need to give information about the existence of documents in another document, such as a s 26 notice, if including that information would cause the latter to be exempt on the grounds set out in ss 33, 37(1) or 45A. (See [5.95] – [5.133] below for further guidance on the application of s 37(1), and [5.203] – [5.209] for guidance on s 45A.) The agency may instead give the FOI applicant notice in writing that it neither confirms nor denies the existence of the document, but if the document existed, it would be exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A.

5.57 Because use of this section has the effect of refusing an FOI request for access to a document without providing reasons, s 25 should be reserved strictly for cases where the content of the document requires it. Further information about refusing to confirm or deny the existence of a document under s 25 can be found in Part 3 of these Guidelines.

5.58 Section 26(2) also provides that there is no requirement to include information in a notice that, were it contained in a document, would make that document exempt (see Part 3).⁴⁷

Evidence from Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security

5.59 Where the Information Commissioner is conducting a review of a decision refusing access to a document under s 33, before deciding that the document is not exempt, the Information Commissioner must ask the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS) to give evidence on the criteria under s 33 (ss 55ZA–55ZD).

5.60 For IC reviews that commenced before 12 August 2023,⁴⁸ this requirement

⁴⁷ See also *Secretary Department of Health and Ageing v iNova Pharmaceuticals (Australia) Pty Limited* [2010] FCA 1442; (2010) 191 FCR 573; 276 ALR 712; 120 ALD 439 for discussion of ss 25 and 26 in relation to decisions that do not provide information as to the existence of documents.

⁴⁸ An IC review commences when a notice under s 54Z of the FOI Act is sent to the respondent (or the person who made the request in the case of an access grant decision).

applies to all documents said to be exempt under s 33 (national security, defence, international relations, or divulge information communicated in confidence).⁴⁹

5.61 For IC reviews that commenced on or after 12 August 2023, the requirement for the Inspector-General to give evidence only arises if the documents are said to be exempt under s 33, the documents are not documents of the Inspector-General, and only if the documents relate directly or indirectly to:

1. the performance of the functions or duties, or the exercise of the powers, of a body mentioned in paragraph (a) of the definition of **intelligence agency** in ss 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*⁵⁰ or
2. the performance of an **intelligence function** (within the meaning of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*) of a body mentioned in paragraph (b) of that definition.⁵¹

5.62 These provisions are designed to assist the Information Commissioner by giving access to independent expert advice from the IGIS to determine whether damage could result from disclosure of a document which is claimed to be exempt under s 33. For more information about Information Commissioner reviews, see Part 10 of these Guidelines.

Cabinet documents (s 34)

5.63 The Cabinet documents exemption in s 34 of the FOI Act is designed to protect the confidentiality of Cabinet processes and to ensure that the principle of collective ministerial responsibility (fundamental to the Cabinet system) is not undermined. Like the other exemptions in Division 2 of Part IV, this exemption is not subject to the public interest test. The public interest is implicit in the purpose of the exemption itself.

5.64 ‘Cabinet’ for the purposes of s 34 means the Cabinet and includes a committee of the Cabinet as set out in s 4(1) of the FOI Act. A ‘committee of the

⁴⁹ See s 7 of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*.

⁵⁰ **Intelligence agency** is defined in s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986* to mean the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, the Defence Signals Directorate, the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation, the Defence Intelligence Organisation, the Office of National Assessments and the 2 agencies that have an intelligence function – the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Federal Police. Section s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986* specifies the intelligence functions for both these agencies.

⁵¹ **Intelligence functions** for the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission means:

- (i) the collection, correlation, analysis, production and dissemination of intelligence obtained by ACIC from the execution of a network activity warrant; or
- (ii) the performance of a function, or the exercise of a power, conferred on a law enforcement officer of ACIC by the network activity warrant provisions of the *Surveillance Devices Act 2004*; or

Intelligence functions for the Australian Federal Police means:

- (i) the collection, correlation, analysis, production and dissemination of intelligence obtained by the Australian Federal Police from the execution of a network activity warrant; or
- (ii) the performance of a function, or the exercise of a power, conferred on a law enforcement officer of the Australian Federal Police by the network activity warrant provisions of the *Surveillance Devices Act 2004*.

Cabinet’ is not defined in the FOI Act. Cabinet does not include informal meetings of ministers outside the Cabinet.

5.65 In *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AATA 2719 (‘Patrick’), White J set out the factors his Honour considered in deciding whether Minutes and notes of the ‘National Cabinet’, established in March 2020, were exempt under s 34 of the FOI Act on the basis that National Cabinet was a ‘committee of the Cabinet’. The factors considered include the way National Cabinet was established, its composition, historical precedent, the discretion and control available to the Prime Minister with respect to National Cabinet, the way National Cabinet operated and its relationship with the Cabinet, as well as collective responsibility and solidarity within the National Cabinet. In Patrick, his Honour found that the National Cabinet, which consisted of the Prime Minister and State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers, did not constitute ‘a committee of the Cabinet’ for the purposes of s 34 of the FOI Act.

5.66 Cabinet notebooks are expressly excluded from the operation of the FOI Act (see the definition of ‘document’ in s 4(1)).

5.67 Further information about the treatment of Cabinet-related material can be found in the Cabinet Handbook.⁵²

Documents included in exemption

5.68 The Cabinet documents exemption applies to the following classes of documents:

- (a) Documents that:
 - (i) have been submitted to Cabinet
 - (ii) are or were proposed by a minister to be submitted to Cabinet
 - (iii) were proposed to be submitted but were not submitted to Cabinet and were brought into existence for the dominant purpose of submission for the consideration of Cabinet (s 34(1)(a))
- (b) official records of the Cabinet (s 34(1)(b))
- (c) documents prepared for the dominant purpose of briefing a minister on a Cabinet submission (s 34(1)(c))
- (d) drafts of a Cabinet submission, official records of the Cabinet or a briefing prepared for a minister on a Cabinet submission (s 34(1)(d)).

5.69 The exemption also applies to full or partial copies of the categories of documents listed at [5.68] above as well as a document that contains an extract from those categories (s 34(2)).

5.70 Any document containing information which, if disclosed, would reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision is exempt, unless the deliberation or decision has

⁵² Available at www.pmc.gov.au. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) asks that agencies consult the PM&C FOI Coordinator (at foi@pmc.gov.au) on any Cabinet-related material identified within the scope of an FOI request.

been officially disclosed (s 34(3)). The words ‘officially disclosed’ are not defined in the FOI Act and should be given their ordinary meaning. A key element is the official character of the disclosure. Disclosure will commonly be as a result of specific authorisation by the Cabinet itself, and may be undertaken by the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Secretary, or a responsible minister. An announcement made in confidence to a limited audience is not an official disclosure for this purpose. The AAT has explained that the qualification in s 34(3) does not come into play if the deliberation or decision has been officially disclosed. Rather, it comes into play when the existence of the deliberation or decision has been officially disclosed.⁵³

5.71 Agencies should also be aware that there is no requirement to provide access to an edited copy of a document that is exempt under s 34(1). Such a document is exempt because of what it is: a Cabinet submission, an official record of the Cabinet, or one of the other prescribed document types in s 34(1). The edited copy would still be of the same type as the original document, and would still be exempt.⁵⁴ However, the exemptions under ss 34(2) and 34(3) are different. For those exemptions, the document is exempt only ‘to the extent that’ it satisfies the requirements of the provision. This means that it will often be possible to edit a copy of the document so that access to that edited copy would be required to be given.⁵⁵

Documents created for the dominant purpose of submission to Cabinet (s 34(1)(a))

5.72 To be exempt under s 34(1)(a), a document must:

- have been created for the dominant purpose of being submitted for Cabinet’s consideration and
- have been submitted to Cabinet for its consideration or have been proposed by a sponsoring minister to be submitted.

Documents in this class may be Cabinet submissions or attachments to Cabinet submissions.

5.73 For example, if, at the time a report is brought into existence there was no intention of submitting it to Cabinet, but it is later decided to submit it to Cabinet, the report will not be covered by s 34(1)(a) because it will not have been brought into existence for the dominant purpose of being submitted to the Cabinet. It may, however, still be exempt under s 34(3) if its disclosure would reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision.

5.74 The use of the word ‘consideration’ rather than ‘deliberation’ in s 34(1)(a) indicates that the Cabinet exemption extends to a document prepared simply to

⁵³ Per Forgie DP in *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Sanderson (Party Joined)* [2015] AATA 361 [77]. Disclosing the substance of the deliberation or decision discloses its existence. Forgie DP noted at [77] that disclosure of its existence, however, does not require disclosure of the substance. Forgie DP also noted at [80] that a media release can constitute an official disclosure of the existence of Cabinet’s deliberations when the media release discloses the ‘existence’ of Cabinet deliberation.

⁵⁴ *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [34].

⁵⁵ *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [36].

inform Cabinet, the contents of which are intended merely to be noted by Cabinet.⁵⁶

5.75 Whether a document has been prepared for the dominant purpose of submission to Cabinet is a question of fact. The relevant time for determining the purpose is the time the document was created.⁵⁷ The purpose will ordinarily be that of the maker of the document, except where it was commissioned by another individual.⁵⁸

5.76 A ‘dominant purpose’ is a purpose ‘which was the ruling, prevailing, or most influential purpose.’⁵⁹

5.77 Relevant considerations when determining whether the ‘dominant purpose’ test has been satisfied include:

- (a) submissions or evidence from the agency or minister about the circumstances surrounding the creation of the document⁶⁰
- (b) examination of the contents of the document over which the exemption is claimed,⁶¹ including consideration as to whom the document is addressed and whether it references a particular Cabinet submission or matters considered by Cabinet⁶² and
- (c) any other available information relating to the purpose of the creation of the document.⁶³

Official record of the Cabinet (s 34(1)(b))

5.78 A document will be exempt from disclosure under s 34(b) if it is an official

⁵⁶ See *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Sanderson (Party Joined)* [2015] AATA 361 [54]–[56], citing *Re Toomer and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Ors* [2003] AATA 1301; (2003) 78 ALD 645.

⁵⁷ *Re Fisse and Secretary, Department of the Treasury* [2008] AATA 288; (2008) 101 ALD 424; 48 AAR 131. See application of the FOI Guidelines in *Justin Warren and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr70 [29]–[38].

⁵⁸ *Rex Patrick and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (No. 2) (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 66 [6]; *Michael Sergent and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 67 [7]; *William Summers and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (No. 2) (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 68 [6]; ‘ACD’ and *Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 69 [6].

⁵⁹ *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Sanderson (Party Joined)* [2015] AATA 361 [62]; *Justin Warren and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 70 [31].

⁶⁰ *Nick Xenophon and Department of Defence* [2016] AICmr 14 [22]–[23]; *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Sanderson (Party Joined)* [2015] AATA 361.

⁶¹ Section 55U(3) of the FOI Act provides that if the Information Commissioner is not satisfied by evidence on affidavit or otherwise that the document is an exempt document under s 34, the information Commissioner may require the document to be produced for inspection.

⁶² *‘JZ’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2016] AICmr 78 [23]; *Nick Xenophon and Department of Defence* [2016] AICmr 14 [26] and *Philip Morris Ltd and IP Australia* [2014] AICmr 28 [12].

⁶³ For example, in *Nick Xenophon and Department of Defence* [2016] AICmr 14 [15]–[16] regard was had to media statements relating to the document at issue. See also *Justin Warren and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 70 [32].

record of the Cabinet.

5.79 The term ‘official record of the Cabinet’ in s 34(1)(b) is not defined. The document must be an official record of the Cabinet itself, such as a Cabinet Minute. A document must relate, tell or set down matters concerning Cabinet and its functions in a form that is meant to preserve that relating, telling or setting down for an appreciable time.⁶⁴

Cabinet briefings (s 34(1)(c))

5.80 A document that is brought into existence for the dominant purpose of briefing a minister on a submission to Cabinet within the meaning of s 34(1)(a) is an exempt document (s 34(1)(c)). The briefing purpose must have been the dominant purpose at the time of the document’s creation (see [5.72] – [5.77] for further information about the dominant purpose test).

Draft Cabinet documents (s 34(1)(d))

5.81 Section 34(1)(d) provides that a draft of a Cabinet submission, an official record of the Cabinet or a Cabinet briefing is exempt.

5.82 Relevant considerations in determining whether s 34(1)(d) applies include examination of the contents of the document at issue, consideration of how the document at issue relates to the document claimed to be exempt under ss 34(1)(a), (b) or (c),⁶⁵ and consideration of submissions from the agency or minister about the role of the document in the Cabinet process.⁶⁶

Copies and extracts (s 34(2))

5.83 A document is exempt from disclosure to the extent that it is a copy or part of, or contains an extract from, a document that is itself exempt from disclosure for one of the reasons specified in s 34(1) (see s 34(2)). In practice, this means a document that comprises or contains a copy of, or part of, an extract from a Cabinet submission, a Cabinet briefing or an official record of the Cabinet is exempt from disclosure. A copy or extract should be a quotation from, or exact reproduction of, the Cabinet submission, official record of the Cabinet or the Cabinet briefing.

5.84 A document that refers to a Cabinet meeting date or Cabinet document reference number could be considered to contain an extract from a Cabinet document for the purposes for s 34(2) in certain circumstances.⁶⁷ It may therefore

⁶⁴ *Re Toomer and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Ors* [2003] AATA 1301 [74].

⁶⁵ See *‘JZ’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2016] AICmr 78 [17]–[19]; *Philip Morris Ltd and IP Australia* [2014] AICmr 28 [14]–[19]; *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [17]–[18].

⁶⁶ *Greenpeace Australia Pacific and Department of Industry* [2014] AICmr 140 [35]–[36]; *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [15]–[16].

⁶⁷ For example, the context of the reference to the Cabinet meeting date is relevant. In *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995; (2015) 68 AAR 207 [55] and [60] Jagot J was of the view that without additional information, details that a meeting had been scheduled between the Attorney-General and the Prime Minister ‘cannot, on any view, amount to a Cabinet document as defined in s 34. It cannot “reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision” even by any

be deleted from an edited copy of the document where this is reasonably practicable (s 22). Although such information is generally not sensitive, s 34 does not require a decision maker to be satisfied that disclosure would cause damage. It is enough that the document in question quotes any information from a document described in s 34(1).⁶⁸

5.85 However, agencies and ministers should be mindful of the exceptions under ss 34(4)–(6) that may apply (see [5.91] – [5.94] for further information about the exceptions to s 34). Even if a document is found to contain an extract from a Cabinet document, if the information in the document is purely factual it is the case that unless disclosure of the information would reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision that has not been officially disclosed, the document cannot be exempt under s 34(2).⁶⁹

5.86 As a result, Cabinet meeting dates and Cabinet document reference numbers included in diaries may not be exempt, although they may be an extract or part of a document to which s 34(1) applies. This is because a diary is a record of day-to-day content and the information in it will generally be considered to be purely factual in nature and without further content will not reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision that has not been officially disclosed.⁷⁰

5.87 Decision makers will need to give detailed consideration to whether coordination comments come within the scope of the exemption in s 34 of the FOI Act. Normal practice is that such comments are drafted separately from the submission to which they relate by the agencies making the comments. Agencies' coordination comments are then incorporated into the submission which is submitted to Cabinet for consideration. The AAT has held that a document comprising a copy of coordination comments which were later incorporated into a Cabinet submission was exempt under the previous version of s 34(2) on the basis that it was an extract from the minister's Cabinet submission.⁷¹

Documents disclosing a deliberation or decision of Cabinet (s 34(3))

5.88 Section 34(3) exempts documents to the extent that their disclosure would reveal any deliberation or decision of the Cabinet unless the existence of the deliberation or decision has been officially disclosed ('officially disclosed' is discussed below at [5.94]).

5.89 'Deliberation' in this context has been interpreted as active debate in Cabinet, or the weighing up of alternatives, with a view to reaching a decision on a matter (but not necessarily arriving at one). In *Re Toomer*, Deputy President Forge analysed earlier consideration of 'deliberation' and concluded:

process of the building of a mosaic by reference to date and published announcements.' See also, *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 19 [19]–[20].

⁶⁸ See *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [54]–[57]; and *Philip Morris Ltd and IP Australia* [2014] AICmr 28 [22].

⁶⁹ For example, see *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 19 [19]–[24] in the context of electronic calendars.

⁷⁰ *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 19 [19]–[20].

⁷¹ *Re McKinnon and Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2007] AATA 1969; 46 AAR 136.

... Taking its [Cabinet's] deliberations first, this means that information that is in documentary form and that discloses that Cabinet has considered or discussed a matter, exchanged information about a matter or discussed strategies. In short, its deliberations are its thinking processes, be they directed to gathering information, analysing information or discussing strategies. They remain its deliberations whether or not a decision is reached. [Cabinet's] decisions are its conclusions as to the courses of action that it adopts be they conclusions as to its final strategy on a matter or its conclusions as to the manner in which a matter is to proceed.⁷²

5.90 Consideration must be given to whether the information in the documents would reveal 'any deliberation or decision of the Cabinet'. An agency or minister cannot contend that s 34(3) applies simply because the information in the documents reveals the subject matter of Cabinet discussions.⁷³

Documents excluded from exemption (ss 34(4), 34(5) and 34(6))

5.91 There are 3 exceptions or qualifications to the Cabinet exemption under s 34:

- a document is not exempt merely because it is attached to a Cabinet submission, record or briefing (s 34(4))
- the document by which a Cabinet decision is officially published is not itself exempt (s 34(5))
- purely factual material in a Cabinet submission, record or briefing is not exempt unless its disclosure would reveal a Cabinet deliberation or decision and the existence of the deliberation or decision has not been officially disclosed (s 34(6)).

Purely factual material (s 34(6))

5.92 Section 34(6) provides that, in a document to which ss 34(1), 34(2) or 34(3) applies, information is not exempt if it is purely factual material unless:

- (a) the disclosure of the information would reveal a deliberation or decision of the Cabinet and
- (b) the existence of that deliberation or decision has not been officially disclosed.

5.93 Purely factual material includes material such as statistical data, surveys and factual studies. A conclusion involving opinion or judgement is not purely factual. For example, a projection or prediction of a future event would not usually be considered purely factual.⁷⁴

Officially disclosed (ss 34(3) and 34(6))

5.94 The Cabinet documents exemption twice refers to the existence of a deliberation or decision of the Cabinet being 'officially disclosed': ss 34(3) and

⁷² *Re Toomer and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Ors* [2003] AATA 1301; (2003) 78 ALD 645 [88].

⁷³ *Justin Warren and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 70 [61] and [65] and *Josh Taylor and Minister for Communications and the Arts (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 9 [43] – [48].

⁷⁴ 'Purely factual matter' and 'deliberative matter' are also referred to in s 47C (see Part 6).

34(6)(b). This can refer to disclosure orally as well as by a written statement — for example, an oral announcement by a minister about a Cabinet decision.⁷⁵ The disclosure may be a general public disclosure (for example, a statement in a consultation paper published on a Departmental website)⁷⁶ or a disclosure to a limited audience on the understanding that it is not a confidential communication.⁷⁷ The disclosure must be ‘official’ — for example, authorised by Cabinet or made by a person (such as a minister) acting within the scope of their role or functions.

Documents affecting law enforcement and public safety (s 37)

5.95 This exemption applies to documents which, if released, would or could reasonably be expected to affect law enforcement or public safety in any of the following ways:

- prejudice the conduct of an investigation of a breach, or possible breach, of the law (s 37(1)(a))
- prejudice the conduct of an investigation of a failure, or possible failure, to comply with a taxation law (s 37(1)(a))
- prejudice the enforcement, or the proper administration, of the law in a particular instance (s 37(1)(a))
- reveal the existence or identity of a confidential source of information, or the non-existence of a confidential source of information, in relation to the enforcement or administration of the law (s 37(1)(b))
- endanger the life or physical safety of any person (s 37(1)(c))
- prejudice the fair trial of a person, or the impartial adjudication of a particular case (s 37(2)(a))
- disclose lawful methods or procedures for investigating, preventing, detecting or dealing with breaches of the law where disclosure of those methods would be reasonably likely to reduce their effectiveness (s 37(2)(b))
- prejudice the maintenance or enforcement of lawful methods for the protection of public safety (see ss 37(2)(c)).

5.96 For the purposes of the exemption, ‘law’ means a law of the Commonwealth or of a State or a Territory (s 37(3)). It encompasses both criminal and civil law.

5.97 Section 37 concerns the investigative or compliance activities of an agency and the enforcement or administration of the law, including the protection of public safety. It is not concerned with an agency’s own obligations to comply with the law.

⁷⁵ The phrase used prior to the 2010 FOI Act amendments was ‘officially published’. This was taken to mean publication by a written document in *Re Toomer and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry* [2003] AATA 1301; (2003) 78 ALD 645 [101].

⁷⁶ *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [30].

⁷⁷ *Re Toomer and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry* [2003] AATA 1301; (2003) 78 ALD 645 [101].

The exemption applies, therefore, where an agency has a function connected with investigating breaches of the law, its enforcement or administration.

5.98 To be exempt under ss 37(1)(a) or 37(1)(b), the document in question should have a connection with the criminal law or the processes of upholding or enforcing civil law or administering a law.⁷⁸ This is not confined to court action or court processes, but extends to the work of agencies in administering legislative schemes and requirements, monitoring compliance, and investigating breaches. The exemption does not depend on the nature of the document or the purpose for which it was brought into existence. A document will be exempt if its disclosure would or could reasonably be expected to have one or more of the consequences set out in the categories listed above at [5.95].

5.99 In applying this exemption, a decision maker should examine the circumstances surrounding the creation of the document and the possible consequences of its release. The adverse consequences need not result only from disclosure of a particular document. The decision maker may also consider whether disclosure, in combination with information already available to the applicant would, or could reasonably be expected to result in any of the specified consequences.

Withholding information about the existence of documents

5.100 Section 25 permits an agency to give to an FOI applicant a notice that neither confirms nor denies the existence of a document if information as to its existence would, if it were included in a document, make the document exempt under s 37(1) (see [5.55] – [5.58] and Part 3 of these Guidelines).

Reasonable expectation

5.101 In the context of s 37, as elsewhere in the FOI Act, the mere risk or possibility of prejudice to an investigation is not a sufficient basis for a reasonable expectation of prejudice. However, the use of the word ‘could’ in the reasonable expectation qualification, as distinct from ‘would’, is less stringent. The reasonable expectation refers to activities that might reasonably be expected to have occurred, be presently occurring, or could occur in the future (see [5.15] – [5.16] above).⁷⁹

Investigation of a breach of law (s 37(1)(a))

5.102 Section 37(1)(a) applies to documents only where there is a current or pending investigation and release of the document would, or could reasonably be expected to, prejudice the conduct of that investigation. Because of the phrase ‘in a particular instance’ it is not sufficient that prejudice will occur to other or future investigations: it must relate to the particular investigation at hand.⁸⁰ In other words, the exemption does not apply if the prejudice is about investigations in general.

5.103 The exemption is concerned with the conduct of an investigation. For

⁷⁸ *Re Gold and Australian Federal Police and National Crime Authority* [1994] AATA 382; (1994) 37 ALD 168, citing Young CJ in *Accident Compensation Commission v Croom* (1991) 2 VR 322 [324].

⁷⁹ *Re Maksimovic and Australian Customs Service* [2009] AATA 28.

⁸⁰ *Re Murtagh and Federal Commissioner of Taxation* [1984] AATA 249; (1984) 54 ALR 313; (1984) 6 ALD 112; (1984) 1 AAR 419; 15 ATR 787.

example, it would apply where disclosure would forewarn the FOI applicant about the direction of the investigation, as well as the evidence and resources available to the investigating body — putting the investigation in jeopardy.⁸¹ The section will not apply if the investigation is being conducted by an overseas agency and does not relate to a breach of Australian law.⁸²

5.104 Where the investigation is merely suspended or dormant rather than permanently closed, or where new information may revive an investigation, the exemption may apply. However, the expectation that an investigation may revive should be more than speculative or theoretical and be supported by evidence.⁸³

5.105 Whether prejudice will occur is a question of fact to be determined on the evidence. The fact that a document is relevant to an investigation is not, however, sufficient.

5.106 It is clear from its terms that the exemption in s 37(1)(a) will not apply if disclosure would benefit rather than prejudice an investigation.

Disclosure of a confidential source (s 37(1)(b))

5.107 Section 37(1)(b) is intended to protect the identity of a confidential source of information connected with the administration or the enforcement of the law.⁸⁴ It is the source, rather than the information, which is confidential. The exemption is not limited to particular instances in the same way as s 37(1)(a).

5.108 The exemption applies where:

- the information in question may enable the agency responsible for enforcing or administering a law to enforce or administer it properly
- the person who supplies that information wishes their identity to be known only to those who need to know it for the purpose of enforcing or administering the law⁸⁵
- the information was supplied on the understanding, express or implied, that the source's identity would remain confidential.⁸⁶

5.109 Where a document contains information known only to a limited number of people and the confidential source is known to the FOI applicant, or where the

⁸¹ *News Corporation v National Companies and Securities Commission* [1984] 5 FCR 88; [\[1984\] FCA 400](#).

⁸² *Re Rees and Australian Federal Police* [\[1999\] AATA 252](#) [89]; (1999) 57 ALD 686. See also *Linton Besser and Department of Employment* [\[2015\] AICmr 67](#) [13]–[17].

⁸³ *Re Doullman and CEO of Customs* [\[2003\] AATA 883](#) and *Noonan and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [\[2000\] AATA 495](#).

⁸⁴ For an example of the application of this part of the FOI Guidelines, see 'PD' and *Australian Skills Quality Authority (Freedom of information)* [\[2018\] AICmr 57](#) [10]–[21].

⁸⁵ *Department of Health v Jephcott* [\[1985\] FCA 370](#) [4]; (1985) 8 FCR 85.

⁸⁶ See for example 'HC' and *Department of Human Services (Freedom of Information)* [\[2015\] AICmr 61](#) in which the Information Commissioner accepted that information was provided on the understanding that the source's identity would remain confidential and that the third party would have an expectation that their identity would not be disclosed. See also 'HP' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of Information)* [\[2015\] AICmr 77](#); and *The Guardian Australia and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (Freedom of information)* [\[2022\] AICmr 70](#).

document has identifying features such as handwriting, disclosure is more likely to identify the confidential source.⁸⁷

5.110 Section 37(1)(b) can also apply to protect information which would allow the FOI applicant to ascertain the existence or non-existence (rather than the identity) of a confidential source of information.⁸⁸

5.111 The ‘mosaic theory’ might apply in some cases (see [5.43] – [5.44] above).⁸⁹ That is, the disclosure of the information in question will lead to it being linked to already available information and thus disclose the identity of the confidential source.⁹⁰

5.112 Section 37(2A) confirms that a person is a confidential source of information in relation to the enforcement or administration of the law if that person is receiving or has received, protection under a program conducted under the auspices of the Australian Federal Police, or the police force of a State or Territory. This provision does not limit the operation of s 37(1)(b) in relation to any other persons.⁹¹

Scope of confidentiality

5.113 Section 37(1)(b) protects the identity of a person who has supplied information on the understanding that their identity would remain confidential. The scope of confidentiality depends on the facts of each case.

5.114 This exemption does not apply if the FOI applicant is aware of the relationship between the agency and the person who supplied the information to the agency, and the FOI applicant is included in the understanding of confidence between the agency and the other person. For example, the exemption did not apply to information disclosed to an agency by an FOI applicant’s financial broker who was interviewed by the agency. The FOI applicant was considered to be included in the relationship of confidence between the broker and the agency. The AAT stated that if the FOI applicant was not privy to the confidence, he was entitled to be.⁹²

5.115 It is not essential that the confidential source provide the information under an express agreement. Often an implied undertaking of confidentiality can be made out from the circumstances of a particular case.⁹³ For example, the source may have supplied the information under the reasonable expectation that their identity would be kept confidential. In some cases, confidentiality can be inferred from the

⁸⁷ See ‘HR’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [\[2015\] AICmr 80](#) [13].

⁸⁸ *Re Jephcott and Department of Community Services* [\[1986\] AATA 248](#) and *The Sun-Herald Newspaper and the Australian Federal Police* [\[2014\] AICmr 52](#) [24].

⁸⁹ For an example, see *Besser and Attorney-General's Department* [\[2013\] AICmr 12](#) [16].

⁹⁰ *Re Petroulias and Others v Commissioner of Taxation* [\[2006\] AATA 333](#); (2006) 62 ATR 1175.

⁹¹ See *Jorgensen v Australian Securities & Investments Commission* (2004) 208 ALR 73; [\[2004\] FCA 143](#) [67]-[68] and the Explanatory Memorandum to the *Law and Justice Legislation Amendment Bill 1994* at 148.

⁹² *Re Lander and Australian Taxation Office* [\[1985\] AATA 296](#).

⁹³ *Department of Health v Jephcott* [\[1985\] FCA 370](#) [11]; (1985) 8 FCR 85.

practice of the agency to receive similar types of information in confidence.⁹⁴ Two examples are a telephone hotline set up to receive certain types of information from members of the public which is expressly promoted as confidential; or information received from a person who would reasonably expect that their identity would not be made known to anyone other than those involved in administering and enforcing the law.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the understanding or representation that information will be received confidentially must not be vague or devoid of context.

5.116 The exemption applies independently of whether it was objectively reasonable or in the public interest for the person to supply information on a confidential basis. It is sufficient that the person supplied the information on the basis that their identity would be confidential.⁹⁶

Enforcement or administration of the law

5.117 The phrase ‘the enforcement or the proper administration of the law’ in s 37(1)(a) is not confined to the enforcement or administration of statutory provisions or of the criminal law. It requires only that a document should have a connection with the criminal law or with the processes of upholding or enforcing civil law.⁹⁷ The term ‘proper administration’ is intended to exclude particular instances where a law is improperly administered.

Disclosure of identity

5.118 There must be a reasonable expectation that the contents of the documents in question will disclose the identity of the confidential source.⁹⁸ Where a person’s identity is not apparent and the information is so general that it is unlikely to lead to identification of the confidential source, or it could have come from any one of several sources, this element of the exemption is not satisfied.

5.119 If other disclosures already make it possible to determine who the source is, an agency or minister cannot claim this exemption. This is because the necessary quality of confidence has already been lost.⁹⁹ On the other hand, the inadvertent or unauthorised leaking of a document does not diminish the quality of confidence attaching to it.¹⁰⁰

5.120 A person’s identity can sometimes be ascertained from a document even if they are not expressly mentioned in that document. For example, a person may be identified by distinctive handwriting in a handwritten letter, letterhead, or the nature of the information which may only be known to a limited number of

⁹⁴ See for example, *The Guardian Australia and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 70 [81]–[83].

⁹⁵ *'X' and Australian Federal Police* [2013] AICmr 40 [20]–[23].

⁹⁶ *Besser and Attorney-General's Department* [2013] AICmr 12 [12].

⁹⁷ *Re Gold and Australian Federal Police and National Crime Authority* [1994] AATA 382; (1994) 37 ALD 168, citing Young CJ in *Accident Compensation Commission v Croom* (1991) 2 VR 322, 324.

⁹⁸ *Re Rees and Australian Federal Police* (1999) 57 ALD 686; [1999] AATA 252.

⁹⁹ *Re Chandra and Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs* [1984] AATA 437; (1984) 6 ALN N257.

¹⁰⁰ *Re Cullen and Australian Federal Police* [1991] AATA 671.

people.¹⁰¹

Endanger the life or physical safety of any person (s 37(1)(c))

5.121 Under s 37(1)(c) a document is exempt if its disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, make a person a potential target of violence by another individual or group. That is, whether release of the documents could be expected to create the risk, not whether the documents reflect an existing credible threat.¹⁰² This exemption requires a reasonable apprehension of danger which will turn on the facts of each particular case. For example, the disclosure of the name of an officer connected with an investigation into threats made by the FOI applicant will not be sufficient.¹⁰³ A reasonable apprehension does not mean the risk has to be substantial, but evidence is necessary. For instance, intemperate language and previous bad behaviour, without more, does not necessarily support a reasonable apprehension.¹⁰⁴

5.122 Some illustrations of the application of the exemption in the Commonwealth, Queensland and Victoria include the following:

- If release of the document might lead to abusive behavior in the form of insulting and offensive communications this will not be enough to make the document exempt. However, if the applicant has a documented history of abusing and threatening departmental staff including threats of serious physical harm this may be sufficient to make the document exempt.¹⁰⁵
- A reasonable apprehension was shown in *Re Ford and Child Support Registrar*.¹⁰⁶ In that case, a third party gave extensive evidence about her fear of what would happen if the FOI applicant was given access to documents. The third party had been the main prosecution witness during the FOI applicant's criminal trial for which they were still in jail. She said he had written threatening letters to her and to her friends and she was scared of him. The AAT found there was a real and objective apprehension of harm and upheld the exemption.
- The Queensland Information Commissioner, in considering a similar provision in Queensland's former *Freedom of Information Act 1992*,¹⁰⁷ found that a threat of litigation against a person is not harassment which endangers a person's life or physical safety.¹⁰⁸
- In considering a similar provision in Queensland's *Right to Information Act 2009*, the Queensland Information Commissioner found, based on

¹⁰¹ See 'X' and Australian Federal Police [2013] AICmr 40 [22]; 'HR' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2015] AICmr 80.

¹⁰² 'I' and Australian National University [2012] AICmr 12 [15].

¹⁰³ *Re Ervin Lajos Boehm and Department of Industry Technology and Commerce* [1985] AATA 60.

¹⁰⁴ *Re Dykstra and Centrelink* [2002] AATA 659. On appeal to the Federal Court, the matter was remitted to the AAT. After considering further evidence, the AAT upheld the exemption (*Re Dykstra and Centrelink* [2003] AATA 202).

¹⁰⁵ 'MM' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information) [2017] AICmr 92 [19]-[35]

¹⁰⁶ *Re Ford and Child Support Registrar* [2006] AATA 283.

¹⁰⁷ Now replaced by the *Right to Information Act 2009*.

¹⁰⁸ *Re Murphy and Queensland Treasury* [1995] QICmr 23; (1995) 2 QAR 744.

evidence and subsequent reporting, that releasing information about suicides at specific locations would lead to an increase in the number of people attempting or completing acts of suicide at those locations.¹⁰⁹

- Access to psychiatric reports provided to the Supreme Court was refused on the basis that disclosure could reasonably be expected to endanger the life or physical safety of other persons. In deciding to refuse access, the Queensland Information Commissioner considered factors such as the FOI applicant's history of violence and criminal activity, the fact the FOI applicant had been the subject of a forensic order which resulted in detention as an inpatient of a high security mental health unit and ongoing mental health issues as relevant in deciding that the FOI applicant's current state of mind was such that disclosure could reasonably be expected to endanger the life or physical safety of other people.
- The exemption was not satisfied under the corresponding provision in the Victorian *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, where evidence was produced that one of several institutions where animal experiments were conducted had received a bomb threat. It was held that danger to lives or physical safety was only considered to be a possibility, not a real chance.¹¹⁰

Prejudice to a fair or impartial trial (s 37(2)(a))

5.123 A document which, if disclosed would, or could reasonably be expected to, prejudice the fair trial of a person or the impartial adjudication of a particular case (s 37(2)(a)) is exempt. This aspect of the exemption operates in specific circumstances. It is necessary to identify which persons would be affected. 'Trial' refers to the judicial examination and determination of issues between parties with or without a jury.¹¹¹ The term 'prejudice' implies some adverse effect from disclosure. For example, the AAT refused to accept a claim under this section where, on the facts, disclosure of the documents to the FOI applicant could have actually facilitated the impartial adjudication of the matter.¹¹² The fact that documents are relevant to a case is not of itself sufficient to justify the exemption. Some causal link between the disclosure and the prejudice must be demonstrated.

Prejudice to law enforcement methods and procedures (s 37(2)(b))

5.124 Section 37(2)(b) exempts documents which, if released would, or could reasonably be expected to:

- disclose lawful methods or procedures for preventing, detecting, investigating or dealing with matters arising out of breaches of the law
- prejudice the effectiveness of those methods or procedures.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Courier-Mail and Queensland Police Service* (Unreported, Queensland Information Commissioner, 15 Feb 2013).

¹¹⁰ *Re Binnie and Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs* (1987) VAR 361.

¹¹¹ See Federal Court of Australia, *Glossary of Legal Terms* www.fedcourt.gov.au/digital-law-library/glossary-of-legal-terms.

¹¹² *Re O'Grady v Australian Federal Police* [1983] AATA 390.

¹¹³ For an example of the application of this part of the FOI Guidelines, see '*RI*' and *Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 71 [12]–[25].

5.125 ‘Lawful methods and procedures’ are not confined to criminal investigations and can, for example, extend to taxation investigations. The exemption focuses on an agency’s methods and procedures for dealing with breaches of the law, where disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, adversely affect the effectiveness of those methods and procedures.

5.126 The word ‘lawful’ is intended to exclude unlawful methods and procedures, for example, methods involving illegal telephone interception or entrapment.

5.127 This exemption requires satisfaction of 2 factors. There must be a reasonable expectation that a document will disclose a method or procedure and a reasonable expectation or a real risk of prejudice to the effectiveness of that investigative method or procedure.¹¹⁴ If the only result of disclosing the methods would be that those methods were no surprise to anyone, there could be no reasonable expectation of prejudice. However, where a method might be described as ‘routine’, but the way in which it is employed can reasonably be said to be ‘unexpected’, disclosure could prejudice the effectiveness of the method.¹¹⁵

5.128 The exemption will not apply to routine techniques and procedures that are already well known to the public or documents containing general information. For example, in *Re Russo v Australian Securities Commission*, the AAT rejected a s 37(2)(b) claim about the (then) Australian Securities Commission’s method of allocating priority to matters, with the observation that disclosing such a method is akin to disclosing that the respondent uses pens, pencils, desks, chairs and filing cabinets in the investigation of possible breaches of the Corporations Law.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the AAT has held that authoritative knowledge of the particular law enforcement methods used (as opposed to the applicant’s suspicion or deduction) would assist endeavours to evade them.¹¹⁷ Where a method or procedure is legislatively prescribed, disclosure of the document would not disclose the method or procedure as it has already been disclosed by the legislation.¹¹⁸

5.129 The exemption may apply to methods and procedures that are neither obvious nor a matter of public notoriety, even if evidence of a particular method or procedure has been given in a proceeding before the courts.¹¹⁹ For example, the AAT held that disclosure of examples of acceptable reasons for refusing to vote in a compulsory election from the Australian Electoral Commission’s internal manual would reasonably be expected to prejudice the effectiveness of law enforcement procedures because people who failed to vote would be able to circumvent the procedures by submitting one of the acceptable reasons.¹²⁰ The exemption is more likely to apply where disclosure of a document would disclose covert, as opposed to

¹¹⁴ *Re Anderson and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 79; (1986) 4 AAR 414; (1986) 11 ALD 355; (1986) 11 ALN N239.

¹¹⁵ See *Hunt and Australian Federal Police* [2013] AICmr 66 [28].

¹¹⁶ *Re Russo v Australian Securities Commission* [1992] AATA 228; (1992) 28 ALD 354.

¹¹⁷ *Re Edelsten and Australian Federal Police* [1985] AATA 350, citing *Re Mickelberg and Australian Federal Police* (1984) 6 ALN N176.

¹¹⁸ *Stephen Waller and Department of Environment* [2014] AICmr 133 [17]-[18].

¹¹⁹ *Re T and Queensland Health* (1994) 1 QAR 386.

¹²⁰ *Re Murphy and Australian Electoral Commission* [1994] AATA 149; (1994) 33 ALD 718.

overt or routine methods or procedures.¹²¹

Protection of public safety (s 37(2)(c))

5.130 Section 37(2)(c) exempts documents if disclosure would prejudice the maintenance or enforcement of lawful methods for the protection of public safety.

5.131 The terms ‘lawful’ and ‘prejudice’ apply to s 37(2)(c) in the same manner as described for s 37(2)(b) at [5.124] – [5.129] above.

5.132 The words ‘public safety’ do not extend beyond safety from violations of the law and breaches of the peace.¹²² The AAT has observed that ‘public safety’ should not be confined to any particular situation, such as civil emergencies (bushfires, floods and the like) or court cases involving the enforcement of the law. The AAT also noted that considerations of public safety and lawful methods will be given much wider scope in times of war than in times of peace.¹²³

5.133 *Re Hocking and Department of Defence* provides an example of the operation of s 37(2)(c).¹²⁴ The FOI applicant was denied access to a portion of an army manual dealing with the tactical response to terrorism and to Army procedures to meet requests for assistance in dealing with terrorism because if the relevant section of the manual was made public, there would be a significant risk to the security of the Commonwealth.

Documents to which secrecy provisions apply (s 38)

5.134 A document is exempt if its disclosure is prohibited under a provision of another Act (s 38(1)(a)) and either:

- that provision is specified in Schedule 3 to the FOI Act (s 38(1)(b)(i)) or
- s 38 prohibits disclosure of the document or information contained in the document, where s 38 is expressly applied to the document, or information by that provision, or by another provision of that or other legislation (s 38(1)(b)(ii)).

5.135 Section 38 is intended to preserve the operation of specific secrecy provisions in other legislation, including in cases where no other exemption or conditional exemption is available under the FOI Act. The primary purpose of secrecy provisions in legislation is to prohibit unauthorised disclosure of client information. Most secrecy provisions allow disclosure in certain circumstances, such as with the applicant’s consent where the information relates to them, or where it is in the course of an officer’s duty or performance of duties, or exercise of powers or functions, to disclose the information.¹²⁵

¹²¹ *Re Anderson and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 79; (1986) 4 AAR 414; (1986) 11 ALD 355; (1986) 11 ALN N239.

¹²² *Re Thies and Department of Aviation* [1986] AATA 141; (1986) 9 ALD 454; (1986) 5 AAR 27.

¹²³ *Re Parisi and Australian Federal Police (Qld)* [1987] AATA 395.

¹²⁴ *Re Hocking and Department of Defence* [1987] AATA 602.

¹²⁵ For an example of the application of this part of the FOI Guidelines, see *John Mullen and Aged Care Complaints Commissioner (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 34 [11]–[27].

5.136 The effect of s 38(1A) is to limit the use of s 38 to the terms of the particular secrecy provision involved, and the exemption is only available to the extent that the secrecy provision prohibits disclosure.¹²⁶ Contrary to usual FOI practice, a decision maker contemplating an exemption under s 38 must consider the identity of the FOI applicant in relation to the document. This is because s 38(1A) permits disclosure of a document in cases where the prescribed secrecy provision does not prohibit disclosure to that person.¹²⁷

5.137 Section 38 does not apply to documents in so far as they contain personal information about the FOI applicant (s 38(2)). The exception applies only to personal information about the FOI applicant and not to ‘mixed personal information’, that is, personal information about the FOI applicant which, if disclosed, would also reveal personal information about another individual. If the FOI applicant’s personal information can be separated from any third-party personal information, the FOI applicant’s personal information will not be exempt under s 38(1) and can be disclosed. The decision maker may consider providing access to an edited copy (s 22).

5.138 The application of s 38(2) was considered in the IC review decision *AFV and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 125. In that decision, the Acting FOI Commissioner accepted Services Australia’s submission that third party protected information could not be disclosed even when that information concerned the FOI applicant or could reasonably be assumed to be known to the FOI applicant. ‘The test is not whether information already is, or may be, known to an FOI applicant, but how the relevant legislation applies to it.’¹²⁸ After considering the document, the Acting FOI Commissioner concluded that some of the information said to be exempt under s 38 was, on its face, not information about anybody other than the FOI applicant. Further, there were inconsistencies in the deletion of the same or similar material in parts of the document and in documents released in response to another FOI request. As a result, the Acting FOI Commissioner was satisfied that it was possible to separate the FOI applicant’s personal information from information about another person; the exception in s 38(2) applied and the information was not exempt under s 38.

5.139 Section 38(3) contains a limited exception to s 38(2). Section 38 continues to apply in relation to a person’s own personal information where that person requests access to a document for which disclosure is prohibited under s 503A of the *Migration Act 1958*, as affected by s 503D of that Act.

5.140 A number of secrecy provisions allow disclosure where it is in the course of an officer’s duty or performance of duties, or exercise of powers or functions. What is in the course of an officer’s duties should be interpreted broadly as to any routine

¹²⁶ *NAAO v Secretary, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs* [2002] FCA 292 [24]–[25]; (2002) 117 FCR 401; (2002) FCAFC 64.

¹²⁷ *Re Young and Commissioner of Taxation* [2008] AATA 155; (2008) 100 ALD 372; 71 ATR 284 see also ‘A’ and *Department of Health and Ageing* [2011] AICmr 4 [13]–[16].

¹²⁸ *AFV and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 125 [48]. See also *Re Collie and Deputy Commissioner of Taxation* [1997] AATA 713 and *e Richardson and Commissioner of Taxation* [2004] AATA 367.

disclosures that may be linked to those duties or functions¹²⁹ but would generally not encompass the release of information under the FOI Act.

5.141 For example, in *Walker and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* the AAT considered the application of s 38 to information relating to the status of medical General Practitioners. Subject to certain exceptions, s 130(1) of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* prohibits disclosure of information acquired in the performance or exercise of powers or functions under that Act. Section 130(1) of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* is listed in Schedule 3 of the FOI Act as a secrecy provision. The AAT explained that 38(1) makes the information exempt and ‘no further enquiry is required or permissible’.¹³⁰

5.142 Similarly, s 355-25 of Schedule 1 to the *Tax Administration Act 1953*, makes it an offence for a taxation officer to record or disclose ‘protected information’. ‘Protected information’ is information relating to and identifying an entity acquired for a taxation law purpose. The effect of this provision on an FOI request for documents is to make a document containing the protected information of a person or entity, other than the person making the FOI request, an exempt document under s 38.

5.143 It may be that consent by a person or entity to disclosure of information protected by a secrecy provision is not a defence to the offence of disclosure. For example, in *‘ADN’ and the Australian Taxation Office* the Acting FOI Commissioner found that although a third party had consented to disclosure of their taxation information to the FOI applicant, that information remained protected information because consent is not a defence to the offence of disclosure in the *Taxation Administration Act 1953*.¹³¹

Documents subject to legal professional privilege (s 42)

5.144 Section 42(1) exempts a document if it is of such a nature that it would be privileged from production in legal proceedings on the ground of legal professional privilege.

5.145 To determine the application of this exemption, the decision maker needs to turn to common law concepts of privilege. The statutory test of client legal privilege under the *Evidence Act 1995* is not applicable and should not be taken into account.¹³²

5.146 It is important that each aspect of the privilege, as discussed below, be addressed in the decision maker’s statement of reasons.

¹²⁹ *Canadian Pacific Tobacco Co Ltd v Stapleton* [1952] HCA 32 [20]; (1952) 86 CLR 1, on the interpretation of ‘course of duty’ in the context of Commonwealth income tax law.

¹³⁰ *Walker and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 606 [32]. Constance DP did not accept Dr Walker’s arguments that she must assess the information contained in the proposed document to determine whether it was exempt information.

¹³¹ *‘ADN’ and the Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 44 [66].

¹³² *Commonwealth of Australia v Dutton* [2000] FCA 1466 [2]; (2000) 102 FCR 168.

Whether a document attracts legal professional privilege

5.147 Legal professional privilege applies to some, but not all, communications between legal advisers and clients. It may also apply to some, but not all, communications between the client and their legal adviser and a third party, to enable the client to obtain legal advice or for use in litigation, either actual or within the reasonable contemplation of the client.¹³³

5.148 The underlying policy basis for legal professional privilege is to promote full and frank disclosure between a lawyer and client to the benefit of the effective administration of justice. It is the purpose of the communication that is determinative.¹³⁴ Legal professional privilege protects documents which would reveal communications between a client and their lawyer made for the dominant purpose of giving or obtaining legal advice.¹³⁵ The information in a document is relevant and may assist in determining the purpose of the communication, but the information in itself is not determinative.

5.149 At common law, determining whether a communication is privileged requires a consideration of:

- whether there is a legal adviser-client relationship
- whether the communication was for the dominant purpose of giving or receiving legal advice, or for use in connection with actual or anticipated litigation
- whether the advice given is independent
- whether the advice given is confidential.¹³⁶

Legal adviser-client relationship

5.150 A legal adviser-client relationship exists where a client retains the services of a lawyer for the purpose of obtaining professional advice. If the advice is received from an independent external legal adviser, establishing the existence of the relationship is usually straightforward.

5.151 The arrangement between the parties as to who should pay for the work done by the legal adviser is seldom material to the question of who the work is done

¹³³ *Nickmar Pty Ltd v Preservatrice Skandia Insurance Ltd* (1985) 3 NSWLR 44; *Ritz Hotel v Charles of the Ritz (No 22)* (1988) 14 NSWLR 132; *Pratt Holdings Pty Ltd v Commissioner of Taxation* [2004] FCAFC 122; *Tabcorp Holdings Ltd v State of Victoria* [2013] VSC 302 [99]–[118].

¹³⁴ *Comcare v Foster* [2006] FCA 6 [22]–[40]; (2006) 42 AAR 434.

¹³⁵ *Esso Australia Resources Ltd v Federal Commissioner of Taxation* [1999] HCA 67 [80]; (1999) 201 CLR 49 at 73; *Daniels Corporation International Pty Ltd v Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2002] HCA 49 [9]–[10].

¹³⁶ *Grant v Downs* [1976] HCA 63; (1976) 135 CLR 674; *Waterford v Commonwealth of Australia* [1987] HCA 25; (1987) 163 CLR 54; and *Esso Australia Resources Ltd v Federal Commissioner of Taxation* [1999] HCA 67; (1999) 201 CLR 49. For examples of the application of these considerations see 'VO' and Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (Freedom of information) [2020] AICmr 47 [24]–[39]; 'VH' and Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information) [2020] AICmr 43 [22]–[36]; and Clifford Chance Lawyers and National Competition Council (Freedom of information) [2020] AICmr 26 [49]–[76].

for and to who the professional duties are owed.¹³⁷ In *Carey v Korda*¹³⁸ the Court held that the legal advice at issue was sought by receivers in relation to their power to care for, preserve and realise the assets of companies during receivership, not by the companies. As a result, only the receivers could engage lawyers for the purpose of obtaining legal advice on their liability when undertaking these tasks. Further, although costs agreements were directed to the companies in receivership, this was only for the purpose of paying invoices and each costs agreement clearly contemplated advice being given to the receivers in relation to the conduct of the receivership.

5.152 A similar issue arose in *Sean Butler and Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman*.¹³⁹ In that decision, the applicant, a director of companies and trusts for which receivers and managers had been appointed, argued that the legal advice was prepared for receivers acting in their capacity as receivers and managers of a group of companies that paid for the legal advice. The Assistant Commissioner, Freedom of Information, examined the documents and was satisfied that an independent legal adviser-client relationship existed between the lawyers and the receivers and managers and that the lawyers did not act for the companies in receivership or for their directors.¹⁴⁰

Legal adviser-client relationship, independence and in-house lawyers

5.153 When legal advice is received from an independent external legal adviser, establishing the existence of the requisite legal adviser-client relationship is usually straightforward. A typical example in a government context is advice received by an agency from a law firm that is on an authorised list of panel firms (including the Australian Government Solicitor).

5.154 A legal adviser-client relationship can exist but may not be as readily established when advice is received from a lawyer who works within the agency, whether as an ongoing staff member of the agency or as a lawyer contracted to work within the agency to provide advice. Whether a true legal adviser-client relationship exists will be a question of fact to be determined based on the circumstances in which the advice was given. That is, there may be a privileged relationship applying to some but not all advice. The following factors are relevant to establishing whether a legal adviser-client relationship exists:

- the legal adviser must be acting in their capacity as a professional legal adviser
- the dominant purpose test must be satisfied
- the giving of the advice must be attended by the necessary degree of

¹³⁷ *Pegrum v Fatharly* (1996) 14 WAR 92.

¹³⁸ [2012] WASCA 228 [75] and [76].

¹³⁹ *Sean Butler and Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman* (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 71.

¹⁴⁰ *Sean Butler and Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman* (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 71 [24].

independence¹⁴¹

- the advice must be confidential
- the fact that the advice arose out of a statutory duty does not preclude the privilege from applying¹⁴²
- whether the lawyer is subject to professional standards can be relevant.¹⁴³

5.155 Having legal qualifications does not suffice in itself to establish that a privileged adviser-client relationship exists. The authorities to date prefer the view that whether an adviser holds a practising certificate is a relevant, but not decisive, factor.¹⁴⁴ Alternatively, a right to practise may be conferred by an Act (for example, ss 55B and 55E of the *Judiciary Act 1903*).

5.156 In the AAT case of *Ransley and Commissioner of Taxation (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 728, Tamberlin DP summarised the principles set out above at [5.154] and discussed that ‘communications and information between an agency and its qualified legal advisers for the purpose of giving or receiving advice will be privileged whether the legal advisers are salaried officers [or not], provided they are consulted in a professional capacity in relation to a professional matter and the communications arise from the relationship of lawyer-client. There is no requirement that an in-house lawyer hold a practicing certificate provided the employee is acting independently in giving the advice.’¹⁴⁵

5.157 An in-house lawyer has the necessary degree of independence as long as their personal loyalties, duties or interests do not influence the professional legal advice they give.¹⁴⁶

5.158 In-house lawyers may perform a range of functions within an agency. The mere fact that advice is given by a lawyer is not sufficient to establish a legal adviser-client relationship.¹⁴⁷ In ‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (*Freedom of information*) [2023] AICmr 3, the Freedom of Information Commissioner considered whether an in-house legal adviser gave advice in their professional capacity as a legal adviser, or in some other capacity, in circumstances in which the

¹⁴¹ Generally, legal professional privilege may be claimed in legal proceedings in relation to advice sought from and given by an in-house lawyer, where the professional relationship between the lawyer and the agency seeking advice has the necessary quality of independence, see *Taggart and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (Freedom of information)* [2016] AATA 327 [32]. For a discussion of in-house lawyers in government agencies, see also *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of Information)* [2020] AATA 1436 [47]–[70].

¹⁴² *Waterford v Commonwealth of Australia* [1987] HCA 25 [9]; (1987) 163 CLR 54.

¹⁴³ *Re Proudfoot and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* [1992] AATA 317 [14] which restates the principles of *Waterford v Commonwealth of Australia* [1987] HCA 25; (1987) 163 CLR 54.

¹⁴⁴ *Aquila Coal Pty Ltd v Bowen Central Coal Pty Ltd* [2013] QSC 82 [23]. See also *Re McKinnon and Department of Foreign Affairs* [2004] AATA 1365 [51], referring to *Australian Hospital Care Pty Ltd v Duggan* (No. 2) [1999] VSC 131. Note a contrary ruling by Crispin J in *Vance v McCormack and the Commonwealth* [2004] ACTSC 78, reversed on appeal but on a different point.

¹⁴⁵ *Ransley and Commissioner of Taxation (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 728 [13].

¹⁴⁶ *Aquila Coal Pty Ltd v Bowen Central Coal Pty Ltd* [2013] QSC 82 [10], referring to *Telstra Corporation Ltd v Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts* (No 2) [2007] FCA 1445 [35].

¹⁴⁷ ‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (*Freedom of information*) [2023] AICmr 3 [66].

agency's Legal Group was responsible for the management of all complaints about the agency. The FOI Commissioner concluded that while some complaints may involve legal issues requiring legal advice (for example, complaints about the exercise of a statutory power or the performance of a statutory duty or function, or complaints involving potential legal liability), not all complaints about an agency will raise legal issues and the role of the Legal Group in such circumstances will generally be of an administrative nature.¹⁴⁸

5.159 For the purpose of the privilege, 'advice' extends to professional advice as to what a party should prudently or sensibly do in the relevant legal context.¹⁴⁹ However, it does not apply to internal communication that is a routine part of an agency's administrative functions. The communication must relate to activities generally regarded as falling within a lawyer's professional functions.

For the dominant purpose of giving or receiving legal advice, or use in actual or anticipated litigation

5.160 Whether legal professional privilege attaches to a document depends on the purpose for which the communication in the document was created. The High Court has confirmed that the common law requires a dominant purpose test rather than a sole purpose test.¹⁵⁰ The communication may have been brought into existence for more than one purpose but will be privileged if the main purpose for its creation was for giving or receiving legal advice or for use in actual or anticipated litigation.

Legal advice privilege

5.161 The AAT has observed that 'a broad approach is to be taken as to what is included in the scope of the privilege' and that 'the obligation of the lawyer to advise, once retained, is "pervasive" and that it would be rarely that one could, in any particular case with a degree of confidence, say that communication between client and lawyer, where there is a retainer requiring legal advice and the directing of the legal advice, was not connected with the provision or requesting of legal advice.'¹⁵¹

5.162 The concept of legal advice, while broad, does not extend to advice that is purely commercial or of a public relations character.¹⁵²

Litigation privilege

5.163 Litigation is 'anticipated' where there is 'a real prospect of litigation, as distinct from a mere possibility, but it does not have to be more likely than not'.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ 'ACV' and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 3 [65]–[68].

¹⁴⁹ AWB Limited v Honourable Terence Rhoderic Hudson Cole (No 5) [2006] FCA 1237 [7].

¹⁵⁰ Esso Australia Resources Ltd v Commissioner for Taxation [1999] HCA 67; (1999) 201 CLR 49.

¹⁵¹ As per Tamberlin DP QC in Ransley and Commissioner of Taxation (Freedom of information) [2015] AATA 728 [14].

¹⁵² AWB Limited v Honourable Terence Rhoderic Hudson Cole (No 5) [2006] FCA 1234 [7].

¹⁵³ Mitsubishi Electric Australia Pty Ltd v Victorian WorkCover Authority [2002] VSCA 59 [17]–[20]; Visy Industries Holdings Pty Limited v Australian Competition and Consumer Commission [2007] FCAFC 147 [30]–[33]; (2007) 161 FCR 122 [30].

5.164 The question of whether litigation privilege extends beyond the Courts to include Tribunals is unsettled.¹⁵⁴

The scope of a claim of legal professional privilege over a document

5.165 In light of AAT authority, agencies and ministers should consider whether the entire contents of a document meets the dominant purpose test. If the entire contents of the document does not meet the test, agencies and ministers should, if reasonably practicable, consider giving the FOI +applicant access to material that is not of itself privileged (while remaining mindful of the consequence of unintended waiver of privilege (see below at [5.168] – [5.176])).¹⁵⁵ In considering whether it is reasonably practicable to prepare an edited copy of a privileged document under s 22 of the FOI Act so the edited document does not disclose exempt material, the decision maker should consider whether editing will leave only a skeleton of the former document that would convey little content or substance. In which case, the purpose of the FOI Act may not be served by disclosing an edited copy and the document should be exempt in full (see Part 3).

Confidentiality

5.166 Legal professional privilege applies to confidential communications — that is, communications known only to the client or to a select class of persons with a common interest in the matter.

5.167 Legal professional privilege can extend to documents containing information that is on the public record if disclosure would reveal confidential communications made for the dominant purpose of giving or receiving legal advice on the various issues covered by those documents.¹⁵⁶

Waiver of privilege

5.168 Section 42(2) confirms that a document is not exempt if the person entitled to claim legal professional privilege waives the privilege.

5.169 Legal professional privilege is the client's privilege to assert or to waive, and the legal adviser cannot waive it except with the authority of the client.¹⁵⁷ In the context of an FOI request, the agency receiving the advice will usually be the 'client'

¹⁵⁴ In *Ingot Capital Investments Pty Ltd v Macquarie Equity Capital Markets Ltd* [2006] NSWSC 530 [55], Bergin J held that litigation privilege did not apply in the AAT because AAT proceedings are not adversarial. In *'GF' and Department of the Treasury* [2015] AICmr 47 [19], the Privacy Commissioner did not accept that proceedings in the Superannuation Complaints Tribunal could attract litigation privilege. However, the following cases have held that the legal advice privilege is available in the AAT: *Waterford v Commonwealth* [1987] HCA 25; (1987) 163 CLR 54; *Farnaby and Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission* [2007] AATA 1792 [29], [31]; (2007) 97 ALD 788; *Re VCA and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [2008] AATA 580 [205].

¹⁵⁵ In *Taggart and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (Freedom of information)* [2016] AATA 327, Forgie DP decided that additional material that was not the substantive content of privileged emails, such as the email subject line, address block, salutation, classification, closing words and signature block was not privileged material and therefore not exempt under s 42.

¹⁵⁶ *Comcare v Foster* [2006] FCA 6 [29]; (2006) 150 FCR 301.

¹⁵⁷ *Re Haneef and the Australian Federal Police* [2009] AATA 51 [76]; (2009) 49 AAR 395, citing *Mann v Carnell* [1999] HCA 66; (1999) 201 CLR 1.

who needs to decide whether to assert or waive legal professional privilege. If the privilege is asserted, the agency will need to provide evidence to establish that the document is exempt from disclosure under s 42. This will be so even if the relevant FOI request is made to a different agency.

5.170 Waiver of privilege may be express or implied. For example, privilege may be waived in circumstances where:

- the communication in question has been widely distributed,
- the content of the legal advice in question has been disclosed or
- a person has publicly announced their reliance on the legal advice in question in a manner that discloses the substance of the legal advice.

5.171 The High Court has held that waiver of legal professional privilege will occur where the earlier disclosure is inconsistent with the confidentiality protected by the privilege.¹⁵⁸ This inconsistency test has been affirmed by the High Court as the appropriate test for determining whether privilege has been waived.¹⁵⁹ It is immaterial that the client did not intend to waive privilege.¹⁶⁰

5.172 Not all disclosures to a wider group necessarily imply a waiver. If the document has been disclosed to a limited audience with a mutual interest in the contents of the document, it may not be inconsistent to continue to claim that the document is confidential and privileged. For example, the Federal Court (Collier J) found that the provision of an in-house legal advice to the Australian Information Commissioner to support a claim that a document is exempt from disclosure did not waive privilege with respect to that legal advice.¹⁶¹ This was because the disclosure was to a statutory officer-holder in the context of an IC review and the document was disclosed on the express basis that it was to remain confidential and not be disclosed to the applicant. Further, the advice was conveyed in an email marked ‘Sensitive: Legal’.

5.173 In *Joshua Badge and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)*¹⁶² the Acting Freedom of Information Commissioner found that legal professional privilege continued to apply in circumstances in which an agency sought advice from the Office of Parliamentary Counsel (OPC) in relation to the preparation of draft legislation. The Acting FOI Commissioner concluded that the agency sought legal advice from the OPC in its capacity as a professional adviser on legislative drafting and that a legal advisor-client relationship existed between the agency and the OPC at all times. Privilege was considered to extend to the agency’s communications with third parties for the same dominant purpose.

5.174 Modern organisations often work in teams and several people may need to know about privileged communications, both in the requesting client organisation

¹⁵⁸ *Mann v Carnell* [1999] HCA 66; (1999) 201 CLR 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Osland v Secretary to the Department of Justice* [2008] HCA 37; (2008) 234 CLR 275; 249 ALR 1; 82 ALJR 1288.

¹⁶⁰ See *Michael Leichenring and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 51 [30]–[31].

¹⁶¹ *Alpert v Secretary, Department of Defence* [2022] FCA 54.

¹⁶² [2023] AICmr 46 (13 June 2023) [70]–[75].

and in the firm of legal advisers. Similarly, a limited disclosure of the existence and effect of legal advice could be consistent with maintaining confidentiality in the actual terms of the advice. The Legal Services Directions 2017 issued by the Attorney-General require legal advices obtained by Australian Government agencies to be shared in particular circumstances, and complying with this requirement does not waive privilege.¹⁶³

5.175 Whether a disclosure is inconsistent with maintaining confidentiality will depend on the particular context and circumstances of the matter, and will involve matters of fact and degree.¹⁶⁴ Relevant considerations include:

- the purpose of the disclosure
- whether the substance or effect of legal advice has been used for forensic or commercial purposes¹⁶⁵ or to disadvantage another person¹⁶⁶
- the legal and practical consequences of a limited rather than complete disclosure¹⁶⁷
- whether the communication merely refers to a person having taken and considered legal advice¹⁶⁸ or whether it discloses the gist or conclusion of legal advice¹⁶⁹
- the nature of the matter in which the advice was sought.¹⁷⁰

5.176 Agencies should take special care in dealing with documents for which they may wish to claim legal professional privilege to avoid unintentionally waiving that privilege. For example, disclosing privileged information more widely than necessary within an agency may be inconsistent with the maintenance of privilege.

The ‘real harm’ test

5.177 A ‘real harm’ criterion is not an element of the common law doctrine of legal professional privilege. Likewise, the test is not a feature of the FOI Act. Historically, government, through convention, has referenced the test as a relevant

¹⁶³ *Judiciary Act 1903* s 55ZH(4). The Legal Services Directions are available at www.legislation.gov.au.

¹⁶⁴ *Osland v Secretary to the Department of Justice* [2008] HCA 37; *Doney and Department of Finance and Deregulation* [2012] ALCmr 25 [23]–[27]; *Alpert v Secretary, Department of Defence* [2022] FCA 54 [82]–[91].

¹⁶⁵ *Bennett v Chief Executive Officer, Australian Customs Service* [2004] FCAFC 237; [2004] 140 FCR 101 per Gyles J (at [68]), Tamberlin J agreeing.

¹⁶⁶ *College of Law Limited v Australian National University* [2013] FCA 492 [24].

¹⁶⁷ *Secretary, Department of Justice v Osland* [2007] VSCA 96; (2007) 26 VAR 425 [45]–[49].

¹⁶⁸ *Ampolex Limited v Perpetual Trustee Co (Canberra) Ltd* [1996] HCA 15 per Kirby J [34].

¹⁶⁹ *Bennett v Chief Executive Officer, Australian Customs Service* [2004] FCAFC 237 per Gyles J (at [65]); *Goldberg v Ng* [1995] HCA 39; *Michael Leichsenring and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] ALCmr 51 [37] applying *Bennett v Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Customs Service* [2004] FCAFC 237 per Tamberlin J at [14]. Disclosure of the gist, conclusion, substance or effect of a privileged communication does not necessarily effect a waiver of legal professional privilege in respect of the advice as a whole. Whether it does or not in a particular case depends on whether, in the circumstances of that case, the requisite inconsistency exists between the disclosure on the one hand and the maintenance of confidentiality on the other.

¹⁷⁰ *College of Law Limited v Australian National University* [2013] FCA 492 [24].

discretionary factor in determining FOI requests.¹⁷¹

5.178 An agency's or minister's decision on the 'real harm' criterion is not an issue that can be addressed in an IC review for the reason that the Information Commissioner cannot decide that access is to be given to a document, so far as it contains exempt matter.¹⁷²

5.179 In the IC review decision of *'ACV' and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 3 [89]–[90] ('ACV'), the FOI Commissioner observed that agencies are not legally bound to refuse access to documents if they are exempt under the FOI Act (see s 3A). In ACV the contents of the relevant document were said to be 'anodyne' and disclose little more than what was disclosed to the applicant in the final version of correspondence sent to them. In such circumstances, the FOI Commissioner advised the agency to consider providing access to the document.

Copies or summary records

5.180 Records made by agency officers summarising communications which are themselves privileged also attract privilege. Privilege may also attach to a copy of an unprivileged document if the copy was made for the dominant purpose of obtaining legal advice or for use in legal proceedings.¹⁷³

Exception for operational information

5.181 A document is not exempt under s 42(1) by reason only of the inclusion in that document of operational information of an agency (s 42(3)).

5.182 Agencies must publish their operational information under the Information Publication Scheme established by Part II, s 8 of the FOI Act. 'Operational information' is information held by an agency to assist the agency to perform or exercise its functions or powers in making decisions or recommendations affecting members of the public or any particular person or entity or class of persons or entities (s 8A). A document is not operational information if it is legal advice prepared for a specific case and not for wider or general use in the agency.¹⁷⁴ For further information about the definition of 'operational information' see Part 13 of these Guidelines.

Documents containing material obtained in confidence (s 45)

5.183 Section 45(1) provides that a document is an exempt document if its disclosure would found an action by a person (other than an agency or the Commonwealth) for

¹⁷¹ This view is in line with the advisory notice issued by the then Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department dated 2 March 1986 (the 'Brazil Direction'), following a Cabinet decision in June 1985. The phrase 'real harm' distinguishes between substantial prejudice to the agency's affairs and mere irritation, embarrassment or inconvenience to the agency.

¹⁷² Section 55L(2) of the FOI Act.

¹⁷³ *Re Haneef and Australian Federal Police and Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions* [2010] AATA 514 [77].

¹⁷⁴ See *'AL' and Department of Defence* [2013] AICmr 72 [33]–[36] and *Hamden and Department of Human Services* [2013] AICmr 41 [19]–[21].

breach of confidence. In other words, the exemption is available where the person who provided the confidential information would be able to bring an action under the general law for breach of confidence to prevent disclosure, or to seek compensation for loss or damage arising from disclosure.¹⁷⁵

5.184 The exemption in s 45(1) does not apply to a document that is conditionally exempt under s 47C(1) (deliberative matter), or would be conditionally exempt but for s 47C(2) or 47C(3), and that is prepared by a minister, ministerial staff or agency officers unless the obligation of confidence is owed to persons other than the minister, ministerial staff or agency officers. For more information about the s 47C conditional exemption see Part 6 of these Guidelines.

5.185 The exemption operates as a separate and independent protection for confidential relationships which may, but need not necessarily, also fall within the scope of other specific exemptions, for example, ss 47F (personal privacy) and 47G (business documents).¹⁷⁶

Breach of confidence

5.186 A breach of confidence is the failure of a recipient to keep confidential, information which has been communicated in circumstances giving rise to an obligation of confidence.¹⁷⁷ The FOI Act expressly preserves confidentiality where that confidentiality would be actionable at common law or in equity.

5.187 The exemption in s 45 is restricted in scope to the disclosure of information that would found an action for breach of confidence. It does not apply to confidential information per se, or to the disclosure of confidential information that would found another type of action such as an action based on the tort of negligence or a breach of statutory duty.¹⁷⁸

5.188 While the existence of either a statutory or contractual obligation of confidence may support the existence of an equitable obligation of confidence for the purpose of s 45, it is not of itself determinative. All 5 criteria (see [5.189] below) must also apply to the information. The existence of either a statutory or a contractual obligation of confidentiality should be considered in the context of

¹⁷⁵ See the Explanatory Memorandum, *Freedom of Information Bill 1992*; and *Re Kamminga and Australian National University* [1992] AATA 84; [1992] AATA 84 [22]–[23].

¹⁷⁶ See the Explanatory Memorandum, *Freedom of Information Bill 1981*.

¹⁷⁷ *Coco v AN Clark (Engineers) Ltd* [1969] 86 RPC 41 (on the test for breach of confidence).

¹⁷⁸ *Francis and Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 12 [101]. See also, *Re Petroulias and Others and Commissioner of Taxation* [2006] AATA 333. *Johns v Australian Securities Commission* [1993] HCA 56 [14]; (1993) 178 CLR 408 [424] discusses the obligation of confidence in circumstances in which an agency obtains information in the exercise of compulsory powers. In such cases, the agency will generally be under a statutory duty to protect the confidentiality of that information. This is because a law that confers a power to obtain information for a purpose defines, expressly or impliedly, the purpose for which the information, once obtained, can be used or disclosed. The law imposes a duty not to disclose the information except for that purpose. The person obtaining the information in exercise of the statutory power must therefore treat the information obtained as confidential whether or not the information is otherwise of a confidential nature.

those 5 criteria.¹⁷⁹

5.189 To found an action for breach of confidence (which means s 45 may be applied by an agency or minister), the following 5 criteria must be satisfied in relation to the information:

- it must be specifically identified
- it must have the necessary quality of confidentiality
- it must have been communicated and received on the basis of a mutual understanding of confidence¹⁸⁰
- it must have been disclosed, or threatened to be disclosed, without authority
- unauthorised disclosure of the information has or will cause detriment.¹⁸¹

5.190 A breach of confidence will not arise, and the exemption will not apply, if the information to be disclosed is an ‘iniquity’ in the sense of a crime, civil wrong, or serious misdeed of public importance which ought to be disclosed to a third party with a real and direct interest in redressing such crime, wrong, or misdeed.¹⁸²

Specifically identified

5.191 The alleged confidential information must be identified specifically. It is not sufficient for the information to be identified in global terms.¹⁸³ For example, where a document contains information that is claimed to be confidential, that information must be specifically identified either in terms of the subject matter or the type of information, or the relevant sentences or paragraphs in which that information appears.¹⁸⁴ Alternatively, if all of the document is claimed to be confidential, identification will be in terms of clearly identifying the relevant document.

Quality of confidentiality

5.192 For the information to have the quality of confidentiality it must be secret or only known to a limited group. Information that is common knowledge or in the public domain will not have the quality of confidentiality.¹⁸⁵ For example, information that is provided to an agency and copied to other organisations on a non-confidential or open basis may not

¹⁷⁹ *Patrick; Secretary, Department of Defence and [2021] AATA 4627 [43]*; see also *Francis and Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (Freedom of information) [2019] AATA 12*.

¹⁸⁰ *‘FT’ and Civil Aviation Safety Authority [2015] AICmr 37 [15]–[18]*.

¹⁸¹ *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic) [1987] FCA 266 [14]*; (1987) 14 FCR 434; *Coco v AN Clark (Engineers) Ltd* [1969] 86 RPC 41; *Commonwealth v John Fairfax and Sons Ltd [1980] HCA 44*; (1980) 147 CLR 39; 32 ALR 485 (on the test for confidence in equity). For examples of the application of these criteria see *‘VO’ and Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (Freedom of information) [2020] AICmr 47 [40]–[72]*; *‘RG’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information) [2019] AICmr 69 [12]–[48]*; *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (No 4) (Freedom of information) [2019] AICmr 40 [22]–[35]*; *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (No.2) (Freedom of information) [2019] AICmr 37 [9]–[32]* and *Secretary Department of Veterans’ Affairs and Burgess (Freedom of Information) [2018] AATA 2897 [11]–[12]*.

¹⁸² *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic) [1987] FCA 266 [41]–[57]*; (1987) 14 FCR 434.

¹⁸³ *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic) [1987] FCA 266*; (1987) 14 FCR 434.

¹⁸⁴ See for example *‘AFK’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 115 [29]–[30]*.

¹⁸⁵ *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic) [1987] FCA 266 [14]*; (1987) 14 FCR 434.

be considered confidential.

5.193 The quality of confidentiality may be lost over time if confidentiality is waived or the information enters the public domain. This can occur if the person whose confidential information it is discloses it. However, even if information has entered the public domain it may not have lost its confidential character unless it has become public knowledge such that, as a matter of common sense, the confidential character of the information has disappeared.¹⁸⁶ The obligation of confidence may also only relate to a limited time period.

Mutual understanding of confidence

5.194 The information must have been communicated and received on the basis of a mutual understanding of confidence. In other words, the agency or minister needs to have understood and accepted an obligation of confidence.¹⁸⁷ The mutual understanding must have existed at the time of the communication. For example, when a person gives information to an agency or a minister they may ask that it be kept confidential and if the agency or minister accepts the information on that basis the requirement for a mutual understanding of confidence will be met. However, if the agency or minister declines to accept the information on that basis (and communicates this to the person) the understanding of confidence will not be mutual.

5.195 A mutual understanding of confidence can exist even if a person is legally obliged to provide the information to the agency.¹⁸⁸ On the other hand, if an agency or minister has a statutory obligation to publish or release specified information, that obligation will outweigh any undertaking by the agency or minister to treat the information confidentially, and therefore is inconsistent with any mutual understanding of confidence.¹⁸⁹

5.196 Whether the agency or minister accepted an obligation of confidence and is maintaining that obligation may be clear from an agency's or minister's actions.¹⁹⁰ For example, an agency or minister may mark a document as confidential, keep it separate from documents that are not confidential and ensure that the material is not disclosed to third parties without consent.

5.197 An obligation of confidentiality may be express or implied.¹⁹¹ An express mutual understanding may occur where the person providing the information asks the agency or minister to keep the information confidential and the agency or minister assures them that they will. Agency practices may illustrate how an implied mutual understanding may arise. For example, if an agency has policies and procedures in place for dealing with commercial-in-confidence information and those policies and procedures are known by the business community, it may be implied that when a business provides such

¹⁸⁶ *Francis and Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 12 [124].

¹⁸⁷ *Re Harts Pty Ltd and Tax Agents' Board (Qld)* [1994] AATA 349 [16]–[18].

¹⁸⁸ *National Australia Bank Ltd and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2013] AICmr 84 [23].

¹⁸⁹ *Maritime Union of Australia and Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development* [2014] AICmr 35 [28]–[40].

¹⁹⁰ *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic)* [1987] FCA 266 [11]; (1987) 14 FCR 434.

¹⁹¹ See *Re Bunting and Minister Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs* [2006] AATA 145.

information to that agency it will be on the basis of confidentiality.¹⁹²

Unauthorised disclosure or threatened disclosure

5.198 The information must have been disclosed or been threatened to be disclosed without authority. The scope of the confidential relationship will often need to be considered to ascertain whether disclosure is authorised.

5.199 For example, the agency or minister may have told the person providing the information about the people to whom the information will usually be disclosed. The law may require disclosure to third parties in the performance of an agency's functions, which will amount to an authorised use or disclosure. Similarly, a person providing confidential information to an agency or minister may specifically permit the agency or minister to divulge the information to a limited group of people.

5.200 Compliance with a statutory requirement for disclosure of confidential information will not amount to an unauthorised use and will not breach confidentiality.¹⁹³

Detriment

5.201 The fifth element for a breach of confidence action is that unauthorised disclosure of the information has, or will, cause detriment to the person who provided the confidential information.¹⁹⁴ Detriment takes many forms, such as threat to health or safety, financial loss, embarrassment, exposure to ridicule or public criticism. The element of detriment applies only to private persons and entities, not government.

5.202 The AAT has applied this element in numerous cases, but whether it must be established is uncertain.¹⁹⁵ The uncertainty arises because of an argument that an equitable breach of confidence operates upon the conscience (to respect the confidence) and not on the basis of damage caused.¹⁹⁶ Despite the uncertainty, it would be prudent to assume that establishing detriment is necessary.¹⁹⁷

Parliamentary Budget Office documents (s 45A)

5.203 While both the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) are exempt agencies under the FOI Act (s 7(1) and Division 1 of Part I of Schedule 2, and s 68A of the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*, documents related to the PBO may be held by other agencies. The PBO exemption in s 45A is designed to

¹⁹² See *Re Bunting and Minister Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs* [2006] AATA 145; *Re Minter Ellison and Australian Customs Service* [1989] AATA 66.

¹⁹³ *Re Drabsch and Collector of Customs and Anor* [1990] AATA 265.

¹⁹⁴ *Corrs Pavey Whiting & Byrne v Collector of Customs (Vic)* [1987] FCA 266; (1987) 14 FCR 434, referring to *Commonwealth v John Fairfax and Sons Ltd* [1980] HCA 44; (1980) 147 CLR 39; 32 ALR 485.

¹⁹⁵ *Burgess; Secretary Department of Veterans' Affairs and (Freedom of Information)* [2018] AATA 2897; *Re Callejo and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2010] AATA 244; (2010) 51 AAR 308; *Petroulias and Others and Commissioner of Taxation* [2006] AATA 333; (2006) 62 ATR 1175.

¹⁹⁶ *Re Callejo and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2010] AATA 244 discussing *Smith Kline & French Laboratories (Aust) Limited v Department of Community Services & Health* [1989] FCA 384; (1989) 89 ALR 366.

¹⁹⁷ *Re B and Brisbane North Regional Health Authority* [1994] QICmr 1 [109], [111]; (1994) 1 QAR 279.

protect the confidentiality of documents in the context of FOI requests made by Senators and Members of the House of Representatives in relation to the budget, or for policy costings outside of the caretaker period of a general election.

Documents included in exemption

5.204 The PBO exemption applies to a document that:

- (a) originates from the Parliamentary Budget Officer or the PBO and the document was prepared in response to, or otherwise relates to, a confidential request (s 45A(1)(a))
- (b) was brought into existence for the dominant purpose of providing information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer or the PBO in relation to a confidential request (s 45A(1)(b))
- (c) was provided to the Parliamentary Budget Officer or the PBO in response to a request for more information in relation to a confidential request (s 45A(1)(c))
- (d) is a draft of any of the above type of documents (s 45A(1)(d)).

5.205 The exemption also applies to a full or partial copy of a document of a category listed at [5.204] above, as well as a document that contains an extract from a document of such a category (s 45A(2)). Like the exemption applying to Cabinet documents, documents exempt under s 45A(1) are not subject to s 22. That is, there is no requirement to provide access to an edited copy (see [5.71]).

5.206 A confidential request is defined in s 45A(8) to be a request made by a Senator or Member under s 64E(1)(a) or (c) of the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* (PS Act) that includes a direction to treat the request or any other information relating to the request as confidential. This includes confidential requests to prepare a costing of a policy or a proposed policy under s 64H of the PS Act and confidential requests for information relating to the budget under s 64M of the PS Act.

5.207 Any document containing information which, if disclosed, would reveal that a confidential request has been made is exempt unless the confidential request has been disclosed by the Senator or Member who made the request (s 45A(3)).

Documents excluded from the exemption

5.208 There are 4 exceptions or qualifications to the general PBO document exemption rules:

- a document is not exempt merely because it is attached to a document that would be exempt under s 45A (s 45A(4))
- information that has been made publicly available by the Parliamentary Budget Officer in accordance with the PS Act is not exempt (s 45A(5))
- a document is not exempt if the information has been made publicly available by the Senator or Member who made the confidential request to which the document relates (s 45A(6))
- information in PBO documents which is purely factual material is not exempt unless its disclosure would reveal the existence of a confidential request and

the existence of the confidential request has not been disclosed by the Senator or Member (s 45A(7)).

5.209 The exemption applies to documents prepared by agencies for the ‘dominant purpose’ of providing information to the PBO relating to a confidential request. It does not apply to documents prepared or held by those agencies in the ordinary course of their business or activities. Agencies are reminded of their obligations under the *Australian Government Protocols Governing the Engagement between Commonwealth Bodies and the Parliamentary Budget Officer*¹⁹⁸ and the *Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the Heads of Commonwealth Bodies in relation to the Provision of Information and Documents*.¹⁹⁹

Withholding information about the existence of documents

5.210 Section 25 permits an agency to give to an FOI applicant a notice that neither confirms nor denies the existence of a document if information as to its existence would, if it were included in a document, make the document exempt under s 45A (see [5.56] – [5.57] above and Part 3 of these Guidelines).

Documents disclosure of which would be contempt of the Parliament or contempt of court (s 46)

5.211 Section 46 provides that a document is exempt if public disclosure of the document would, apart from the FOI Act and any immunity of the Crown:

- (a) be in contempt of court
- (b) be contrary to an order or direction by a Royal Commission or by a tribunal or other person or body having power to take evidence on oath
- (c) infringe the privileges of the Parliament of the Commonwealth or a State or of a House of such a Parliament or of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory.

5.212 Both the Parliament and courts have powers to regulate their own proceedings which have traditionally been regarded as a necessary incident to their functions as organs of the state. The protection of the privileges of Parliament and the law of contempt of court are designed to allow these institutions to regulate their proceedings and to operate effectively without interference or obstruction. Over the years, Royal Commissions and tribunals have assumed similar but more limited powers.

5.213 This provision takes its scope from the principles of privilege and the general law of contempt of court. While these powers have wide application, FOI decision makers will usually encounter them in connection with the disclosure of documents that may have been prepared for or are relevant to parliamentary or court proceedings.

¹⁹⁸ Available at www.aph.gov.au.

¹⁹⁹ Available at www.aph.gov.au.

Apart from this Act

5.214 The effect of the words ‘apart from this Act and any immunity of the Crown’ is to preserve the principles of parliamentary privilege and the law of contempt of court within the operation of the FOI Act. This is achieved by ensuring that the grounds for exemption (that is, if disclosure of a document would have any of the effects in ss 46(a)-(c)), may be met notwithstanding that there may be protection from certain actions under the FOI Act (see ss 90–92), or under the protections afforded by the common law to the immunities of the Crown.

Contempt of court

5.215 A contempt of court is an action which interferes with the due administration of justice. It includes, but is not limited to, a deliberate breach of a court order. Other actions that have been found to be contempt of court include an attempt to apply improper pressure on a party to court proceedings²⁰⁰ or prejudging the results of proceedings, failing to produce documents as ordered by a court or destroying documents that are likely to be required for proceedings.

5.216 Documents protected under s 46(a) include documents that are protected by the courts as part of their power to regulate their own proceedings. For example, a court may prohibit or limit publication of the names of parties or witnesses in litigation, or statements and evidence presented to the court. Because public disclosure of such documents would be a contempt of court, the documents will be exempt.

Contrary to an order or direction

5.217 Documents protected by s 46(b) are documents subject to an order prohibiting their publication made by a Royal Commission, tribunal or other body having power to take evidence on oath.²⁰¹ Royal Commissions are established for a fixed time period. However confidentiality orders continue in effect past this period.²⁰²

Infringe the privileges of Parliament

5.218 The term ‘parliamentary privilege’ refers to the privileges or immunities of the Houses of the Parliament and the powers of the Houses to protect the integrity of their processes.²⁰³

5.219 Section 49 of the Australian Constitution gives the Australian Parliament the power to declare the ‘powers, privileges and immunities of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, and of the members and the committees of each House’, and provides for the powers, privileges and immunities of the United Kingdom’s

²⁰⁰ *Attorney-General v Times Newspapers Ltd* [1973] 3 All ER 54 in which an article criticising the small size of an offer of settlement of a negligence claim was found to be in contempt because it improperly applied pressure to induce a litigant to settle.

²⁰¹ For examples see ‘KZ’ and *Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 24 [23]–[28] and ‘ABY’ and *Department of Defence (Freedom of Information)* [2022] AICmr 61 [23]–[29].

²⁰² *Re KJ Aldred and Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet* [1989] AATA 148.

²⁰³ See Senate Brief No 11, available at www.aph.gov.au.

House of Commons to apply until a declaration by the Australian Parliament. The *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* (the Privileges Act) is such a law, addressing some (but not all) aspects of parliamentary privilege as it applies to the Commonwealth Parliament.

5.220 Section 50 of the Australian Constitution provides that each House of the Parliament may make rules and orders with respect to the mode in which its powers, privileges and immunities may be exercised and upheld. The rules and orders most relevant to FOI decision makers are those that restrict publication or restrict publication without authority. Publication contrary to such rules may amount to an infringement of privilege, providing a basis for claiming the exemption under s 46(c).²⁰⁴

5.221 Section 4 of the Privileges Act contains what amounts to a definition of ‘contempt of Parliament’:

Conduct (including the use of words) does not constitute an offence against a House unless it amounts, or is intended or likely to amount, to an improper interference with the free exercise by a House or committee of its authority or functions, or with the free performance by a member of the member’s duties as a member.

5.222 Accordingly, conduct that improperly interferes with the free exercise by a House of Parliament of its authority or functions, such as the contravention of a rule or order of a House of Parliament, may constitute contempt of the Parliament and infringe the privileges of the Parliament.

5.223 For s 46(c) to apply where there is no rule or order preventing publication, there must be a close connection between a document and some parliamentary purpose to which it relates which could be prejudiced by disclosure. Section 46(c) is concerned with circumstances where information provided to a House or committee of Parliament has been disclosed without authority or the disclosure otherwise improperly interferes with a member of Parliament’s free performance of their duties as a member.

5.224 Disclosure of briefings to assist ministers in Parliament — namely, question time briefs or possible parliamentary questions — would not ordinarily be expected to breach a privilege of Parliament. A document of this kind, while prepared for a minister to assist them respond to potential questions raised in Parliament, is nevertheless an executive document. Unless some clear prejudice to parliamentary proceedings can be demonstrated, s 46(c) should not be claimed for briefings of this kind. Depending on the content of the briefings, other exemptions may apply.

5.225 When assessing a document that may be exempt for a limited time — for example, until a parliamentary committee either publishes or authorises publication of documentary evidence — a decision maker should consider deferring access under s 21(1)(b). For further guidance on deferring access see Part 3.

²⁰⁴ See *Seven Network (Operations) Limited and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 32.

Documents disclosing trade secrets or commercially valuable information (s 47)

5.226 Section 47 provides that a document is an exempt document if its disclosure would disclose:

- (a) trade secrets or
- (b) any other information having a commercial value that would be, or could reasonably be expected to be, destroyed or diminished if the information were disclosed.

5.227 The exemption does not apply if the information in the document is:

- (a) in respect of the FOI applicant's business or professional affairs
- (b) in respect of an undertaking and the FOI applicant is the proprietor of the undertaking or a person acting on behalf of the proprietor
- (c) in respect of an organisation and the FOI applicant is the organisation or a person acting on behalf of the organisation (s 47(2)).

5.228 These exceptions to the exemption capture situations in which no adverse impact would result from disclosure of documents because they are being provided to the individual or entity that they concern. But the exemption may apply if the information jointly concerns the trade secrets or valuable commercial information of another individual or organisation, or another person's undertaking and that information is not severable from the document.

Trade secrets (s 47(1)(a))

5.229 The term 'trade secret' is not defined in the FOI Act. The Federal Court has interpreted a trade secret as information possessed by one trader which gives that trader an advantage over its competitors while the information remains generally unknown.²⁰⁵

5.230 The Federal Court referred to the following test when considering whether information amounts to a trade secret:

- the information is used in a trade or business
- the owner of the information must limit its dissemination or at least not encourage or permit its widespread publication
- if disclosed to a competitor, the information would be liable to cause real or significant harm to the owner of the information.²⁰⁶

5.231 Factors that a decision maker might regard as useful guidance, but which do not constitute an exhaustive list of factors to consider include:

²⁰⁵ *Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business v Staff Development and Training Company* [2001] FCA 1375 [14]; (2001) 114 FCR 301.

²⁰⁶ *Lansing Linde Ltd v Kerr* (1990) 21 IPR 529 per Staughton LJ [536], cited in *Searle Australia Pty Ltd and Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Department of Community Services and Health* [1992] FCA 241 [34]; (1992) 108 ALR 163.

- the extent to which the information is known outside the business of the owner of that information
- the extent to which the information is known by persons engaged in the owner's business
- measures taken by the owner to guard the secrecy of the information²⁰⁷
- the value of the information to the owner and to their competitors
- the effort and money spent by the owner in developing the information
- the ease or difficulty with which others might acquire or duplicate the secret.²⁰⁸

5.232 Where the information is 'observable', such as the design features of a fishing net, the Information Commissioner has found that the information is not a trade secret.²⁰⁹

5.233 Information of a non-technical character may also amount to a trade secret. To be a trade secret, information must be capable of being put to advantageous use by someone involved in an identifiable trade.²¹⁰

Information having a commercial value (s 47(1)(b))

5.234 To be exempt under s 47(1)(b) a document must satisfy 2 criteria:

- the document must contain information that has a commercial value either to an agency or to another person or body and
- the commercial value of the information would be, or could reasonably be expected to be, destroyed or diminished if it were disclosed.²¹¹

5.235 It is a question of fact whether information has commercial value, and whether disclosure would destroy or diminish that value. The commercial value may relate, for example, to the profitability or viability of a continuing business operation or commercial activity in which an agency or person is involved.²¹² The information need not necessarily have 'exchange value', in the sense that it can be sold as a trade secret or intellectual property.²¹³ The following factors may assist in deciding whether information has commercial value:

- whether the information is known only to the agency or person to whom

²⁰⁷ See *Cordova and Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)* [2015] AATA 956, a case involving electoral software 'source code' where the AAT considered that the software supplier had taken precautions to limit dissemination of the source code and the source code has a commercial value to find that the source code is trade secret; and *'HN' and Department of the Environment* [2015] AICmr 76 [16]–[18] where the Information Commissioner considered that information relating to oil flow modelling is BP's trade secret.

²⁰⁸ *Re Organon (Aust) Pty Ltd and Department of Community Services and Health* [1987] AATA 396.

²⁰⁹ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Australian Fisheries Management Authority* [2016] AICmr 43 [30].

²¹⁰ *Searle Australia Pty Ltd and Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Department of Community Services and Health* [1992] FCA 241 [38]; (1992) 36 FCR 111; (1992) 108 ALR 163.

²¹¹ See *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (No 2) (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 40 [10]–[38].

²¹² *Re Mangan and The Treasury* [2005] AATA 898; *Re Metcalf Pty Ltd and Western Power Corporation* [1996] WAICmr 23.

²¹³ *McKinnon and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 34 [42].

it has value or, if it is known to others, to what extent that detracts from its intrinsic commercial value

- whether the information confers a competitive advantage on the agency or person to whom it relates — for example, if it lowers the cost of production or allows access to markets not available to competitors
- whether a genuine ‘arm’s-length’ buyer would be prepared to pay to obtain that information²¹⁴
- whether the information is still current or out of date (out of date information may no longer have any value)²¹⁵
- whether disclosing the information would reduce the value of a business operation or commercial activity — reflected, perhaps, in a lower share price.

5.236 The time and money invested in generating information will not necessarily mean that it has commercial value. Information that is costly to produce will not necessarily have intrinsic commercial value.²¹⁶

5.237 The second requirement of s 47(1)(b) — that it could reasonably be expected that disclosure of the information would destroy or diminish its value — must be established separately by satisfactory evidence. It should not be assumed that confidential commercial information will necessarily lose some of its value if it becomes more widely known.²¹⁷ Nor is it sufficient to establish that an agency or person would be adversely affected by disclosure; for example, by encountering criticism or embarrassment. It must be established that the disclosure would destroy or diminish the commercial value of the information.²¹⁸

Consultation

5.238 Where disclosure of a document may disclose a trade secret or commercially valuable information belonging to an individual, organisation or undertaking other than the FOI applicant, the decision maker should consult the relevant parties. Section 27 of the FOI Act requires an agency or minister to consider whether that individual, organisation or undertaking might reasonably wish to contend that the document is exempt from disclosure. If the decision maker’s view is that the third party might wish to make a submission, the decision maker must consult them before giving access if it is reasonably practicable to do so. Further guidance on third party

²¹⁴ *Re Cannon and Australian Quality Egg Farms* [1994] 1 QAR 491 and *Re Hassell and Department of Health of Western Australia* [1994] WAICmr 25.

²¹⁵ *Re Angel and the Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Environment; HC Sleigh Resources Ltd and Tasmania* [1985] AATA 314.

²¹⁶ *Re Hassell and Department of Health Western Australia* [1994] WAICmr 25.

²¹⁷ See for example *'D' and Civil Aviation Safety Authority* [2013] AICmr 13.

²¹⁸ *McKinnon and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 34 [45]. In *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Australian Fisheries Management Authority* [2016] AICmr 43 [38]–[39], information relating to the design and performance of a fishing net was found to be commercially valuable information. The information was specific technical information that had commercial value such that a competitor would be willing to pay for it, and that value would be diminished by disclosure. See also, *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence (No 2) (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 40 [27]–[38].

consultation is in Parts 3 and 6 of these Guidelines.

Electoral rolls and related documents (s 47A)

5.239 A document is an exempt document under s 47A(2) if it is:

- (a) an electoral roll
- (b) a print, or a copy of a print, of an electoral roll
- (c) a microfiche of an electoral roll
- (d) a copy on tape or disc of an electoral roll
- (e) a document that sets out particulars of only one elector and was used to prepare an electoral roll
- (f) a document that is a copy of a document that sets out particulars of only one elector and was used to prepare an electoral roll
- (g) a document that contains only copies of a document that sets out particulars of only one elector and was used to prepare an electoral roll
- (h) a document (including a habitation index within the meaning of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*) that sets out particulars of electors and was derived from an electoral roll.

5.240 The exemption extends to electoral rolls (or part of an electoral roll) of a State or Territory or a Division or Subdivision (within the meaning of the Commonwealth Electoral Act) prepared under that Act (s 47A(1)).

5.241 The exemption does not apply if an individual is seeking access to their own electoral records. That is:

- the part of the electoral roll that sets out the particulars of the elector applying for access (s 47A(3))
- any print, copy of a print, microfiche, tape or disk that sets out or reproduces only the particulars entered on an electoral roll in respect of the elector (s 47A(4))
- a document that sets out only the particulars of the elector and was used to prepare an electoral roll (s 47A(5)(a))
- a copy, with deletions, of a document that sets out particulars of only one elector and was used to prepare an electoral roll (or a copy of such a document) (s 47A(5)(b))
- a copy, with deletions, of a document (including a habitation index within the meaning of the Commonwealth Electoral Act) that sets out particulars of electors and was derived from an electoral roll (s 47A(5)(b)).

Part 6 — Conditional exemptions

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Introduction

- 6.1 This Part of the FOI Guidelines sets out each of the conditional exemptions in Division 3 of Part IV of the FOI Act and explains the threshold criteria that must be met before deciding that a document is conditionally exempt.
- 6.2 Section 11A(5) of the FOI Act provides that when a document is conditionally exempt under a conditional exemption in Division 3 of Part IV of the FOI Act, access must be given to the document unless, in the circumstances, giving access would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest (s 11A(5)).
- 6.3 After discussing each conditional exemption and its threshold criteria, Part 6 sets out how decision-makers should apply the public interest test, which is common to all conditional exemptions in Division 3 of Part IV.
- 6.4 It is important to recognise that agencies and ministers retain a discretion to provide access to a document, even if the document meets the criteria for one of the exemptions in Division 2 of Part IV (s 3A). In each case, agencies and ministers should consider the information sought and the public interest factors in favour of release of a conditionally exempt document. This process can involve factors such as the current context, the passage of time and the availability of related information.
- 6.5 Sections 90, 91 and 92 of the FOI Act provide protection against civil and criminal liability when documents are disclosed or published in good faith in the belief that publication or disclosure is required or permitted under the FOI Act or otherwise, whether under an express legislative power or not.
- 6.6 As noted in *‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency*,¹ agencies [and ministers] are not legally bound to refuse access if a document is exempt and may consider disclosure of a document if this is not otherwise legally prohibited. Such an approach is consistent with the pro-access parliamentary intention underpinning the FOI Act.

Decision making under Division 3 of Part IV

- 6.7 Deciding whether a document is exempt under Division 3 of Part IV of the FOI Act requires decision makers to:
- consider the document at issue and the criteria that must be established for each conditional exemption
 - decide, in the context of each individual document, whether the threshold for one or more conditional exemptions is met²
 - consider whether giving access would be contrary to the public interest test (s 11A(5)) by:
 - identifying the public interest factors favouring disclosure (s 11B(3)) (see [6.229] – [6.231])
 - identifying the public interest factors against disclosure (see [6.232] – [6.233])
 - ensuring that irrelevant factors are not considered (s 11B(4)) (see [6.234] – [6.235])

¹ *‘ACV’ and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 3 [89] and [90].

² If the statutory criteria for the conditional exemption is not met, the document is not conditionally exempt. Unless another exemption applies, access to the document must be given (s 11A(5) of the FOI Act).

- weighing the relevant factors for and against disclosure to reach a decision (see [6.237] – [6.239]). It is only if the factors against disclosure outweigh those for disclosure that the document will be exempt
- make a decision and notify the applicant; and
- if refusing access to information provide written reasons for that decision which meet the requirements of s 26.

Identifying the matters that must be established for each conditional exemption

6.8 A document is conditionally exempt if it satisfies all the elements of any of the 8 conditional exemptions listed below. Conditional exemptions in Division 3 of Part IV that are subject to the public interest test relate to the following:

- Commonwealth-State relations (s 47B)³
- deliberative processes (s 47C)⁴
- financial or property interests of the Commonwealth (s 47D)⁵
- certain operations of agencies (s 47E)⁶
- personal privacy (s 47F)⁷
- business (other than documents to which s 47 applies) (s 47G)⁸
- research (s 47H)⁹
- the economy (s 47J).¹⁰

6.9 For each conditional exemption there is a balancing of public interest factors for and against disclosure of information. For a document that is found to be conditionally exempt, the balancing test requires the decision maker to determine that release of the information would be contrary to the public interest. In circumstances where the decision maker is not satisfied that release would be contrary to the public interest, the information must be released. The use of the word contrary sets a high threshold, in summary, demonstrating that the factors against disclosure are oppositional to the public interest.

6.10 Under Division 3 a document will be conditionally exempt if its disclosure:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, *cause damage* to relations between the Commonwealth and a State (s 47B(a))
- would have a *substantial adverse effect* on the financial or property interests of the Commonwealth or an agency (s 47D)

³ See [6.222]–[6.45] below.

⁴ See [6.466]–[6.78] below.

⁵ See [6.79]–[6.83] below.

⁶ See [6.844]–[6.1158] below.

⁷ See [6.119]–[6.176] below.

⁸ See [6.1777]–[6.212] below.

⁹ See [6.213]–[6.2144] below.

¹⁰ See [6.215]–[6.221] below.

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a *substantial adverse effect* on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth or by an agency, or on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency (ss 47E(c) and 47E(d))
- would involve the *unreasonable disclosure* of personal information about any person (including a deceased person) (s 47F)
- would disclose information concerning a person in respect of their business or professional affairs or concerning the business of commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking in a case in which the disclosure of the information would, or could reasonably be expected to, *unreasonably affect that person adversely* in respect of their lawful business or professional affairs or that organisation or undertaking in respect of its lawful business, commercial or financial affairs (s 47G(1))
- before the completion of research would be *likely unreasonably to expose the agency or officer to disadvantage* (s 47H)
- would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a *substantial adverse effect* on Australia's economy (s 47J).

6.11 Agencies and ministers must administer each FOI request individually, having regard to the contents of the document and should apply the public interest test to the particular document to decide whether to grant access at that time.¹¹ An agency cannot rely on a class claim contention when refusing access to a document under a conditional exemption.

Commonly used terms

6.12 Certain expressions in the FOI Act are common to several exemptions and conditional exemptions. These are explained below.

Would or could reasonably be expected to

6.13 The test 'would or could reasonably be expected' appears in the following conditional exemptions:

- Commonwealth-State relations (s 47B)
- certain operations of agencies (ss 47E(a)-(d))
- business affairs (ss 47G(1)(a)-(b))
- the economy (s 47J).

6.14 The test requires the decision maker to assess the likelihood of the predicted or forecast event, effect or damage occurring after disclosure of a document.¹²

¹¹ See *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* [2013] AICmr 69 [36]–[45]; *Cornerstone Legal Pty Ltd and Australian Securities and Investment Commission* [2013] AICmr 71 [32]–[41] and [53]; *'FI' and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2015] AICmr 28 [14]; *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 506 [63]; *Dan Conifer and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (No. 2) (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 117 [15]; *'ABH' and Australian Transport Safety Bureau (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 27 [27]; *'ZT' and the Department of Home Affairs* [2022] AICmr 4 [23]. See also discussion of class claims in *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AATA 2719 [230]–[244].

¹² The test 'would or could reasonably be expected' has been discussed in various decisions. For example see *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 494 [37]; *Xenophon and Secretary, Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2019] AATA 3667 [98]–[103].

- 6.15 The use of the word ‘could’ is less stringent than ‘would’ and requires analysis of the reasonable expectation rather than the certainty of an event, effect or damage occurring. It may be a reasonable expectation that an effect has occurred, is presently occurring, or could occur in the future.¹³
- 6.16 The mere risk, allegation, possibility, or chance of prejudice does not qualify as a reasonable expectation.¹⁴ There must be, based on reasonable grounds, at least a real, significant or material possibility of prejudice.¹⁵

Substantial adverse effect

- 6.17 Several conditional exemptions¹⁶ require the decision maker to assess the impact and scale of an expected effect or event that would follow disclosure of the document. That is, the expected effect needs to be both ‘substantial’ and ‘adverse’.
- 6.18 The term ‘substantial adverse effect’ broadly means ‘an adverse effect which is sufficiently serious or significant to cause concern to a properly concerned reasonable person’.¹⁷ The word ‘substantial’, in the context of substantial loss or damage, has been interpreted as including ‘loss or damage that is, in the circumstances, real or of substance and not insubstantial or nominal’.¹⁸
- 6.19 A decision maker should clearly describe the expected effect and its impact on the usual operations or activity of the agency in the statement of reasons under s 26 to show their deliberations in determining the extent of the expected effect. It may sometimes be necessary to use general terms to avoid making the statement of reasons itself an ‘exempt document’ (s 26(2)).

Prejudice

- 6.20 Some exemptions and conditional exemptions¹⁹ require the decision maker to assess whether the potential disclosure of a document would be prejudicial. The FOI Act does not define prejudice. The Macquarie Dictionary definition of ‘prejudice’ requires:
- (a) disadvantage resulting from some judgement or action of another
 - (b) resulting injury or detriment.
- 6.21 A prejudicial effect is one which would cause a bias or change to the expected results leading to detrimental or disadvantageous outcomes. The expected outcome does not need to have an impact that is ‘substantial and adverse’.²⁰

¹³ *Re Maksimovic and Australian Customs Service* [2009] AATA 28 [28].

¹⁴ *Re News Corporation Limited v National Companies and Securities Commission* [1984] FCA 400; (1984) 5 FCR 88 per Fox and Woodward JJ; *Re Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1985] AATA 180 [41]; (1985) 7 ALD 731 at 742.

¹⁵ *Chemical Trustee Limited and Ors and Commissioner of Taxation and Chief Executive Officer, AUSTRAC (Joined Party)* [2013] AATA 623 [79].

¹⁶ Sections 47D, 47E(c), 47E(d) and 47J.

¹⁷ See *Re Thies and Department of Aviation* [1986] AATA 141 [24].

¹⁸ See *Tillmanns Butcheries Pty Ltd v Australasian Meat Employees Union & Ors* [1979] FCA 85 [14]–[15]; (1979) 27 ALR 367 [383]; per Deane J in relation to the meaning of ‘substantial loss’ in s 45D of the *Trade Practices Act 1974*. Although Deane J noted that it was unnecessary that he form a concluded view, Deane J’s interpretation of ‘substantial’ provides general guidance on the interpretation of this term under the FOI Act. See also for example *Re Marko Ascic v Australian Federal Police* [1986] FCA 260.

¹⁹ Sections 37(1)(a), 37(2)(a), 37(2)(c), 47E(a), 47E(b) and 47G(1)(b).

²⁰ See *Re James and Ors and Australian National University* [1984] AATA 501; (1984) 6 ALD 687 per President Hall on the operation of s 32 of the FOI Act.

Documents affecting Commonwealth-State relations (s 47B)

6.22 Section 47B conditionally exempts a document where disclosure:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to relations between the Commonwealth and a State (s 47B(a))
- would divulge information or matter communicated in confidence by or on behalf of the Government of a State or an authority of a State, to the Commonwealth, to an authority of the Commonwealth or to a person receiving the communication on behalf of the Commonwealth (s 47B(b))
- would divulge information or matter communicated in confidence by or on behalf of an authority of Norfolk Island, to the Government of the Commonwealth, to an authority of the Commonwealth or to a person receiving the communication on behalf of the Commonwealth or an authority of the Commonwealth (s 47B(d)) or
- would divulge information or matter communicated in confidence by or on behalf of the Government of a State or an authority of a State, to an authority of Norfolk Island or to a person receiving the communication on behalf of an authority of Norfolk Island (s 47B(f)).

6.23 For the purposes of this conditional exemption, a State includes the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory (s 4(1)).

Relevance of the author of the document

6.24 A document does not have to have been supplied or written by the Commonwealth, a State agency, a State authority or an authority of Norfolk Island to fall within this conditional exemption. The content of the document (and potentially the reason why or circumstances in which the document was created) is the deciding factor, rather than the originator's identity. It follows that it is also not a relevant consideration that all the parties referred to in the document are aware of the document or of the reference to the particular agency.

Cause damage to Commonwealth-State relations

6.25 A decision maker may consider that disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, damage the relations of the Commonwealth and one or more States (s 47B(a)). The term 'relations' has received judicial consideration under the term 'working relations', which was found to encompass all interactions of the Australian Government and the States,²¹ from formal Commonwealth-State consultation processes such as the National Cabinet through to any working arrangements between agencies undertaken as part of their day-to-day functions.

6.26 Disclosure of a document may cause damage by, for example:

²¹ See *Arnold (on behalf of Australians for Animals) v Queensland* [1987] FCA 148; (1987) 73 ALR 607.

- interrupting or creating difficulty in negotiations or discussions that are underway, including in the development of joint or parallel policy²²
 - adversely affecting the administration of a continuing Commonwealth-State project
 - substantially impairing (not merely modifying) Commonwealth-State programs²³
 - adversely affecting the continued level of trust or co-operation in existing inter-office relationships²⁴
 - impairing or prejudicing the flow of information to and from the Commonwealth.²⁵
- 6.27 Decision makers may also need to consider future working relationships where disclosure may, for example:
- impair or prejudice the future flow of information
 - adversely affect Commonwealth-State police operations or investigations
 - adversely affect the development of future Commonwealth-State projects.
- 6.28 The potential damage need not be quantified,²⁶ but the effect on relations arising from the disclosure must be adverse.
- 6.29 The Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) warns against applying class claims to documents under s 47B(a), explaining that this and other conditional exemptions require a closer analysis of the nature of the information in each document to determine whether a particular document is conditionally exempt.²⁷
- 6.30 Decision makers should also consider whether all or only some of the information in the requested documents would damage Commonwealth-State relations if disclosed. For example, in *Diamond and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority*, the FOI Commissioner found that disclosing school data provided by State and Territory Governments to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority for publication on the ‘My School’ website would damage Commonwealth-State relations.²⁸ Releasing the data would have breached an agreement between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to keep the data confidential and might reasonably cause State and Territory Governments to decline to provide further data for the website. However, the FOI Commissioner found that release of a list of schools featured on the website would not breach the confidentiality agreement as it would not disclose any State or Territory Government data.
- 6.31 Guidance on the application of the public interest test to documents found to be conditionally exempt under s 47B can be found at [6.222] – [6.238] and [6.240] – [6.44].

²² See *Arnold (on behalf of Australians for Animals) v Queensland* [1987] FCA 148; (1987) 73 ALR 607. See also *Rex Patrick and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 57 [31] in which the conditional exemption was found not to apply because the negotiations referred to in the statement of reasons had concluded.

²³ See *Re Cosco Holdings Pty Limited and Department of Treasury* [1998] AATA 124.

²⁴ See *Arnold (on behalf of Australians for Animals) v Queensland* [1987] FCA 148; (1987) 73 ALR 607.

²⁵ See *Re Shopping Centre Council and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2004] AATA 119; 78 ALD 494.

²⁶ See *Re Angel and the Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment; HC Sleigh Resources Ltd Tasmania* [1985] AATA 314.

²⁷ See *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 506 [63]; also these Guidelines above at [6.11].

²⁸ *Diamond and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* [2013] AICmr 57.

Damage to be reasonably expected

- 6.32 The term ‘could reasonably be expected to’ is explained in greater detail at [6.13]–[6.16] above. There must be real and substantial grounds for expecting the damage to occur which can be supported by evidence or reasoning.²⁹ There cannot be a mere assumption or allegation that damage may occur if the document is released. For example, when consulting a State agency or authority as required under s 26A, the agency should ask the State agency or authority for its reasons for expecting damage, as an unsubstantiated concern will not satisfy the s 47B(a) threshold.
- 6.33 The word ‘damage’ in s 47B is not qualified by any adjective as to extent or character and it may refer to forms of intangible damage.³⁰ It can also be taken to connote a less severe effect than ‘a substantial adverse effect’, which is the expression used in ss 47D, 47E and 47J of the FOI Act.³¹

Information communicated in confidence

- 6.34 Section 47B(b) conditionally exempts information communicated in confidence to the Commonwealth Government or an agency by a State or an authority of a State. It is not necessary for the decision maker to find that disclosure may found an action for breach of confidence for this element to apply (as is required for an exemption under s 45).
- 6.35 This exemption only applies if disclosure would divulge information that is communicated in confidence by a State Government or authority to the Commonwealth Government or agency, and not the reverse.³²
- 6.36 When assessing whether the information was communicated in confidence, the test is whether the communication was considered to be confidential at the time of the communication. The circumstances of the communication may also need to be considered, such as:
- whether the communication was ad hoc, routine, or required³³
 - whether there were any existing, implied or assumed arrangements or understandings between the Commonwealth and a State concerning the exchange or supply of information³⁴

²⁹ See *Attorney-General's Department and Australian Iron and Steel Pty Ltd v Cockcroft* [1986] FCA 35; (1986) 10 FCR 180. See also *Community and Public Sector Union and Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 75 [22] and *Dan Conifer and National Disability Insurance Agency (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 33 [28] in which the Information Commissioner stresses the need for agencies and ministers to provide evidence to support claims that there are real and substantial grounds for expecting disclosure would cause damage to Commonwealth-State relations.

³⁰ *Diamond v Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* [2014] AATA 707 [103].

³¹ *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AATA 2719 [216].

³² *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 506 [83].

³³ See *Re Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1985] AATA 180.

³⁴ See *Re Maher and Attorney-General's Department* [1985] AATA 180 for agreements and *Re Queensland and Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (Australians for Animals, party joined)* [1986] AATA 224 for assumed arrangements. See *Bradford and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2021] AATA 3984 [146]–[151] for examples of existing arrangements and understandings.

- how the information was subsequently handled, disclosed or otherwise published.³⁵
- 6.37 See also the discussion on s 33(b) (international relations) in Part 5 of these Guidelines. That provision is expressed in the same language but for the relevant entities which are to have communicated the information.
- 6.38 It may be difficult to establish that s 47B applies if the document relates to routine or administrative matters or are already in the public domain.³⁶ The relevant test is whether the relevant information was communicated in confidence by or on behalf of a State. However this is not to say that the fact that the document has already been released or its contents are already known by members of the public is irrelevant deciding whether s 47B applies.³⁷

A State and an authority of a State

- 6.39 An ‘authority of a State’ is an entity that has been established by the State for a public purpose, given the power to direct or control the affairs of others on the State’s behalf, reports to and is under some control of the State.³⁸ Where there is doubt as to whether an entity is an ‘authority of a State’, the agency should consult the entity. The view of the State Government or the entity as to its status will be an influential, but not decisive, factor.

Consultation with a State (s 26A)

- 6.40 In circumstances where:

- an FOI request is made to an agency or minister for access to a document
- that originated with, or was received from, the State or an authority of the State or
- the document contains information that originated with, or was received from, the State or an authority of the State

agencies and ministers are required to consult the State or authority of the State before deciding to release the document. Consultation is only required if it appears that the State may reasonably wish to contend that the document is conditionally exempt under s 47B and that giving access to the document would be contrary to the public interest.

- 6.41 Consultation is to be undertaken in accordance with arrangements made between the Commonwealth and the States (s 26A(2)). Such arrangements have been made to facilitate consultation where this is required under s 26A. Agreement has been obtained from the States that all correspondence and communication should, at first instance, be with the delegated FOI contact officer of the particular agency and not directly with the author or action officer whose name may appear in the document.³⁹ This process has been put in place to ensure FOI requests are appropriately received and monitored, and to minimise

³⁵ See *McGarvin and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [1998] AATA 585; *Rex Patrick and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 57 [30]–[31].

³⁶ In *Rex Patrick and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 57 [30]–[31] the requested document was shared with the Department on a confidential basis at the time of the consultation, but since then the final version of the document had been published.

³⁷ *Diamond and Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* [2014] AATA 707 [98].

³⁸ See *General Steel Industries Inc v Commissioner for Railways (NSW)* [1964] HCA 69; (1964) 112 CLR 125; *Committee of Direction of Fruit Marketing v Delegate of the Australian Postal Commission* [1980] HCA 23; (1980) 144 CLR 577.

³⁹ See FOI Memo No. 26A dated June 1996 which is available at [17 Mar 2012 - www.dpmc.gov.au/foi/guidelines.cfm](http://www.dpmc.gov.au/foi/guidelines.cfm) - Trove (nla.gov.au).

inconsistency across jurisdictions if a person makes FOI requests to several Australian Government and State agencies. FOI practitioners can find FOI contact information on the relevant State government agency website.⁴⁰

- 6.42 Part 3 of these Guidelines provides information about consultation, including consultation with a State or an authority of a State. Part 3 also provides further information in relation to advising the State or State authority of the FOI decision, review rights and applicable timeframes. The State, or authority of the State, may apply for internal review or IC review if it disagrees with the agency's or minister's access grant decision (ss 54B and 54M).
- 6.43 Formal consultation under s 26A extends the time in s 15(5)(b) for deciding an FOI request by 30 days (s 15(6)). The Information Commissioner recommends that consultation be undertaken at an early stage in processing an FOI request, that is, when the agency is gathering information that would show whether the documents are conditionally exempt under s 47B.

Consultation comments to be considered when assessing conditional exemption

- 6.44 The decision maker must take into account any concerns raised by the consulted State, or State or Norfolk Island authority. The consulted authority does not have the right to veto access and agencies and ministers should take care that the State or authority is not under such a misapprehension. All other relevant considerations should be taken into account to ensure a sound decision is made.
- 6.45 The information provided during the consultation can assist the decision maker in assessing whether the document contains material that concerns Commonwealth-State relations, and to assess what damage, if any, could occur from disclosure.

Documents subject to deliberative processes (s 47C)

- 6.46 This conditional exemption is characterised by a 3-stage decision making process reflecting the statutory requirements. Firstly, the decision maker must be satisfied that information within the scope of the request includes deliberative matter. Secondly, if the decision maker is satisfied, they are then required to be satisfied that the deliberative matter was obtained, prepared or recorded in the course of, or for the purposes of, deliberative processes. Thirdly, the decision maker must be satisfied that the deliberative processes were involved in the functions exercised by or intended to be exercised by an Australian Government agency or minister. The decision maker must be satisfied that of each of these requirements is met.
- 6.47 Deliberative matter is content that is in the nature of, or relating to either:
- an opinion, advice or recommendation that has been obtained, prepared or recorded or
 - a consultation or deliberation that has taken place, in the course of, or for the purposes of, a deliberative process of the government, an agency or minister (s 47C(1)).

⁴⁰ Not all States use the term 'Freedom of Information' or 'FOI', so checking the website for 'access to information', 'right to information' or similar terms may be necessary.

- 6.48 Deliberative matter does not include operational information or purely factual material (s 47C(2)). ‘Operational information’ is defined in s 8A and is information that an agency must publish under the Information Publication Scheme (see Part 13 of these Guidelines).
- 6.49 The conditional exemption does not apply to:
- a) reports (including reports concerning the results of studies, surveys or tests) of scientific or technical experts, whether employed within an agency or not, including reports expressing the opinions of such experts on scientific or technical matters (see [6.73] – [6.72] below)
 - b) reports of a body or organisation, prescribed by the regulations, that is established within an agency (currently none are prescribed)
 - c) the record of, or a formal statement of the reasons for, a final decision given in the exercise of a power or of an adjudicative function (s 47C(3)).
- 6.50 The deliberative processes conditional exemption provides a framework through which the nature and context of the information must be examined before the conditional exemption will apply. Firstly, the information must include content of a specific type, namely deliberative matter. If a document does not contain deliberative matter, it cannot be conditionally exempt under this provision. This requires a factual determination by the decision maker as an initial step in satisfying themselves that the conditional exemption applies because the document contains deliberative matter involved in a deliberative process.
- 6.51 The decision-maker must also be satisfied that the information relates to a deliberative function and that that function was or was intended to be exercised by one of 3 entities: an agency, a minister, or the Government of the Commonwealth.
- 6.52 Agencies and ministers should only claim this conditional exemption in clearly applicable circumstances, noting that s 47C is subject to an overriding public interest test that is weighted toward disclosure. Not every document generated or held by a policy area of an agency is ‘deliberative’ in the sense used in this provision, even if it appears to deal with the development or implementation of a policy. This is reinforced by the language of the FOI Act which describes what does not constitute ‘deliberative matter’. A decision maker should ensure that the content of a document strictly conforms with the criteria for identifying ‘deliberative matter’ prepared or recorded for the purposes of a ‘deliberative process’ before claiming this conditional exemption (see [6.46] above and [6.59] – [6.58] below).
- 6.53 Guidance in relation to the role of inhibition of frankness and candour when applying the public interest test to documents found to be conditionally exempt under s 47C can be found at [6.245] – [6.252].

Deliberative process

- 6.54 A deliberative process involves the exercise of judgement in developing and making a selection from different options:

The action of deliberating, in common understanding, involves the weighing up or evaluation of the competing arguments or considerations that may have a bearing upon one's course of action. In short, the deliberative processes involved in the functions of an agency are its thinking processes – the processes of reflection, for

example, upon the wisdom and expediency of a proposal, a particular decision or a course of action.⁴¹

- 6.55 It is not enough for the purposes of s 47C(1) that an opinion, advice or recommendation is merely obtained, prepared or recorded; it must be obtained, prepared or recorded *in the course of, or for the purposes of*, the deliberative processes involved in the functions of the agency, minister or government.⁴²
- 6.56 The functions of an agency are usually found in the Administrative Arrangements Orders or the instrument or Act that established the agency. For the purposes of the FOI Act, the functions include both policy making and the processes undertaken in administering or implementing a policy. The functions also extend to the development of policies in respect of matters that arise in the course of administering a program. The non-policy decision making processes required when carrying out agency, ministerial or governmental functions, such as code of conduct investigations, may also be deliberative processes.⁴³
- 6.57 A deliberative process may include the recording or exchange of:
- opinions
 - advice
 - recommendations
 - a collection of facts or opinions, including the pattern of facts or opinions considered⁴⁴
 - interim decisions or deliberations.
- 6.58 An opinion or recommendation does not need to be prepared for the sole purpose of a deliberative process. However, it is not sufficient that an agency or minister merely has a document in its possession that contains information referring to matters for which the agency or minister has responsibility.⁴⁵

Assessing deliberative matter

- 6.59 ‘Deliberative matter’ is a shorthand term for ‘opinion, advice and recommendation’ and ‘consultation and deliberation’ that is recorded or reflected in a document.⁴⁶ There is no

⁴¹ See *Re JE Waterford and Department of Treasury (No 2)* [1984] AATA 67 [58]; (1984) 5 ALD 588; *British American Tobacco Australia Ltd and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2012] AICmr 19 [15]–[22] and *Carver and Fair Work Ombudsman* [2011] AICmr 5 in relation to code of conduct investigations.

⁴² *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of information)* [2020] AATA 4964 (‘Patrick’) [72]. In ‘Patrick’ Deputy President Britten-Jones concluded at [77] that an audit report prepared to assess the effectiveness and value for money of the Department of Defence’s acquisition of light protected vehicles did not involve a deliberative process because the audit report did not involve the weighing up or evaluation of competing arguments and did not involve the exercise of judgment in developing and making a selection from different options. In so far as the audit report disclosed an opinion, the opinion was not obtained, prepared or recorded in the course of, or for the purposes of, any deliberative processes involved in the functions of the Auditor-General. As a consequence, the audit report was not found to be conditionally exempt under s 47C.

⁴³ See *Re Murtagh and Commissioner of Taxation* [1984] AATA 249; *Re Reith and Attorney-General’s Department* [1986] AATA 437; *Re Zacek and Australian Postal Corporation* [2002] AATA 473.

⁴⁴ See *Chapman and Chapman and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs* [1996] AATA 210; (1996) 43 ALD 139.

⁴⁵ *Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Sanderson (Party Joined)* [2015] AATA 361 [93].

⁴⁶ As discussed by Bennett J in *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General’s Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [18].

reason generally to limit the ordinary meanings given to the words ‘opinion, advice or recommendation, consultation or deliberation’.⁴⁷

- 6.60 The agency must assess all the material to decide if it is deliberative matter that relates to, or is in the nature of, the deliberative processes of the agency or minister.⁴⁸
- 6.61 The presence or absence of particular words or phrases is not a reliable indication of whether a document includes deliberative matter. The agency or minister should assess the substance and content of the document before concluding it includes deliberative matter. Similarly, the format or class of the document, such as a ministerial brief or submission, or the document being a draft version of a later document does not automatically designate the content as deliberative matter.
- 6.62 Material that is not deliberative matter, where not already excluded as operational information, purely factual material or a scientific report, would include:
- content that is merely descriptive
 - incidental administrative content⁴⁹
 - procedural or day to day content⁵⁰
 - the decision or conclusion reached at the end of the deliberative process⁵¹
 - matter that was not obtained, prepared or recorded in the course of, or for the purposes of, a deliberative process.
- 6.63 Where material was gathered as a basis for intended deliberations, it may be deliberative matter.⁵² However, if the material was obtained before there was a known requirement that the material would be considered during a deliberative process, that material would not be deliberative matter.⁵³
- 6.64 Matter may still be deliberative even if the deliberative process has stalled or been overtaken by other events.⁵⁴

Consultation

- 6.65 A consultation undertaken for the purposes of, or in the course of, a deliberative process includes any discussion between the agency, minister or government and another person in relation to the decision that is the object of the deliberative process.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ As explained by Forgie DP in *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 945 [39].

⁴⁸ See *Secretary, Department of Employment, Workplace Relations v Small Business and Staff Development and Training Centre Pty Ltd* [2001] FCA 1375; (2001) 114 FCR 301.

⁴⁹ See *Re VXF and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* [1989] AATA 107.

⁵⁰ See *Subramanian and Refugee Review Tribunal* [1997] AATA 31.

⁵¹ See *Chapman and Chapman and Minister of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs* [1996] AATA 210; (1996) 43 ALD 139; *British American Tobacco Australia Ltd and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2012] AICmr 19; *Briggs and the Department of the Treasury (No. 3)* [2012] AICmr 22.

⁵² See *Secretary, Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business v Staff Development and Training Centre Pty Ltd* [2001] FCA 1375; (2001) 114 FCR 301.

⁵³ See *Re Susic and Australian Institute of Marine Science* [1993] AATA 97; *Re Booker and Department of Social Security* [1990] AATA 218.

⁵⁴ *Parnell & Dreyfus and Attorney-General's Department* [2014] AICmr 71 [38].

⁵⁵ *McGarvin and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [1998] AATA 585.

- 6.66 The agency should create the consultation document with the intention of initiating a 2-way exchange between at least 2 parties.⁵⁶ If the other person does not respond or participate, the consultation document may still be deliberative matter.

Purely factual material

- 6.67 The exclusion of purely factual material under s 47C(2)(b) is intended to allow disclosure of material used in the deliberative process.
- 6.68 A conclusion involving opinion or judgement is not purely factual material. Similarly, an assertion that something is a fact may be an opinion rather than purely factual material.
- 6.69 Conversely, when a statement is made of an ultimate fact, involving a conclusion based on primary facts which are unstated, such a statement may be a statement of purely factual material.⁵⁷
- 6.70 'Purely factual material' does not extend to factual material that is an integral part of the deliberative content and purpose of a document, or is embedded in or intertwined with the deliberative content such that it is impractical to excise it.⁵⁸
- 6.71 Where a decision maker finds it difficult to separate the purely factual material from the deliberative matter, both the elements may be exempt.⁵⁹ If the 2 elements can be separated, the decision maker should consider giving the applicant a copy with deletions under s 22 to provide access to the purely factual material.⁶⁰
- 6.72 The action taken by decision-makers in relation to the provision of edited copies of documents is an important element of the operation of the FOI Act. There are preconditions described in s 22(1) and in circumstances where these preconditions are met, s 22(2) provides that the agency or minister must prepare an edited copy of the document and give the FOI applicant access to the edited copy.

Reports on scientific or technical matters

- 6.73 As noted at [6.49] above, the s 47C conditional exemption does not apply to reports (including reports concerning the results of studies, surveys or tests) of scientific or technical experts, including reports expressing experts' opinions on scientific or technical matters (s 47C(3)(a)).
- 6.74 The sciences include the natural sciences of physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology (such as botany, zoology and medicine⁶¹) and the earth sciences (which include geology, geophysics,

⁵⁶ *Re Booker and Department of Social Security* [1990] AATA 218.

⁵⁷ *Re Waterford and the Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia* [1984] AATA 518 [15], citing *Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [1984] FCA 8; (1984) 51 ALR 581 [586].

⁵⁸ *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [18].

⁵⁹ See *Eccleston and Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs* (1993) 1 QAR 60 and *Chapman and Chapman and Minister of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs* [1996] AATA 210; (1996) 43 ALD 139. See also *Parnell & Dreyfus and Attorney-General's Department* [2014] AICmr 71 [40] in which the Information Commissioner found that factual material was so integral to the deliberative content that the analysis and views in the document would be robbed of their essential meaning if it was not included. Further, the Information Commissioner concluded that it would also be impractical to separate the factual material from the deliberative content, as the 2 were intertwined.

⁶⁰ See *Re Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [1983] FCA 242; (1983) 78 FLR 236.

⁶¹ See *Re Wertheim and Department of Health* [1984] AATA 537.

hydrology, meteorology, physical geography, oceanography, and soil science). Technical matters involve the application of science, and includes engineering.⁶²

- 6.75 For the purposes of s 47C(3)(a), the social sciences, or the study of an aspect of human society, are not scientific (for example, anthropology, archaeology, economics,⁶³ geography, history, linguistics, political science, sociology and psychology).

Interaction with Cabinet documents exemption

- 6.76 In some cases, a document may contain deliberative matter that relates to Cabinet in some way but is not exempt under the Cabinet documents exemption in s 34. An example would be a document containing deliberative matter that is marked ‘Cabinet-in-Confidence’ but nonetheless does not satisfy any of the exemption criteria in s 34.⁶⁴ Disclosing a document of this kind will not necessarily be contrary to the public interest only because of the connection to Cabinet deliberations. For example, disclosure is less likely to be contrary to the public interest if:

- the document contains deliberative but otherwise non-sensitive matter about a policy development process that has been finalised and
- the Government has announced its decision on the issue.⁶⁵

- 6.77 Even if the Government has not announced a decision on the issue, disclosure of such a document is less likely to be contrary to the public interest if it is public knowledge that the Government considered, or is considering, the issue.⁶⁶ The key public interest consideration in both situations is to assess whether disclosure would inhibit the Government’s future deliberation of the issue.

- 6.78 Examples of non-sensitive matter in this context include information that is no longer current or that is already in the public domain, or information that provides a professional, objective analysis of potential options without favouring one over the other. For guidance about the Cabinet documents exemption see Part 5 of these Guidelines.

Documents affecting financial or property interests of the Commonwealth (s 47D)

- 6.79 Section 47D conditionally exempts documents where disclosure would have a substantial adverse effect on the financial or property interests of the Commonwealth or an agency.⁶⁷

⁶² See *Re Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Keith Cameron Mackriell* [1983] FCA 242; (1983) 78 FLR 236 per Beaumont J.

⁶³ See *Re Waterford and the Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia* [1985] AATA 114.

⁶⁴ See *Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW Inc and Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer* [2013] AICmr 70 [17].

⁶⁵ *Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW Inc and Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer* [2013] AICmr 70 [13]–[21]; *Australian Private Hospitals Association and Department of the Treasury* [2014] AICmr 4 [38]–[45].

⁶⁶ *Philip Morris Ltd and Department of Finance* [2014] AICmr 27 [49]–[52]; *Sanderson and Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development* [2014] AICmr 66 [29]–[37].

⁶⁷ For an example of the application of this exemption see *Briggs and the Department of the Treasury (No. 3)* [2012] AICmr 22.

Financial or property interests

- 6.80 The financial or property interests of the Commonwealth or an agency may relate to assets, expenditure or revenue-generating activities. An agency's property interests may be broader than merely buildings and land, and may include intellectual property or the Crown's interest in natural resources.⁶⁸

Substantial adverse effect

- 6.81 For the conditional exemption to apply, the potential effect that would be expected to occur following disclosure must be both substantial⁶⁹ and adverse. This standard is discussed in more detail at [6.17] – [6.19] above.
- 6.82 A substantial adverse effect may be indirect. For example, where disclosure of documents would provide the criteria by which an agency is to assess tenders, the agency's financial interest in seeking to obtain the best value for money through a competitive tendering process may be compromised.⁷⁰
- 6.83 An agency or government cannot merely assert that its financial or property interests would be adversely affected following disclosure.⁷¹ The particulars of the predicted effect should be identified during the decision-making process and should be supported by evidence. Where the conditional exemption is relied on, the relevant particulars and reasons should form part of the decision maker's statement of reasons, if they can be included without disclosing exempt matter (s 26, see Part 3 of these Guidelines). The effect must bear on the actual financial or property interests of the Commonwealth or an agency.⁷²

Documents affecting certain operations of agencies (s 47E)

- 6.84 Section 47E conditionally exempts a document where disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, prejudice or have a substantial adverse effect on certain identified agency operations.
- 6.85 There are 4 separate grounds for the conditional exemption, one or more of which may be relevant in a particular case. A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under the FOI Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

⁶⁸ See *Re Connolly and Department of Finance* [1994] AATA 167 in which the Commonwealth property was the uranium stockpile.

⁶⁹ See *Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [1983] FCA 242; (1983) 78 FLR 236.

⁷⁰ See *Secretary, Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business v Staff Development & Training Centre Pty Ltd* [2001] FCA 1375; (2001) 114 FCR 301.

⁷¹ See *Community and Public Sector Union and Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 75 [57]–[61] in which the Information Commissioner found that the respondent had not provided particulars to explain why disclosure of the particular material it decided was exempt under s 47D would adversely impact the ability of the government to manage its financial matters. See also *'DB' and Australian Federal Police* [2014] AICmr 105 [37]–[40] in which the acting Freedom of Information Commissioner found that the respondent had made broad assertions about the need to exempt documents containing financial and budgetary information from disclosure but had not addressed the actual contents of each document. The respondent also did not substantiate its claim that disclosure would have a 'substantial adverse impact' on its financial or property interests.

⁷² See *Re Hart and Deputy Commissioner of Taxation* [2002] AATA 1190; (2002) 36 AAR 279.

- a) prejudice the effectiveness of procedures or methods for the conduct of tests, examinations or audits by an agency
 - b) prejudice the attainment of the objects of particular tests, examinations or audits conducted or to be conducted by an agency
 - c) have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth or an agency or
 - d) have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.
- 6.86 Where an agency is considering documents relating to its industrial relations activities, conditional exemptions such as s 47E(c) (management of personnel) or s 47E(d) (proper and efficient conduct of the operations of the agency) may be relevant.
- 6.87 Terms used in this conditional exemption are discussed below.

Prejudice

- 6.88 Sections 47E(a) and (b) require a decision maker to assess whether the conduct or objects of tests, examinations or audits would be prejudiced in a particular instance. The term 'prejudice' is explained at [6.20] – [6.21] above.
- 6.89 In the context of this conditional exemption, a prejudicial effect could be regarded as one that would cause a bias or change to the expected results leading to detrimental or disadvantageous outcomes. The expected change does not need to have an impact that is 'substantial and adverse', which is a stricter test.⁷³

Reasonably be expected

- 6.90 For the grounds in ss 47E(a)–(d) to apply, the predicted effect needs to be reasonably expected to occur. The term 'could reasonably be expected' is explained in greater detail at [6.13] – [6.16] above. There must be more than merely an assumption or allegation that damage may occur if the document is released.
- 6.91 Where the document relates more closely to investigations into compliance with a taxation law or the enforcement of or proper administration of the law due to the involvement of police or the Director of Public Prosecutions, or by an agency's internal investigators, the agency may need to consider the law enforcement exemption under s 37 (see Part 5).

Reasons for predicted effect

- 6.92 An agency cannot merely assert that an effect will occur following disclosure. The particulars of the predicted effect should be identified during the decision-making process, including whether the effect could reasonably be expected to occur. Where the conditional exemption is relied on, the relevant particulars and reasons should form part of the decision maker's statement of reasons, if they can be included without disclosing exempt matter (s 26, see Part 3).

⁷³ See *Re James and Ors and Australian National University* [1984] AATA 501; (1984) 6 ALD 687.

Prejudice the effectiveness of testing, examining or auditing methods or procedures (s 47E(a))

- 6.93 Where a document relates to a procedure or method for the conduct of tests, examinations or audits by an agency, the decision maker must address both elements of the conditional exemption in s 47E(a), namely that:
- an effect would reasonably be expected following disclosure
 - the expected effect would be, overall, prejudicial to the effectiveness of the procedure or method of the audit, test or examination being conducted.
- 6.94 The decision maker will need to consider the content and context of the document to be able to identify the purpose, methodology or intended objective of the examination, test or audit. This operational information provides the necessary context in which to assess the document against the conditional exemption and should be included in the statement of reasons issued under s 26.
- 6.95 The decision maker should explain how the expected effect will prejudice the effectiveness of the agency's testing methods.⁷⁴ A detailed description of the predicted effect will enable a comprehensive comparison of the predicted effect against the usual effectiveness of existing testing methods. The comparison will indicate whether the effect would be prejudicial.
- 6.96 Examples of testing methods considered by the Information Commissioner and the AAT include:
- safety audits and testing regimes⁷⁵
 - licensing board examinations⁷⁶
 - risk assessment matrices⁷⁷
 - compliance audit indicators⁷⁸ and any comparative weighting of the indicators
 - accident investigation techniques⁷⁹
 - tests or examinations leading to qualifications⁸⁰
 - potential fraud case assessment and analysis tools.⁸¹
- 6.97 Circumstances considered by the AAT where disclosure of the testing method may prejudice the method include:
- providing forewarning of the usual manner of audits

⁷⁴ See for example 'ADR' and Inspector-General of Taxation (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 51 [57]–[60] in which the Acting FOI Commissioner rejected a claim that a document was conditionally exempt under s 47E(a) on the basis that the Inspector-General had not explained how disclosure could prejudice the effectiveness of its review or audit methods and procedures nor why that prejudice could reasonably be expected to follow from disclosure of the document.

⁷⁵ See *Vasta and McKinnon and Civil Aviation Safety Authority* [2010] AATA 499; (2010) 116 ALD 356.

⁷⁶ *Australian Federation of Air Pilots and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 65.

⁷⁷ See *Lobo and Secretary, Department of Education, Science and Training* [2007] AATA 1891 and *Fortitude East Pty Ltd and Australian Trade Commission* [2016] AICmr 71.

⁷⁸ *Besser and Department of Infrastructure and Transport* [2013] AICmr 19 [31]–[32].

⁷⁹ See *Vasta and McKinnon and Civil Aviation Safety Authority* [2010] AATA 499; (2010) 116 ALD 356.

⁸⁰ See *Re James and Ors and Australian National University* [1984] AATA 501; (1984) ALD 687.

⁸¹ See *Splann and Centrelink* [2009] AATA 320.

- permitting analysis of responses to tests or examinations or information gathered during an audit
- facilitating cheating, fraudulent or deceptive conduct by those being tested or audited⁸²
- permitting pre-prepared responses which would compromise the integrity of the testing process.⁸³

Prejudice the attainment of testing, examination or auditing objectives (s 47E(b))

6.98 Where a document relates to the integrity of the attainment of the objects of tests, examinations or audits by an agency, the decision maker must address both elements of the conditional exemption in s 47E(b). The decision maker must be satisfied that:

- a) an effect would reasonably be expected following disclosure
- b) the expected effect would be prejudicial to the attainment of the objects of the audit, test or examination conducted or to be conducted.

6.99 The agency needs to conduct, or propose to conduct, the testing, examination or audit to meet particular requirements, and have a particular need for the results (the test objectives). The operational reason for conducting the test, examination or audit is the context for assessing whether s 47E(b) applies and this operational reason should be included in the s 26 statement of reasons.

6.100 Some examples of test objects include:

- ensuring only properly qualified people are flying aircraft
- ensuring the selection of the most competent and best candidates for promotion⁸⁴
- determining suitability for highly technical positions⁸⁵
- ensuring that an agency's expenditure is being lawfully spent through proper acquittal.⁸⁶

6.101 The AAT has accepted that disclosure would be prejudicial to testing methods where it would:

- allow for plagiarism or circulation of questions or examination papers that would lead to a breach of the integrity of the examination system⁸⁷
- allow for examiners to be inhibited in future marking by the threat of challenge to their marking⁸⁸
- allow scrutiny of past test results or questions for the pre-preparation of expected/acceptable responses, rather than honest or true responses, for example in

⁸² See *Re Marko Ascic and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 108.

⁸³ See *Re Crawley and Centrelink* [2006] AATA 572.

⁸⁴ See *Re Marko Ascic and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 108.

⁸⁵ *Australian Federation of Air Pilots and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 65 [21] and [30].

⁸⁶ *Besser and Department of Infrastructure and Transport* [2013] AICmr 19 [35].

⁸⁷ See *Re Marko Ascic and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 108.

⁸⁸ See *Re Marko Ascic and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 108.

psychometric testing to ascertain an applicant's eligibility for a certain pension⁸⁹ or patent examiner examinations.⁹⁰

Substantial adverse effect on management or assessment of personnel (s 47E(c))

6.102 Where a document relates to an agency's policies and practices in relation to the assessment or management of personnel, the decision maker must address both elements of the conditional exemption in s 47E(c), namely that:

- an effect would reasonably be expected following disclosure
- the expected effect would be both substantial and adverse.

6.103 For this conditional exemption to apply, the document must relate to either:

- the management of personnel – including broader human resources policies and activities, recruitment,⁹¹ promotion, compensation, discipline, harassment and work health and safety
- the assessment of personnel – including the broader performance management policies and activities concerning competency, in-house training requirements, appraisals and underperformance, counselling, feedback, assessment for bonus or eligibility for progression.

6.104 The terms 'would reasonably be expected' and 'substantial adverse' have the same meaning as explained at [6.13] – [6.16] and [6.17] – [6.19] above. If the predicted effect would be substantial but not adverse, or may even be beneficial, the conditional exemption does not apply. It will be unlikely that the potential embarrassment of an employee would be considered to be an effect on the agency as a whole.

6.105 The predicted effect must arise from the disclosure of the document being assessed.⁹² The decision maker may also need to consider the context of the document and the integrity of a system that may require those documents, such as witness statements required to investigate a workplace complaint,⁹³ or referee reports to assess job applicants.⁹⁴

6.106 The AAT has accepted that candour is essential when an agency seeks to investigate staff complaints, especially those of bullying.⁹⁵ In such cases staff may be reluctant to provide information and cooperate with investigators if they are aware that the subject matter of those discussions may be disclosed through the FOI process.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ See *Re Crawley and Centrelink* [2006] AATA 572.

⁹⁰ See *Re Watermark and Australian Industrial Property Organisation* [1995] AATA 389.

⁹¹ See *Re Dyrenfurth and Department of Social Security* [1987] AATA 140.

⁹² See *Re Dyrenfurth and Department of Social Security* [1987] AATA 140 [16].

⁹³ See *Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [1983] FCA 242; (1983) 78 FLR 236; *Re Marr and Telstra Corporation Limited* [1993] AATA 328.

⁹⁴ See *Department of Social Security v Dyrenfurth* [1988] FCA 148; (1988) 80 ALR 533; (1988) 8 AAR 544.

⁹⁵ *De Tarle and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 230 [42].

⁹⁶ *Plowman and Australian Securities and Investments Commission (Freedom of information)* [2020] AATA 4729 [16]. See also 'LC' and *Australia Post (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 31 [21]; 'QM' and *Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 41 [36]; 'RM' and *Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 1 [30].

6.107 Information relating to staff training and development, such as confidential feedback where public release could undermine confidence and inhibit candour in performance review processes, may also be conditionally exempt under this provision.⁹⁷

6.108 Where the FOI applicant is primarily seeking documents relating to personnel management or assessment matters more closely related to their own employment and circumstances, the agency should encourage them to access the records using the agency's established procedures for accessing personnel records in the first instance (see s 15A).

Public servants and s 47E(c)

6.109 In some circumstances it may be appropriate to address concerns about the work health and safety impacts of disclosing public servants' personal information (such as names and contact details) under s 47E(c).⁹⁸

6.110 An assessment conducted on a case-by-case basis, based on objective evidence, is required when considering whether it is appropriate to apply s 47E(c).⁹⁹ The type of objective evidence needed to found a decision that disclosure of a public servant's personal information may pose a work health and safety risk will depend on all the circumstances. For example, the security risks to operational law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and to the employees of law enforcement and intelligence agencies more generally, will be well known to the agency based on experience and understanding of the operating environment. Some agencies will already be aware of, and have documented, abusive behaviour by individuals that will be sufficient evidence not to disclose the personal information of their staff to those individuals. That information may have informed a decision by an agency to impose communication restrictions on an individual to mitigate work health and safety risks. In some cases, a public servant may be able to provide evidence of online abuse or harassment. Additionally, self-report by an individual of their health and safety concerns should this information be disclosed may be sufficient.

6.111 Relevant factors to consider when deciding whether s 47E(c) applies to conditionally exempt the names and contact details of public servants include:

- the nature of the functions discharged by the agency¹⁰⁰
- the relationship between the individual public servant and the exercise of powers and functions discharged by the agency (i.e., are they a decision maker?)¹⁰¹
- the personal circumstances of the individual public servant which may make them more vulnerable to, or at greater risk of, harm if their name and contact details are released, for example – due to family violence or mental health issues
- whether the relevant information is already publicly available

⁹⁷ See, for example, *Paul Cleary and Special Broadcasting Service* [2016] AICmr 2 [25]–[27] in which the Information Commissioner upheld the exemption where feedback provided to cadet journalists was found to be given in the expectation that it feedback would be treated confidentially and public release would undermine confidence in the system of providing cadet feedback. Also *'ACT' and Merit Protection Commissioner (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 1 [38].

⁹⁸ *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 37.

⁹⁹ *Lisa Martin and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 47 [105].

¹⁰⁰ *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 37 [71]; *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 37 [72]; *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* 52 [68].

¹⁰¹ For example, in *'NN' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 1 the FOI applicant sought access to the name of the person who completed an assessment that resulted in the cancellation of their pension.

- whether the FOI applicant has a history of online abuse, trolling or insults
- any communication restrictions the agency has imposed upon the individual
- whether the FOI applicant has a history of harassment or abusing staff.¹⁰²

Substantial adverse effect on an agency's proper and efficient conduct of operations (s 47E(d))

6.112 An agency's operations may not be substantially adversely affected if the disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, lead to a change in the agency's processes that would enable those processes to be more efficient.¹⁰³

6.113 Examples of circumstances where the AAT has upheld the conditional exemption include where it was established that:

- disclosure of the Australian Electoral Commission's policies in relation to the accepted reasons for a person's failure to vote in a Federal election would result in substantial changes to their procedures to avoid jeopardising the effectiveness of methods and procedures used by investigators¹⁰⁴
- disclosure of information provided by industry participants could reasonably be expected to prejudice the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's ability to investigate anti-competitive behaviour and its ability to perform its statutory functions¹⁰⁵
- disclosure of the Universal Resource Locators and Internet Protocols of internet content that is either prohibited or potentially prohibited content under Schedule 5 to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* could reasonably be expected to affect the Australian Broadcasting Authority's ability to administer a statutory regulatory scheme for internet content to be displayed¹⁰⁶
- disclosure of the details of a complaint made by a member of the public to the Civil Aviation Safety Authority could make potential informants reluctant to bring matters of unlawful and unsafe conduct to the attention of the regulator, thus undermining the agency's ability to effectively perform its public safety functions.¹⁰⁷

6.114 The conditional exemption may also apply to a document that relates to a complaint made to an investigative body. Disclosure of this type of information could reasonably affect the willingness of people to make complaints to the investigative body, which would have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the investigative body's operations.¹⁰⁸ Further, disclosure of information provided in confidence by parties to a

¹⁰² 'NN' and Department of Human Services (Freedom of information) [2018] AICmr 1 [25]–[27].

¹⁰³ For example, in *Re Scholes and Australian Federal Police* [1996] AATA 347, the AAT found that the disclosure of particular documents could enhance the efficiency of the Australian Federal Police as it could lead to an improvement of its investigation process.

¹⁰⁴ *Re Murphy and Australian Electoral Commission* [1994] AATA 149; (1994) 33 ALD 718.

¹⁰⁵ *Re Telstra Australia Limited and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2000] AATA 71.

¹⁰⁶ *Re Electronic Frontiers Australia and the Australian Broadcasting Authority* [2002] AATA 449.

¹⁰⁷ *Pascoe and Civil Aviation Safety Authority (Freedom of information)* [2018] AATA 1273 [30]–[38].

¹⁰⁸ For examples of the application of the exemption to complaints processes see *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Commonwealth Ombudsman* [2012] AICmr 11; *British American Tobacco Australia Ltd and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2012] AICmr 19; *Wilson AM and Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AATA 458 [47].

complaint or investigation may reduce the willingness of parties to provide information relevant to a particular complaint and may reduce their willingness to participate fully and frankly with the investigative process. In such cases the investigative body's ability to obtain all information would be undermined and this may have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the investigative body's operations.¹⁰⁹

- 6.115 The predicted effect must bear on the agency's 'proper and efficient' operations, that is, the agency is undertaking its operations in an expected manner. Where disclosure of the documents reveals unlawful activities or inefficiencies, this element of the conditional exemption will not be met and the conditional exemption will not apply. This is for reasons including the irrelevant factors that must not be taken into account in deciding whether access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest.

Public servants and s 47E(d)

- 6.116 Unless an agency can establish that disclosure of public servants' personal information (for example, names and contact details) will have a *substantial adverse effect* on an agency's operations, it will not be appropriate to exempt this material under s 47E(d). In most cases the impact may be more of an inconvenience or distraction for an individual officer, rather than something that impacts substantially on the operations of the agency. Should an agency have evidence that provision of such information would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the agency's operations, a case may be more likely to be made.
- 6.117 Further, for future conduct to amount to a risk that requires mitigation by refusing access to contact details from disclosure in response to an FOI request, that conduct must be reasonably expected to occur.
- 6.118 As discussed above at [6.109], concerns about the work health and safety impacts of disclosing public servants' personal information may be more appropriately addressed under the conditional exemption in s 47E(c).

Documents affecting personal privacy (s 47F)

- 6.119 Section 47F conditionally exempts a document where disclosure would involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information of any person (including a deceased person). This conditional exemption is intended to protect the personal privacy of individuals.
- 6.120 This conditional exemption does not apply if the personal information is only about the FOI applicant (s 47F(3)). Where the information is joint personal information, however, the exemption may apply. For more information about joint personal information see [6.1433] – [6.145] below.
- 6.121 In some cases, providing indirect access to certain personal information via a qualified person may be appropriate (s 47F(5) – see [6.171] – [6.176] below).

Personal information

- 6.122 The FOI Act shares the same definition of 'personal information' as the *Privacy Act 1988* (Privacy Act), which regulates the handling of personal information about individuals (see

¹⁰⁹ Wilson AM and Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (*Freedom of Information*) [2023] AATA 458 [47].

s 4(1) of the FOI Act and s 6 of the Privacy Act). The cornerstone of the Privacy Act's privacy protection framework is the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs), a set of legally binding principles that apply to both Australian Government agencies and private sector organisations that are subject to the Privacy Act. Detailed guidance about the APPs is available in the Information Commissioner's APP guidelines, available at www.oaic.gov.au.

6.123 Personal information means information or an opinion about an identified individual, or an individual who is reasonably identifiable:

- a) whether the information or opinion is true or not and
- b) whether the information or opinion is recorded in a material form or not.¹¹⁰

6.124 In other words, personal information:

- is information about an identified individual or an individual who is reasonably identifiable
- says something about a person
- may be opinion
- may be true or untrue
- may or may not be recorded in material form.

6.125 Personal information can include a person's name, address, telephone number,¹¹¹ date of birth, medical records, bank account details, taxation information¹¹² and signature.¹¹³

A person who is reasonably identifiable

6.126 What constitutes personal information will vary depending on whether an individual can be identified or is reasonably identifiable in the particular circumstances. For particular information to be personal information, an individual must be identified or reasonably identifiable.

6.127 Where it may be possible to identify an individual using available resources, the practicability, including the time and cost involved, will be relevant to deciding whether an individual is 'reasonably identifiable'.¹¹⁴ An agency or minister should not, however, seek information from the FOI applicant about what other information they have or could obtain.

6.128 Where it may be technically possible to identify an individual from information, but doing so is so impractical that there is almost no likelihood of it occurring, the information is not personal information.¹¹⁵ In *Jonathan Laird and Department of Defence* [2014] AICmr 144, the Privacy Commissioner was not satisfied that DNA analysis of human remains could reasonably identify a World War II HMAS Sydney II crew member. In finding that the DNA sequencing information held by the Department was not personal information, the Privacy

¹¹⁰ See s 4 of the FOI Act and s 6 of the Privacy Act.

¹¹¹ See *Re Green and Australian and Overseas Telecommunications Corporation* [1992] AATA 252; (1992) 28 ALD 655.

¹¹² See *Re Murtagh and Commissioner of Taxation* [1984] AATA 249; (1984) 54 ALR 313; (1984) 6 ALD 112 and *Re Jones and Commissioner of Taxation* [2008] AATA 834.

¹¹³ See *Re Corkin and Department of Immigration & Ethnic Affairs* [1984] AATA 448.

¹¹⁴ Explanatory Memorandum to the Privacy Amendment (Enhancing Privacy Protection) Bill 2012, p 61.

¹¹⁵ Australian Privacy Principles guidelines at [B.93].

Commissioner discussed that identifying the remains using DNA sequencing would be ‘impractical for a reasonable member of the public’.¹¹⁶

- 6.129 Similarly, in a series of IC review decisions,¹¹⁷ the Information Commissioner had to decide whether or not aggregate information relating to the nationality, language and religion of refugees resettled under Australia’s offshore processing arrangements was the personal information of the relevant individuals. In each case, the Information Commissioner found that the individuals were not reasonably identifiable from the aggregated information.
- 6.130 Therefore, whether or not an individual is reasonably identifiable depends on the practicability of linking pieces of information to identify them.

Says something about a person

- 6.131 The information needs to be ‘about’ an individual – there must be a connection between the information and the person.¹¹⁸ This is a question of fact and depends on the context and circumstances. Some information is clearly about an individual – for example, name, date of birth, occupation details and medical records. A person’s signature, home address, email address, telephone number, bank account details and employment details will also generally constitute personal information. Other information may be personal information if it reveals a fact or opinion about the person in a way that is not too tenuous or remote. Invoices related to the purchase of alcohol for Prime Ministerial functions do not disclose personal information about the Prime Minister if it is possible that a staff member made the purchases based on something other than the Prime Minister’s preferences.¹¹⁹ Examples of when information is not ‘about’ a person and therefore the information is not personal information for the purposes of s 6 of the Privacy Act, include the colour of a person’s mobile phone or their network type (e.g., 5G).¹²⁰

Natural person

- 6.132 An individual is a natural person and does not include a corporation, trust, body politic or incorporated association.¹²¹ Section 47F(1) specifically extends to the personal information of deceased persons.

¹¹⁶ *Jonathan Laird and Department of Defence* [2014] AICmr 144 [17].

¹¹⁷ *Alex Cuthbertson and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 18; *Alex Cuthbertson and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 19; *Alex Cuthbertson and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 20.

¹¹⁸ *Privacy Commissioner v Telstra Corporation Limited* [2017] FCAFC 4 [63].

¹¹⁹ In *Penny Wong and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2016] AICmr 27 [13]–[19], the Information Commissioner discussed that there was nothing before him to indicate the former Prime Minister had any involvement with the purchase of alcohol for prime ministerial functions. Therefore, purchase invoices did not contain the personal information of the former Prime Minister. However, if it had been shown that the purchases had been made to accord with the Prime Minister’s personal preferences, the Information Commissioner accepted that the alcohol brands could be the personal information of the former Prime Minister.

¹²⁰ *Privacy Commissioner v Telstra Corporation Limited* [2017] FCAFC 4 [63].

¹²¹ See s 2B of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*.

Unreasonable disclosure

6.133 The personal privacy conditional exemption is designed to prevent the unreasonable invasion of third parties' privacy.¹²² The test of 'unreasonableness' implies a need to balance the public interest in disclosure of government-held information and the private interest in the privacy of individuals. The test does not, however, amount to the public interest test of s 11A(5), which follows later in the decision-making process. It is possible that the decision maker may need to consider one or more factors twice, once to determine if a projected effect is unreasonable and again when assessing the public interest balance.

6.134 In considering what is unreasonable, the AAT in *Re Chandra and Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs* stated that:

... whether a disclosure is 'unreasonable' requires ... a consideration of all the circumstances, including the nature of the information that would be disclosed, the circumstances in which the information was obtained, the likelihood of the information being information that the person concerned would not wish to have disclosed without consent, and whether the information has any current relevance ... it is also necessary in my view to take into consideration the public interest recognised by the Act in the disclosure of information ... and to weigh that interest in the balance against the public interest in protecting the personal privacy of a third party ...¹²³

6.135 An agency or minister must have regard to the following matters in determining whether disclosure of the document would involve an unreasonable disclosure of personal information:

- a) the extent to which the information is well known
- b) whether the person to whom the information relates is known to be (or to have been) associated with the matters dealt with in the document
- c) the availability of the information from publicly accessible sources¹²⁴
- d) any other matters that the agency or minister considers relevant (s 47F(2)).¹²⁵

6.136 These are the same considerations that must be taken into account for the purposes of consulting an affected third party under s 27A(2).

6.137 Key factors for determining whether disclosure is unreasonable include:

- a) the author of the document is identifiable¹²⁶

¹²² See *Re Chandra and Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs* [1984] AATA 437; (1984) 6 ALN N257; *Parnell and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2012] AICmr 31; 'R' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 32.

¹²³ See *Re Chandra and Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs* [1984] AATA 437 [259]; (1984) 6 ALN N257.

¹²⁴ See *Re Jones and Commissioner of Taxation* [2008] AATA 834; 'Q' and *Department of Human Services* [2012] AICmr 30.

¹²⁵ For example, where a 'care leaver' requests access to third party personal information, decision makers should note that it is government policy that a care leaver have such access. A 'care leaver' is a child in Australia in the 20th century who was brought up 'in care' as a state ward, foster child, or in an orphanage. See the government response to recommendation 12 of the report of the [Senate Community Affairs References Committee \(2009\) *Lost innocents and Forgotten Australians revisited report on the progress with the implementation of the recommendations of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians reports*](#), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

¹²⁶ Note: s 11B(4)(c) provides that when the public interest test is considered, the fact that the author of the document was (or is) of high seniority in the agency is not to be taken into account (see these Guidelines at [6.235]).

- b) the document contains third party personal information
- c) release of the document would cause stress to the third party
- d) no public purpose would be achieved through release.¹²⁷

6.138 As discussed in the IC review decision of *'FG' and National Archives of Australia* [2015] AICmr 26, other factors considered to be relevant include:

- the nature, age and current relevance of the information
- any detriment that disclosure may cause to the person to whom the information relates
- any opposition to disclosure expressed or likely to be held by that person
- the circumstances of an agency's or minister's collection and use of the information
- the fact that the FOI Act does not control or restrict any subsequent use or dissemination of information released under the FOI Act
- any submission an FOI applicant chooses to make in support of their request as to their reasons for seeking access and their intended or likely use or dissemination of the information and
- whether disclosure of the information might advance the public interest in government transparency and integrity.¹²⁸

6.139 The leading IC review decision on s 47F is *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner*¹²⁹ in which the Information Commissioner explained that the object of the FOI Act to promote transparency in government processes and activities needs to be balanced with the purpose of s 47F to protect personal privacy, although care is needed to ensure that an FOI applicant is not expected to explain their reason for access contrary to s 11(2).¹³⁰

6.140 Disclosure that supports effective oversight of government expenditure may not be unreasonable, particularly if the person to whom the personal information relates may have reasonably expected that the information would be open to public scrutiny in future.¹³¹ It may not be unreasonable to disclose work related travel expense claims for a named government employee if this would advance the public interest in government transparency and integrity around the use of Australian Government resources.¹³² On the other hand, disclosure may be unreasonable if the person provided the information to the Australian Government on the understanding that it would not be made publicly available, and there are no other statutory disclosure frameworks that would require release of the information.¹³³

6.141 Deciding whether disclosure of personal information would be unreasonable should not be uniformly approached on the basis that the disclosure will be to the 'world at large'.¹³⁴

¹²⁷ *Re McCallin and Department of Immigration* [2008] AATA 477.

¹²⁸ See *'FG' and National Archives of Australia* [2015] AICmr 26 [47]–[48].

¹²⁹ *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner* [2014] AICmr 9 [64].

¹³⁰ *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner* [2014] AICmr 9 [64], citing M Paterson, *Freedom of Information and Privacy in Australia* (LexisNexis Butterworths, 2005) 241.

¹³¹ *'AK' and Department of Finance and Deregulation* [2013] AICmr 64 [18]–[24].

¹³² *Rex Patrick and Department of Defence* [2020] AICmr 31.

¹³³ *'Z' and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2013] AICmr 43 [11].

¹³⁴ See *'FG' and National Archives of Australia* [2015] AICmr 26 [19]–[44].

Examples of situations in which FOI applicants assert an interest in obtaining access that would not be available generally to any member of the public include:

- an FOI applicant who is seeking access to correspondence they sent to an agency or minister that contains the personal information of other people – that is, personal information provided by the FOI applicant to the agency
- an FOI applicant who is seeking access to the medical records of a deceased parent to learn if the parent had a genetic disorder that may have been transmitted to the FOI applicant
- an FOI applicant who is seeking access to their own personal information, which is intertwined with the personal information of other people who may be known to the FOI applicant (such as family members, or co-signees of a letter or application)
- a professional who is seeking access to records that include client information, and who gives a professional undertaking not to disclose the information to others (for example, a doctor who seeks patient consultation records in connection with a Medicare audit, or a lawyer who seeks case records of a client to whom legal advice is being provided)
- a ‘care leaver’ (meaning a child who was brought up in care as a state ward, foster child or in an orphanage) who is seeking access to third party personal information.¹³⁵

6.142 It would be problematic in each of these instances for an agency or minister to grant access under the FOI Act if it proceeded from the premise that ‘if one person can be granted access to a particular document under the FOI Act, any other person who cares to request it and to pay the relevant fees, can be granted access to it’.¹³⁶ In instances such as these, an agency or minister can make a practical and risk-based assessment about whether to provide access to a particular FOI applicant.

Joint personal information

6.143 Documents often contain personal information about more than one individual. Where possible, personal information should be dealt with separately under the conditional exemption. An individual’s personal information may, however, be intertwined with another person’s personal information, for example, information provided for a joint loan application, a medical report or doctor’s opinion, or information about a relationship provided to Services Australia or the Child Support Agency.

6.144 Intertwined personal information should be separated where possible, without diminishing or impairing the quality or completeness of the FOI applicant’s personal information.¹³⁷ Where it is not possible to separate an FOI applicant’s personal information from a third party’s personal information, the conditional exemption may be claimed if it is unreasonable to release the third party’s personal information.

6.145 Whether it is unreasonable to release personal information may depend on the relationship between the individuals. Decisions about the release of joint personal information should be made after consultation with the third party where such consultation is reasonably practical. For more information about consultation see [6.156] – [6.163]. below.

¹³⁵ ‘FG’ and National Archives of Australia [2015] AICmr 26 [38].

¹³⁶ *Re Callejo and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2010] AATA 244[101]; (2010) 51 AAR 308 per Forgie DP.

¹³⁷ *Re Anderson and Australian Federal Police* [1986] AATA 79 and *Re McKinnon and Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs* [1995] AATA 364.

Personal information about agency employees

- 6.146 Documents held by agencies or ministers often include personal information about public servants. For example, a document may include a public servant’s name, work email address, position or title, contact details, decisions or opinions.
- 6.147 In some circumstances, an individual public servant will not be reasonably identifiable from their first name alone (that is, without their family name).¹³⁸ In such circumstances the first name will not be personal information for the purposes of s 47F. However in some circumstances the first name of a public servant, without their surname, would reasonably identify them and therefore will be personal information for the purposes of s 47F.¹³⁹ Relevant factors for decision makers to consider when deciding whether the first names of staff, without their family names, would make an individual reasonably identifiable may include the particular context in which the name appears in the document, the size of the agency, the context in which the document was created and the uniqueness of the first name.
- 6.148 Previous IC review decisions, and previous versions of these Guidelines, expressed the view that where a public servant’s personal information is included in a document because of their usual duties or responsibilities, it will not be unreasonable to disclose it unless special circumstances exist. Further, previous versions of the FOI Guidelines considered that agencies and ministers should start from the position that including the full names of staff in documents released in response to FOI requests increases transparency and accountability of government and is consistent with the objects of the FOI Act. The OAIC considered these issues in a position paper titled *‘Disclosure of public servant details in response to a freedom of information request’* published in August 2020.¹⁴⁰ This paper noted the evolution of the digital environment and the new risks for both public servants and citizens but confirmed the Information Commissioner’s view that agencies and ministers should start from the position that including the full names of staff in documents released in response to FOI requests increases transparency and accountability of government and is consistent with the objects of the FOI Act.
- 6.149 This position was considered but not accepted by Deputy President Forgie in *Warren; Chief Executive Officer, Services Australia and (Freedom of information)*¹⁴¹ (Warren). In Warren, Deputy President Forgie accepted that the words of s 47F should be the starting point of any consideration, rather than any presumption that disclosing the full names of staff in documents increases transparency and promotes the objects of the FOI Act, or that absent special circumstances a public servant’s name should generally be disclosed. Deputy President Forgie said:
- ... It is important to understand the exemptions in the context of the FOI Act as enacted. Its objects, as set out in ss 3 and 3A, make no reference to accountability. Apart from objects associated directly with accessibility to information held by the Commonwealth as a public resource, the objects focus on the way in which accessibility promotes Australia’s representative democracy. In particular, they focus on increasing public participation in “Government processes” and on increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of “Government activities”. The word “accountability” tends to blur

¹³⁸ ‘ADM’ and Services Australia (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 38 [26].

¹³⁹ AIJ’ and Services Australia (Freedom of information) [2024] AICmr 55 [77].

¹⁴⁰ Available on the OAIC website - [Disclosure of public servant details in response to a freedom of information request](#) | OAIC.

¹⁴¹ [2020] AATA 4557.

that focus and take scrutiny to the level of scrutiny of individual APS employees and contractors. The FOI Act's objectives do not establish a separate merits review process of the activities of individuals engaged in the Government's processes or activities.

There may be cases in which disclosure of individual's names may increase scrutiny, discussion or comment of Government processes or activities. In others, the names of those responsible for the processes or activities may be neither here nor there in their scrutiny.¹⁴²

6.150 Following this decision, IC review decisions from 2021 have adopted the considerations identified by DP Forgie in *Warren*.¹⁴³

6.151 Concerns about the work health and safety impacts of disclosing public servants' personal information may be more appropriately addressed under the conditional exemption in s 47E(c) rather than under s 47F (see [6.109]).

6.152 When considering whether it would be unreasonable to disclose the names of public servants, there is no basis under the FOI Act for agencies to start from the position that the classification level of a departmental officer determines whether their name would be unreasonable to disclose. In seeking to claim the exemption, an agency needs to consider the factors identified above at [6.135] – [6.138] in the context of the document, rather than start from the assumption that such information is exempt.¹⁴⁴ A document may however be exempt for another reason, for example, where disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, endanger the life or physical safety of any person (s 37(1)(c)).

Information relating to APS recruitment processes

6.153 Following Australian Public Service (APS) recruitment processes, an agency may receive an FOI request from an unsuccessful candidate seeking information about the person selected for the position or about the other applicants.

6.154 The IC review decision in *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner*¹⁴⁵ offers some guiding principles for assessing an FOI request seeking access to recruitment documentation. However, an agency must consider each FOI request on its merits. A separate decision is required in each case as to whether disclosure of personal information about candidates from an APS recruitment process would be unreasonable.¹⁴⁶

6.155 The Public Service Commissioner has issued guidelines to assist agencies understand how s 103 of the *Public Service Regulations 2023* affects their ability to use and disclose the personal information of staff within their agencies and with other APS agencies. Agency compliance with these guidelines will be a relevant consideration in deciding whether

¹⁴² *Warren*; Chief Executive Officer, Services Australia and (Freedom of information) [2020] AATA 4557 [115].

¹⁴³ See for example, *'YO' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AICmr 67; *YQ' and Airservices Australia (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AICmr 69; *Lisa Cox and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 72; *Ben Butler and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (Freedom of information)* [2022] AICmr 34; *ABK' and Commonwealth Ombudsman* [2022] AICmr 44; *'ADM' and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 38.

¹⁴⁴ *Maurice Blackburn Lawyers and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 85 [3].

¹⁴⁵ *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner* [2014] AICmr 9 [2], [89].

¹⁴⁶ *'BA' and Merit Protection Commissioner* [2014] AICmr 9 [66].

disclosure of personal information relating to a public official would be unreasonable under s 47F and contrary to the public interest.¹⁴⁷

Consultation

- 6.156 Where a document includes personal information relating to a person who is not the FOI applicant, an agency or minister should give that individual (the third party) a reasonable opportunity to contend that the document is exempt from disclosure before making a decision to give access (s 27A). If the third party is deceased, their legal representative should be given this opportunity.
- 6.157 Such consultation should occur where it appears to the agency or minister that the third party might reasonably wish to make a submission that the document is exempt from disclosure having regard to:
- the extent to which the information is well known
 - whether the person to whom the information relates is known to be (or to have been) associated with the matters dealt with in the information
 - whether the information is publicly available, and
 - any other relevant matters (s 27A(2)).
- 6.158 Section 27A(3) provides that an agency or minister must not decide to give access to a document without giving the person concerned a reasonable opportunity to make submissions in support of an exemption contention. It follows that if the decision maker decides, after reviewing the document, that it is exempt there may be no need to consult a third party. Conversely in *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* the AAT found that where an entry in a diary disclosed the name of a person who was scheduled to meet the Attorney-General and nothing more, in the ordinary course disclosure of that fact would not involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information, and so there would be no basis upon which people mentioned in the diary might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention.¹⁴⁸
- 6.159 Agencies and ministers should generally start from the position that a third party may reasonably wish to make a submission. This is because the third party may bring to the agency or minister's attention sensitivities that may not have been otherwise apparent.
- 6.160 Consultation may not be reasonably practicable in all circumstances. Whether it is reasonably practicable to consult a third party will depend on all the circumstances including the time limits for processing the FOI request (s 27A(4)). For example, it may not be reasonably practicable if the agency cannot locate the third party in a timely way.¹⁴⁹ Where it

¹⁴⁷ See 'Circular 2016/2: Use and disclosure of employee information' on the Australian Public Service Commissioner website www.apsc.gov.au.

¹⁴⁸ *Dreyfus and Attorney-General (Commonwealth of Australia) (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 995 [37] and [40]. The AAT's decision was upheld by the Federal Court in *Attorney-General v Honourable Mark Dreyfus* [2016] FCAFC 119.

¹⁴⁹ See for example, *Ray Brown and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 146 in which the Acting Information Commissioner found that it would not be reasonably practicable for the Department to consult (for the purposes of s 27A(4)) 526 staff members because of the time and resources involved and the type of personal information contained in the document (although ultimately the Acting Information Commissioner decided that the Department could decide to give access to the document without providing staff a reasonable opportunity to make submissions under s 27A). In *Stefania Maurizi and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 31 [59] the Information Commissioner found that consultation would not be reasonably practicable to undertake because of the unique personal

is not reasonably practicable to consult a third party, agencies and ministers should consider whether, in the circumstances, it is likely the third party would oppose disclosure of their personal information. The relevant circumstances may include the nature of the personal information in the document, whether the personal information has already been disclosed¹⁵⁰ and whether the third party is known to be associated with the information in the document.¹⁵¹

- 6.161 Where it appears that consultation will be required with a large number of individuals, an agency should carefully consider whether consultation is reasonably practicable before deciding that consultation is required. This is particularly the case where an agency is relying on such consultation to decide that a practical refusal reason exists (s 24) and thereby to refuse the FOI request. For example, it is impractical, and therefore unnecessary, for an agency to consult 600 individuals before making a decision whether to give access to an organisational chart.¹⁵²
- 6.162 Where there is a need to consult third parties under s 27A, the timeframe for making a decision in s 15(5)(b) is extended by 30 days (s 15(6)). Agencies and minister should identify as soon as possible within the initial 30-day decision-making period whether there is a need for consultation.
- 6.163 To assist the third party make a submission, it may be necessary, where practical, to give them a copy of the document. This can be done by providing an edited copy of the document, for example, by deleting any material that may be exempt under another provision. Agencies and ministers should also take care not to breach their obligations under the APPs in the Privacy Act during consultation, for example, by disclosing the FOI applicant's personal information to a third party, unless the FOI applicant has consented or another exception under the APPs applies.¹⁵³

Submissions

- 6.164 Where consultation occurs, a third party consulted under s 27A should be asked whether they object to disclosure and invited to make submissions about whether:
- the conditional exemption should apply and
 - on balance, access would be contrary to the public interest.
- 6.165 An affected third party who is consulted under s 27A may contend that s 47F applies to the requested document. Where the third party contends that exemptions other than s 47F apply, it is open to the agency or minister to rely on those exemptions in its decision.¹⁵⁴

circumstances of the third party and the fact that consultation may have revealed confidential discussions between Australia and foreign governments.

¹⁵⁰ *Ben Butler and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (No. 2) (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AICmr 56 [104].

¹⁵¹ For example in *ADW' and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 59 [47] the Acting Freedom of Information Commissioner considered that disclosure of health information, which is sensitive information for the purposes of s 6 of the Privacy Act, would be unreasonable in circumstances in which the relevant individuals had not been consulted. Similarly, in *'ADV' and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 58 [88] the Acting Information Commissioner considered that a third party would likely oppose disclosure of sensitive personal information in circumstances in which they had not been consulted.

¹⁵² As the Acting Information Commissioner found in *Maria Jockel and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 70 [36].

¹⁵³ For more information about an agency's obligations regarding the disclosure of personal information, see the Guidelines to the Australian Privacy Principles at www.oaic.gov.au.

¹⁵⁴ See *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Civil Aviation Safety Authority* [2015] AICmr 21 [5].

However, should the agency or minister decide to grant access to the documents, the third party does not have a right to seek review of that decision on grounds other than those specified in s 27A (that is, the decision that s 47F does not apply).

- 6.166 The third party should be asked to provide reasons and evidence to support their submission. The third party's submissions should address their individual circumstances – generalised submissions or assertions of a theoretical nature will make it difficult for an agency or minister to accept that s 47F applies to the document.¹⁵⁵
- 6.167 The letter to the third party should also include information about the obligation on agencies and ministers to provide the public with access to a document that has been released to an FOI applicant (on the agency or minister's disclosure log), subject to certain exceptions such as personal or business information that it would be unreasonable to publish (s 11C).
- 6.168 An agency or minister must have regard to any submissions made by the third party before deciding whether to give access to the document (ss 27A(3) and 27A(4)). However, the third party does not have the right to veto access and agencies and ministers should take care to ensure the third party is not under such a misapprehension. The statement of reasons should clearly set out the weight applied to submissions and the reasons for that weight.
- 6.169 When an agency or minister decides to give the FOI applicant access to documents after a third party has made submissions, they must give the third party written notice of the decision (s 27A(5)). Access to a document must not be given to the FOI applicant until the third party's opportunities for review have run out, or if a review was undertaken, the decision still stands (s 27A(6)).
- 6.170 General information about consultation is provided in Part 3 of these Guidelines. Part 3 provides guidance about extended timeframes, notices of decision, review rights and when access to documents may be provided.

Access given to qualified person

- 6.171 An agency or minister may provide a qualified person with access to a document that would otherwise be provided to an FOI applicant where:
- the personal information was provided by a qualified person acting in their capacity as a qualified person (s 47F(4)(a)) and
 - it appears to the agency or minister that disclosing the information to the FOI applicant might be detrimental to their physical or mental health, or wellbeing (s 47F(4)(b)).
- 6.172 A broad approach should be taken in considering an FOI applicant's health or wellbeing. The possibility of detriment must appear to be real or tangible.¹⁵⁶
- 6.173 Where access is to be provided by a qualified person, the FOI applicant is to nominate a qualified person (s 47F(5)(b)). The nominated qualified person must carry on the same occupation as the qualified person who provided the document (s 47F(5)(a)).

¹⁵⁵ 'ADM' and Services Australia (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 38 [46]–[47].

¹⁵⁶ *Re K and Director-General of Social Security* [1984] AATA 252. See 'PT' and Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (Freedom of information) [2019] AICmr 3 [26] in which the Information Commissioner decided that access to certain information was to be given to a qualified person because evidence was led that a previous releases of similar information had a negative effect on the FOI applicant's well-being.

6.174 A qualified person means a person who carries on (and is entitled to carry on) an occupation that involves providing care for a person's physical or mental health or wellbeing including:

- a medical practitioner
- a psychiatrist
- a psychologist
- a counsellor
- a social worker (s 47F(7)).

6.175 Where access is provided to a qualified person, it is left to their discretion as to how they facilitate the FOI applicant's access to the document.

6.176 APP 12.6 of the Privacy Act allows agencies to give an individual access to their personal information through a mutually agreed intermediary.¹⁵⁷ This provision is more flexible than the equivalent provision under s 47F of the FOI Act. For example, an intermediary under APP 12 does not have to carry on the same occupation as the person who provided the information. Where giving access in accordance with APP 12.6 might more satisfactorily meet an FOI applicant's needs, an agency or minister may wish to suggest they request the information they seek under APP 12.6

Documents disclosing business information (s 47G)

6.177 Section 47G conditionally exempts documents where disclosure would disclose information concerning a person in respect of his or her business or professional affairs, or concerning the business, commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking (business information), where the disclosure of the information:

- would, or could reasonably be expected to, unreasonably affect the person adversely in respect of his or her lawful business or professional affairs or that organisation or undertaking in respect of its lawful business, commercial or financial affairs (s 47G(1)(a)) or
- could reasonably be expected to prejudice the future supply of information to the Commonwealth or an agency for the purpose of the administration of a law of the Commonwealth or of a Territory or the administration of matters administered by an agency (s 47G(1)(b)).

6.178 If the business information concerns a person, organisation or undertaking other than the FOI applicant, the decision maker may be required to consult that third party (see [6.201] – [6.207] below).

Exemption does not apply in certain circumstances

6.179 The conditional exemption does not apply if the document contains only business information about the FOI applicant (s 47G(3)). Where the business information concerns both the FOI applicant and another business, the provision may operate to conditionally

¹⁵⁷ For more information, see Chapter 12 of the APP guidelines at www.oaic.gov.au.

exempt the FOI applicant's information, but only if the FOI applicant's business information cannot be separated from the information of the other business or undertaking.

- 6.180 This conditional exemption does not apply to trade secrets or other information to which s 47 applies (s 47G(2)). In other words, a decision maker should consider an exemption under s 47 for documents containing trade secrets or other information to which s 47 applies if the circumstances call for it. This is a limited exception to the normal rule that more than one exemption may apply to the same information (see s 32).

Elements of the exemption

- 6.181 The operation of the business information conditional exemption depends on the effect of disclosure rather than the precise nature of the information itself. Nevertheless, the information in question must have some relevance to a person in respect of his or her business or professional affairs or to the business, commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking (s 47G(1)(a)).
- 6.182 For the purposes of this conditional exemption, an undertaking includes an undertaking carried on by, or by an authority of, the Commonwealth, Norfolk Island or a state or territory government (s 47G(4)). However, it has been held that the business affairs exemption is not available to a person within a government agency or undertaking, nor to the agency or undertaking itself.¹⁵⁸ Decision makers should be aware that the application of this conditional exemption to an agency's own business information is uncertain and should avoid relying on it, even if the agency is engaged in competitive business activities.¹⁵⁹ As an alternative, one of the specific exemptions for agencies in respect of particular documents in Part II of Schedule 2 may be available.

Could reasonably be expected

- 6.183 This term is explained at [6.13] – [6.16] above. As in other situations, it refers to an expectation that is based on reason. Mere assertion or speculative possibility is not enough.¹⁶⁰

Unreasonable adverse effect of disclosure

- 6.184 The presence of 'unreasonably' in s 47G(1) implies a need to balance public and private interests. The public interest, or some aspect of it, will be one of the factors in determining whether the adverse effect of disclosure on a person in respect of his or her business affairs is unreasonable.¹⁶¹ A decision maker must balance the public and private interest factors to decide whether disclosure is unreasonable for the purposes of s 47G(1)(a), but this does not amount to the public interest test in s 11A(5) which follows later in the decision process. It is possible that the decision maker may need to consider one or more factors twice, once to determine if a projected effect is unreasonable and again in assessing the public interest test. Where disclosure would be unreasonable, the decision maker will need to apply the

¹⁵⁸ *Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* [1983] FCA 242; (1983) 78 FLR 236.

¹⁵⁹ In *Secretary, Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business v Staff Development and Training Centre Pty Ltd* [2001] FCA 1375; (2001) 114 FCR 301 the Full Federal Court seemed to accept (without referring to *Harris*) that a government agency could claim this conditional exemption, although it did not decide the case on this point. The question therefore remains uncertain.

¹⁶⁰ *Re Actors' Equity Association (Aust) and Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (No 2)* [1985] AATA 69 [25].

¹⁶¹ As explained by Forgie DP in *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 494 [48].

public interest test in s 11A(5). This is inherent in the structure of the business information exemption.

- 6.185 ‘Would or could reasonably be expected’ to have a particular impact demands the application of an objective test. The test of reasonableness applies not to the claim of harm but to the objective assessment of the expected adverse effect. For example, the disclosure of information that a business’ activities pose a threat to public safety, damage the natural environment, or that a service provider has made false claims for government money, may have a substantial adverse effect on that business but may not be unreasonable in the circumstances to disclose. Similarly, it would not be unreasonable to disclose information about a business that revealed serious criminality.¹⁶² These considerations require weighing the public interest against a private interest – preserving the profitability of a business. However at this stage it bears only on the threshold question of whether disclosure would be unreasonable.¹⁶³
- 6.186 Section 47G(1)(a) concerns documents that relate to the *lawful* business or professional affairs of an individual, or the lawful business, commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking. To find that s 47G(1)(a) applies, a decision maker needs to be satisfied that if the document was disclosed there would be an unreasonable adverse effect, on the business or professional affairs of an individual, or on the lawful business, commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking.
- 6.187 These criteria require more than simply asserting that a third party’s business affairs would be adversely affected by disclosure. The effect needs to be *unreasonable*. This requires a balancing of interests, including the private interests of the business and other interests such as the public interest. Where other interests, for example environmental interests, outweigh the private interest of the business this conditional exemption cannot apply.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, where the documents reveal unlawful business activities the s 47G(1)(a) conditional exemption cannot apply.
- 6.188 The AAT has said, for example, that there is a strong public interest in knowing whether public money was accounted for at the appropriate time and in the manner required, and in ensuring that public programs are properly administered.¹⁶⁵
- 6.189 The AAT has distinguished between ‘truly government documents’ and other business information collected under statutory authority. The first category includes documents that have been created by government or that form part of a flow of correspondence and other documents between government and business. The AAT concluded that such documents incline more to arguments favouring scrutiny of government activities when considering

¹⁶² *Searle Australia Pty Ltd v Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Department of Community Services and Health* [1992] FCA 241; (1992) 108 ALR 163; 36 FCR 111.

¹⁶³ In relation to the test of reasonableness, see ‘E’ and *National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority* [2012] AICmr 3.

¹⁶⁴ See Deputy President Forge’s discussions in *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 494 particularly at [44]. The Information Commissioner has discussed and followed the *Bell* approach in a number of IC review decisions, for example *Linton Besser and Department of Employment* [2015] AICmr 67; ‘VO’ and *Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 47; *Boston Consulting Group and Australian National University (Freedom of information) (No 2)* [2022] AICmr 16.

¹⁶⁵ As explained by Forge DP in *Bell and Secretary, Department of Health (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 494 [68] and as discussed by the Information Commissioner in *Linton Besser and Department of Employment* [2015] AICmr 67.

whether disclosure would be unreasonable.¹⁶⁶ By implication, the conditional exemption is more likely to protect documents obtained from third party businesses.

- 6.190 Where disclosure would result in the release of facts already in the public domain, that disclosure would not amount to an unreasonable adverse effect on business affairs.¹⁶⁷

Business or professional affairs

- 6.191 The use of the term ‘business or professional affairs’ distinguishes an individual’s personal or private affairs and an organisation’s internal affairs. The term ‘business affairs’ has been interpreted to mean ‘the totality of the money-making affairs of an organisation or undertaking as distinct from its private or internal affairs’.¹⁶⁸

- 6.192 The internal affairs of an organisation include its governance processes and the processes by which organisations are directed and controlled. For example, documents relating to member voting processes are not exempt under s 47G, because member voting forms part of the governance affairs of an organisation.¹⁶⁹

- 6.193 In the absence of a definition in the FOI Act, ‘professional’ bears its usual meaning. For FOI purposes, ‘profession’ is not static and may extend beyond the occupations that have traditionally been recognised as professions, reflecting changes in community acceptance of these matters.¹⁷⁰ For example, the Information Commissioner accepts that medical and scientific researchers have professional affairs.¹⁷¹ The word ‘profession’ is clearly intended to cover the work activities of a person who is admitted to a recognised profession and who ordinarily offers professional services to the public for a fee. In addition, s 47G(5) makes it clear that the conditional exemption does not apply merely because the information refers to a person’s professional status.

- 6.194 Any extension of the normal meaning of ‘profession’ will require evidence of community acceptance that the occupation in question should be regarded as a profession. For example, the absence of any evidence indicating, at that time, community acceptance of the audit activities of officers of the Australian Taxation Office as constituting ‘professional affairs’ led the AAT to refuse to extend the ordinary meaning of the expression in that case.¹⁷²

Organisation or undertaking

- 6.195 The term ‘organisation or undertaking’ should be given a broad application, including Commonwealth, Norfolk Island or State undertakings (s 47G(4)). An organisation or undertaking need not be a legal person. However, a natural individual cannot be an organisation but may be the proprietor of an undertaking, for example, when the individual

¹⁶⁶ *Re Actors’ Equity Association (Aust) and Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (No 2)* [1985] AATA 69 [31].

¹⁶⁷ *Re Daws and Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry* [2008] AATA 1075 [22]. See also *DPP Pharmaceuticals Pty Ltd and IP Australia (Freedom of information)* [2020] AICmr 29 [34] and *Boston Consulting Group and Australian National University (Freedom of information) (No 2)* [2022] AICmr 16 [34]–[40].

¹⁶⁸ *Re Mangan and The Treasury* [2005] AATA 898 citing *Cockcroft and Attorney-General’s Department and Australian Iron and Steel Pty Ltd (party joined)* (1985) 12 ALD 462.

¹⁶⁹ See ‘GD’ and *Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 46 [56].

¹⁷⁰ *Re Fogarty and Chief Executive Officer, Cultural Facilities Corporation* [2005] ACTAAT 14.

¹⁷¹ In ‘GO’ and *National Health and Medical Research Council* [2015] AICmr 56 [33] the Information Commissioner said that a ‘researcher’s professional affairs would usually involve working on more than a single research project and that his or her research would contribute to a body of knowledge over many years’.

¹⁷² *Re Dyki and Commissioner of Taxation* (1990) 22 ALD 124; (1990) 12 AAR 554.

is a sole trader. The exemption may apply to information about an individual who is a sole trader to the extent that the information concerns the undertaking's business, commercial or financial affairs.

Prejudice future supply of information

6.196 A document that discloses the kind of information described at [6.177] above will be conditionally exempt if the disclosure could reasonably be expected to prejudice the future supply of information to the Commonwealth or an agency for the purpose of the administration of a law of the Commonwealth or of a Territory or the administration of matters administered by an agency (s 47G(1)(b)).

6.197 This limb of the conditional exemption comprises 2 parts:

- a reasonable expectation of a reduction in the quantity or quality of business affairs information to the government
- the reduction will prejudice the operations of the agency.¹⁷³

6.198 There must be a reasonable likelihood that disclosure will result in a reduction in either the quantity or quality of business information flowing to the government.¹⁷⁴ In some cases, disclosing the identity of the person providing the business information may be sufficient to prejudice the future supply of information.¹⁷⁵ Disclosure of the person's identity may also be conditionally exempt under s 47F (personal privacy). In these cases, consideration should be given to whether the information may be disclosed without also disclosing the identity of the person supplying the information.

6.199 Where the business information in question can be obtained compulsorily, or is required for some benefit or grant, no claim of prejudice can be made. No prejudice will occur if the information at issue is routine or administrative (that is, generated as a matter of practice).¹⁷⁶

6.200 The agency will usually be best placed to identify, and be concerned about, the circumstances where the disclosure of documents might reasonably be expected to prejudice the future supply of information to it.¹⁷⁷

Consultation

6.201 Where a document includes business information relating to a person, organisation or undertaking other than the FOI applicant, an agency or minister should give that individual or organisation (the third party) a reasonable opportunity to make a submission that the document is exempt from disclosure under s 47 (trade secrets) or conditionally exempt under s 47G, and that disclosure would be contrary to the public interest, before making a decision to give access (s 27).

¹⁷³ *Re Angel and the Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Environment; HC Sleigh Resources Ltd and Tasmania* [1985] AATA 314.

¹⁷⁴ *Re Maher and the Attorney-General's Department* [1986] AATA 16, *Re Telstra and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission* [2000] AATA 71 [15].

¹⁷⁵ *Re Caruth and Department of Health, Housing, Local Government and Community Services* [1993] ATA 187 [17].

¹⁷⁶ *Re Kobelke and Minister for Planning* [1994] WAICmr 5.

¹⁷⁷ See, for example 'HZ' and *Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [2016] AICmr 7 [34]; *Wellard Rural Exports Pty Ltd and Department of Agriculture* [2014] AICmr 131 [43].

6.202 For the purposes of consulting a third party ‘business information’ means:

- a) information about an individual’s business or professional affairs
- b) information about the business, commercial or financial affairs of an organisation or undertaking (s 47G(2)).

6.203 Because the requirement to consult extends to a third party who may wish to contend that a document is exempt under s 47 as well as conditionally exempt under s 47G, business information includes information about trade secrets and any business information the value of which would be destroyed or diminished if disclosed. See Part 5 of these Guidelines for further guidance on the application of s 47.

6.204 Consultation should occur where:

- a) it is reasonably practicable. This will depend on all the circumstances, including the time limits for processing the FOI request (s 27(5)). For example, it may not be reasonably practicable if the agency or minister cannot locate the third party in a timely and effective way.¹⁷⁸
- b) it appears to the agency or minister that the third party might reasonably wish to make a submission that the document is exempt from disclosure under either s 47 or s 47G having regard to:
 - the extent to which the information is well known
 - whether the person to whom the information relates is known to be (or to have been) associated with the matters dealt with in the information
 - whether the information is publicly available, and
 - any other relevant matters (s 27(3)).

6.205 Agencies and ministers should generally start from the position that a third party might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention. This is because the third party may bring to the agency or minister’s attention sensitivities that may not otherwise have been apparent.

6.206 Where there is a need to consult third parties under s 27, the timeframe for making a decision is extended by 30 days (s 15(6)). Decision makers should identify as soon as possible within the initial 30-day decision-making period whether there is a need for consultation. Where consultation is undertaken, the agency or minister must inform the FOI applicant as soon as practicable that the processing period has been extended (s 15(6)(b)).

6.207 General information about consultation is provided in Part 3 of these Guidelines. That Part provides guidance about extended timeframes, notices of decision, review rights and when access to documents may be provided.

Submissions

6.208 Where consultation occurs, a third party should be asked if they object to disclosure and invited to make submissions about:

- whether the conditional exemption apply

¹⁷⁸ For discussion of the relevant principles when there are a large number of third parties see *PL’ and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 67 [34]–[40]. See also *Christis Tombazos and Australian Research Council (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 14 [45].

- whether, on balance, access would be contrary to the public interest.

6.209 An affected third party who is consulted under s 27 may contend that exemptions under ss 47 or 47G apply. Where the third party contends that exemptions other than ss 47 or 47G apply, it is open to an agency or minister to rely on those exemptions in its decision.¹⁷⁹

However, should the agency or minister decide to grant access to the documents, the third party does not have a right to seek review of that decision on grounds other than those specified in s 27.

6.210 The third party should be asked to provide reasons and evidence for their exemption contention. To assist them to make an exemption contention it may be necessary to provide a copy of the document. This can be done by providing an edited copy of the document, for example, by deleting any material that may be exempt under another provision. An agency or minister should take care not to breach any obligations under the Privacy Act during consultation, for example, by identifying the FOI applicant without their consent. If an edited copy of the document has been provided for consultation purposes, that copy should be clearly marked where material has been edited, and it should state that the copy has been provided for the purpose of consultation. The copy may be annotated or watermarked to indicate it is a consultation copy.

6.211 An agency or minister must have regard to any submissions made before deciding whether to give access to the document (ss 27(4) and 27(5)). The third party does not, however, have the right to veto access and agencies and ministers should take care that the third party is not under such a misapprehension. The statement of reasons will need to demonstrate the weight attributed to these submissions and their subsequent impact on the final decision.

6.212 Where an agency or minister decides to give the FOI applicant access to documents after a third party has made an exemption contention, they must give the third party written notice (s 27(6)). Access to a document must not be given to the FOI applicant until the third party's opportunities for review have run out, or if review did occur, the decision still stands (s 27(7)).

Research documents (s 47H)

6.213 Section 47H conditionally exempts material where:

- a) it contains information relating to research that is being, or is to be, undertaken by an officer of an agency specified in Schedule 4 of the Act (that is, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Australian National University) and
- b) disclosure of the information before the completion of the research would be likely to unreasonably to expose the agency or officer to disadvantage.

6.214 There are no AAT or court decisions on this provision.

¹⁷⁹ See *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Civil Aviation Safety Authority* [2015] AICmr 21 [5] and s 27(1)(b) of the FOI Act.

Documents affecting the Australian economy (s 47J)

6.215 Under s 47J(1) a document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under the FOI Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on Australia's economy by:

- a) influencing a decision or action of a person or entity or
- b) giving a person (or class of persons) an undue benefit or detriment, in relation to business carried on by the person (or class), by providing premature knowledge of proposed or possible action or inaction of a person or entity.

6.216 The economy conditional exemption reflects the need for the government to be able to maintain the confidentiality of certain information if it is to carry out its economic policy responsibilities, including the development and implementation of economic policy in a timely and effective manner.

6.217 Section 47J(2) makes it clear that a 'substantial adverse effect on Australia's economy' includes a substantial adverse effect on a particular segment of the economy, or the economy of a particular region of Australia (s 47J(2)). For example, the disclosure of the results of information regarding the impacts of economic conditions or policies on particular sectors of the market may distort investment decisions within that sector and, in turn, adversely affect the Government's ability to develop and implement economic policies more generally.

6.218 In this exemption, a 'person' includes a body corporate and a body politic (for example, the government of a State or Territory) (s 22 *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*).

6.219 The types of documents to which s 47J(1) applies includes documents containing matters related to any of the following:

- currency or exchange rates
- interest rates
- taxes, including duties of customs or of excise
- the regulation or supervision of banking, insurance and other financial institutions
- proposals for expenditure
- foreign investment in Australia
- borrowings by the Commonwealth, a State or an authority of the Commonwealth, Norfolk Island or of a State (s 47J(3)).

6.220 The terms 'reasonably be expected' and 'substantial adverse effect' are explained in greater detail at [6.13] – [6.16] and [6.17] – [6.19] above. There must be more than an assumption, allegation or possibility that the adverse effect would occur if the document were released.

6.221 A decision maker must focus on the expected effect on Australia's economy if a document is disclosed. The types of circumstances that would, or could reasonably be expected to, lead to a substantial adverse effect could include:

- premature disclosure of information could compromise the Government's ability to obtain access to information

- disclosure of information could undermine confidence in markets, financial frameworks or institutions
- disclosure of information could distort the Australian economy by influencing investment decisions or giving particular individuals or businesses a competitive advantage.¹⁸⁰

The public interest test

6.222 Section 11A(5) provides that an agency or minister must give access to a document if it is conditionally exempt at a particular time unless (in the circumstances) access to the document at that time would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest.

6.223 To decide whether giving access to a conditionally exempt document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest under s 11A(5), the factors set out in s 11B must be considered. Some of these factors must be taken into account (where relevant) and some factors must not be taken into account. Decision makers are required to balance the factors for and against disclosure and decide whether it would be contrary to the public interest to give access to the requested document(s).

What is the public interest?

6.224 The public interest is considered to be:

- something that is of serious concern or benefit to the public, not merely of individual interest¹⁸¹
- not something of interest to the public, but in the interest of the public¹⁸²
- not a static concept, where it lies in a particular matter will often depend on a balancing of interests¹⁸³
- necessarily broad and non-specific¹⁸⁴ and
- related to matters of common concern or relevance to all members of the public, or a substantial section of the public.¹⁸⁵

6.225 It is not necessary for an issue to be in the interest of the public as a whole. It may be sufficient that the issue is in the interest of a section of the public bounded by geography or another characteristic that depends on the particular situation. An issue of particular

¹⁸⁰ See Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2010, pp. 21–22. For an example of the application of this exemption see *Washington and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [2011] AICmr 11.

¹⁸¹ *British Steel Corporation v Granada Television Ltd* [1981] AC 1096. The 1979 Senate Committee on the FOI bill described the concept of ‘public interest’ in the FOI context as: ‘a convenient and useful concept for aggregating any number of interests that may bear upon a disputed question that is of general – as opposed to merely private – concern.’ Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, *Report on the Cth Freedom of Information Bill 1978, 1979*, [5.25].

¹⁸² *Johansen v City Mutual Life Assurance Society Ltd* [1904] HCA 43; (1904) 2 CLR 186.

¹⁸³ As explained by Forgie DP in *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 945 [54] citing *McKinnon v Secretary, Department of Treasury* [2005] FCAFC 142 [231]; (2005) 145 FCR 70; 220 ALR 587; 88 ALD 12; 41 AAR 23 per Jacobson J with whom Tamberlin J agreed, citing *Sankey v Whitlam* [1978] HCA 43; (1978) 142 CLR 1 [60] per Stephen J.

¹⁸⁴ Because what constitutes the public interest depends on the particular facts of the matter and the context in which it is being considered.

¹⁸⁵ *Sinclair v Maryborough Mining Warden* [1975] HCA 17 [16]; (1975) 132 CLR 473 at 480 (Barwick CJ).

interest or benefit to an individual or small group of people may also be a matter of general public interest.

Applying the public interest test

6.226 A decision maker is not required to consider the public interest test (s 11A(5)) until they have first determined that the document is conditionally exempt. A decision maker cannot withhold access to a document simply because it is conditionally exempt. Disclosure of a conditionally exempt document is required unless in the particular circumstances and, at the time of the decision, it would be contrary to the public interest to give access to the document.

6.227 The pro-disclosure principle declared in the objects of the FOI Act is given specific effect in the public interest test, as the test is weighted towards disclosure. If a decision is made that a conditionally exempt document should not be disclosed, the decision maker must include the public interest factors they took into account in their statement of reasons under s 26(1)(aa) (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

6.228 Applying the public interest test involves the following sequential steps:

- Identify the factors favouring access
- Identify any factors against access
- Review to ensure no irrelevant factors are taken into account
- Weigh the relevant factors for and against access to determine where the public interest lies (noting that the public interest test is weighted in favour of disclosure).

More information about each of these steps is provided below.

Identify the factors favouring access

6.229 The FOI Act sets out 4 factors favouring access that must be considered if relevant. They are that disclosure would:

- a) promote the objects of the FOI Act
- b) inform debate on a matter of public importance¹⁸⁶
- c) promote effective oversight of public expenditure¹⁸⁷
- d) allow a person to access his or her personal information (s 11B(3)).

6.230 For example, disclosure of a document that is conditionally exempt under s 47G(1)(a) might, in the particular circumstances, both inform debate on a matter of public importance and promote effective oversight of public expenditure. These would be factors favouring access in the public interest. Similarly, it would be a rare case in which disclosure would not promote the objects of the FOI Act, including by increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the government's activities.

6.231 The 4 factors favouring disclosure are broadly framed but they do not constitute an exhaustive list. Other factors favouring disclosure may also be relevant in the particular circumstances. The FOI Act recognises the temporal nature of the public interest test

¹⁸⁶ See *Janet Rice and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 41 [45]–[47].

¹⁸⁷ See *Janet Rice and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 41 [45]–[47].

through references to factors and considerations ‘at a particular time’. Accordingly, the decision maker must consider factors of public interest relevant to the document sought together with the context and the pro-disclosure object of the FOI Act. A non-exhaustive list of factors is listed below.

Public interest factors favouring access

- a) promotes the objects of the FOI Act, including to:
 - i) inform the community of the Government’s operations, including, in particular, the policies, rules, guidelines, practices and codes of conduct followed by the Government in its dealings with members of the community
 - ii) reveal the reason for a government decision and any background or contextual information that informed the decision
 - iii) enhance the scrutiny of government decision making
- b) inform debate on a matter of public importance,¹⁸⁸ including to:
 - i) allow or assist inquiry into possible deficiencies in the conduct or administration of an agency or official¹⁸⁹
 - ii) reveal or substantiate that an agency or official has engaged in misconduct or negligent, improper or unlawful conduct
 - iii) reveal deficiencies in privacy or access to information legislation¹⁹⁰
- c) promote effective oversight of public expenditure¹⁹¹
- d) allow a person to access his or her personal information, or
 - i) the personal information of a child, where the applicant is the child’s parent and disclosure of the information is reasonably considered to be in the child’s best interests
 - ii) the personal information of a deceased individual where the applicant is a close family member (a close family member is a spouse or partner, adult child or parent of the deceased, or other person who was ordinarily a member of the person’s household)
- e) contribute to the maintenance of peace and order
- f) contribute to the administration of justice generally, including procedural fairness¹⁹²
- g) contribute to the enforcement of the criminal law
- h) contribute to the administration of justice for a person

¹⁸⁸ *Rex Patrick and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 57 [66]–[72].

¹⁸⁹ See also *Carver and Fair Work Ombudsman* [2011] AICmr 5.

¹⁹⁰ See *‘FG’ and National Archives of Australia* [2015] AICmr 26.

¹⁹¹ For example, *Linton Besser and Department of Employment* [2015] AICmr 67 [25]–[26] and [53]; *Rex Patrick and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 57 [72]; *Janet Rice and Department of Health and Aged Care (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 41 [27].

¹⁹² This refers to administration of justice in a more general sense. Access to documents through FOI is not intended to replace the discovery process in particular proceedings in courts and tribunals, which supervise the provision of documents to parties in matters before them: *‘Q’ and Department of Human Services* [2012] AICmr 30 [17].

- i) advance the fair treatment of individuals and other entities in accordance with the law in their dealings with agencies
- j) reveal environmental or health risks of measures relating to public health and safety and contribute to the protection of the environment
- k) contribute to innovation and the facilitation of research.

Identify any factors against access

6.232 The FOI Act does not list any factors weighing against access. These factors, like those favouring disclosure, will depend on the circumstances. However, the inclusion of the exemptions and conditional exemptions in the FOI Act recognises that disclosure of some types of documents will, in certain circumstances, prejudice an investigation, unreasonably affect a person's privacy or reveal commercially sensitive information which may, on balance be contrary to the public interest. Such policy considerations are reflected in the application of public interest factors that may be relevant in a particular case.

6.233 A non-exhaustive list of factors against disclosure is provided below.

Public interest factors against access

- a) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the protection of an individual's right to privacy,¹⁹³ including where:
 - i. the personal information is that of a child, where the applicant is the child's parent, and disclosure of the information is reasonably considered not to be in the child's best interests
 - ii. the personal information is that of a deceased individual where the applicant is a close family member (a close family member is a spouse or partner, adult child or parent of the deceased, or other person who was ordinarily a member of the person's household) and the disclosure of the information could reasonably be expected to affect the deceased person's privacy if that person were alive
 - iii. the personal information is that of a government employee in relation to personnel management and the disclosure of the information could reasonably be considered to reveal information about their private disposition or personal life.¹⁹⁴
- b) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the fair treatment of individuals and the information is about unsubstantiated allegations of misconduct or unlawful, negligent or improper conduct
- c) could reasonably be expected to prejudice security, law enforcement, public health or public safety¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ 'PX' and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information) [2019] AICmr 8 [119]–[120]; Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of Information) [2023] AICmr 31 (28 April 2023) [41]–[46].

¹⁹⁴ See 'GC' and Australian Federal Police [2015] AICmr 44, Paul Cleary and Special Broadcasting Service [2016] AICmr 2. As noted at [6.156], agency compliance with guidelines issued by the Australian Public Service Commission to assist agencies understand how s 103 of the Public Service Regulations 2023 affects their ability to use and disclose the personal information of staff within their agencies and with other APS agencies will be a relevant consideration in deciding whether disclosure of an employee's personal information would be unreasonable (for the purposes of s 47F) and contrary to the public interest.

¹⁹⁵ For example, Bradford and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of information) [2021] AATA 3984 [202]–[203].

- d) could reasonably be expected to impede the administration of justice generally, including procedural fairness
- e) could reasonably be expected to impede the administration of justice for an individual
- f) could reasonably be expected to impede the protection of the environment¹⁹⁶
- g) could reasonably be expected to impede the flow of information to the police or another law enforcement or regulatory agency¹⁹⁷
- h) could reasonably be expected to prejudice an agency's ability to obtain confidential information¹⁹⁸
- i) could reasonably be expected to prejudice an agency's ability to obtain similar information in the future¹⁹⁹
- j) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the competitive commercial activities of an agency²⁰⁰
- k) could reasonably be expected to harm the interests of an individual or group of individuals²⁰¹
- l) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the conduct of investigations, audits or reviews by the Ombudsman or Auditor-General²⁰²
- m) could reasonably be expected to discourage the use of agency's access and research services²⁰³
- n) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the management function of an agency²⁰⁴
- o) could reasonably be expected to prejudice the effectiveness of testing or auditing procedures.

Ensure no irrelevant factor is considered

6.234 The decision maker must take care not to consider factors that are not relevant in the particular circumstances. The FOI Act specifies certain factors that must not be taken into account.

6.235 The irrelevant factors are:

¹⁹⁶ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Secretary, Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources (Freedom of information)* [2022] AATA 1451 [101].

¹⁹⁷ *Outside the Square Solutions and Australian Skills Quality Authority (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 33 [24]–[28]; *'PX' and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 8 [119]–[120]; *Wilson AM and Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AATA 458 [66].

¹⁹⁸ *Outside the Square Solutions and Australian Skills Quality Authority (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 33 [24]–[28]; *'PX' and Australian Federal Police (Freedom of Information)* [2019] AICmr 8 [119]–[120].

¹⁹⁹ *Wilson AM and Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (Freedom of Information)* [2023] AATA 458 [66].

²⁰⁰ *MacTiernan and Secretary, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (Freedom of Information)* [2016] AATA 506 [134] and [142].

²⁰¹ *Washington and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [2011] AICmr 11 [27]–[29]; *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 37 [93].

²⁰² See *Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Commonwealth Ombudsman* [2012] AICmr 11 [33].

²⁰³ See *'FG' and National Archives of Australia* [2015] AICmr 26.

²⁰⁴ *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 37 [93].

- access to the document could result in embarrassment to the Commonwealth Government, or cause a loss of confidence in the Commonwealth Government
- access to the document could result in any person misinterpreting or misunderstanding the document
- the author of the document was (or is) of high seniority in the agency to which the request for access to the document was made
- access to the document could result in confusion or unnecessary debate (s 11B(4)).

Weigh the relevant factors to determine where the public interest lies

6.236 The decision maker must determine whether giving access to a conditionally exempt document is, at the time of the decision, contrary to the public interest, taking into account the factors for and against access. The timing of the FOI request may be important. For example, it is possible that certain factors may be relevant when the decision is made, but may not be relevant if the FOI request were to reconsidered some time later.²⁰⁵ In such circumstances a new and different decision could be made.²⁰⁶

6.237 In weighing the factors for and against access to a document, it is not sufficient simply to list the factors. The decision maker's statement of reasons must explain the relevance of the factors and the relative weight given to them (s 26(1)(aa)) (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).²⁰⁷

6.238 To conclude that, on balance, disclosure of a document would be contrary to the public interest is to conclude that the benefit to the public resulting from disclosure is outweighed by the benefit to the public of withholding the information. The decision maker must analyse, in each case, where on balance the public interest lies based on the particular facts at the time the decision is made.²⁰⁸

6.239 As noted in *Jonathan Sequeira and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (No. 3) (Freedom of information)*:

Access must be provided unless the degree of that harm is such that it outweighs the public interests in disclosure that underpin the FOI Act and apply in the particular case. The test is not whether disclosure would be positively in the public interest. Rather it is whether, on balance, disclosure would be contrary to the public interest, that is, that some harm or damage to the public interest which outweighs the benefit to the public in disclosure would ensue.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ *Rovere and Secretary, Department of Education and Training* [2015] AATA 462 [67].

²⁰⁶ See *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 945 [78]–[79]; *Raymond Williams and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 26 [61]–[64].

²⁰⁷ See for example the weight given to individual public interest factors and how these are balanced to determine whether disclosure would be contrary to the public interest in *'AHZ' and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (No. 1) (Freedom of Information)* [2024] AICmr 45 [114]–[118]; *'AHZ' and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (No. 2) (Freedom of Information)* [2024] AICmr 47 [79]–[83].

²⁰⁸ *'PM' and Department of Industry, Innovation and Science (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 70 [35].

²⁰⁹ *Jonathan Sequeira and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (No. 3) (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 30 [90].

The public interest test and s 47B (Commonwealth-State relations)

6.240 When applying the public interest test to a document considered to be conditionally exempt under s 47B(a), it may be relevant to take into account whether disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to Commonwealth-State relations. However, the fact that damage may result from disclosure is not determinative of whether it would be contrary to the public interest to give access to the conditionally exempt document.²¹⁰ Other public interest factors may also be relevant (such as the desirability of allowing scrutiny of government activities).

6.241 Conversely, in relation to another provision of s 47B, such as 47B(b) and information or matter communicated in confidence, where disclosure of a document may reasonably be expected to have a positive or neutral effect on Commonwealth-State relations, then that may be a public interest factor in favour of disclosure.

6.242 It is not uncommon that documents considered to be conditionally exempt under s 47B(b) are documents shared between law enforcement agencies. In such cases factors favouring access will include:

- promoting the objects of the FOI Act
- enhancing the scrutiny of government operations or decision making and promoting governmental accountability and transparency
- informing debate on a matter of public importance
- [and in some cases] allowing applicants to access their own personal information.

6.243 Countervailing factors may include:

- inhibiting the future supply of information, which would prejudice the conduct of future investigations
- prejudicing an agency's ability to obtain confidential information and
- prejudicing an agency's ability to obtain similar information in the future.

6.244 When balancing these public interest factors, the factors against access will often outweigh those in favour. While the public interest is served by promoting the objects of the FOI Act, the risk of damage to relations between law enforcement agencies is often very high and could have serious and lasting effects on the effectiveness of agency operations in the future.

Inhibition of frankness and candour

6.245 Prior to the FOI Act reforms of 2010, a common factor considered to weigh against access of deliberative matter (s 47C) was that giving access would inhibit the giving of frank and candid advice by public servants. Frankness and candour arguments have been significantly affected by the 2010 reforms to the FOI Act, as demonstrated by a number of AAT and Information Commissioner decisions.²¹¹

²¹⁰ *Patrick and Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Freedom of Information)* [2021] AATA 2719 [224].

²¹¹ In particular, *Rovere and Secretary, Department of Education and Training* [2015] AATA 462; *'GI' and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 51; *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 945 and *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962.

6.246 The ability of public servants to provide robust and frank advice (often referred to as frank and fearless advice) is still often identified as a public interest factor against access by decision makers. Decision maker should exercise caution if this is the only public interest factor identified as being against access. The Australian Information Commissioner said in *‘GI’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet*:

... a more recent decision of the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, *Rovere and Secretary, Department of Education and Training* [2015] AATA 462 has held that ‘A frankness and candour claim, made in circumstances where there is no (other) factor against access ... cannot be a factor against access when applying the public interest test’ (at 52). I read that as a comment only that a confidentiality or candour claim carries no weight by itself but must be related to some particular practice, process, policy or program in government.²¹²

6.247 In *Rovere and Secretary, Department of Education and Training* the AAT said that in relation to pre-decisional communications, a frankness and candour claim cannot be a public interest factor against access.²¹³ The Information Commissioner reads *Rovere* as authority for the proposition that a confidentiality or candour claim carries no weight by itself but must be related to some particular practice, process, policy or program in government.²¹⁴

6.248 The Information Commissioner considers that frankness and candour in relation to s 47C may have some application as one public interest factor against disclosure in combination with other factors. However frankness and candour may be the sole factor where the public interest is clearly, heavily weighted against disclosure of a document of a minister, or a document that would affect the effective and efficient functioning of government.

6.249 Public servants are expected to operate within a framework that encourages open access to information and recognises Government information as a national resource to be managed for public purposes (ss 3(3) and (4)). In particular, the FOI Act recognises that Australia’s democracy is strengthened when the public is empowered to participate in Government processes and scrutinise Government activities (s 3(2)). In this setting, transparency of the work of public servants should be the accepted operating environment and fears about a lessening of frank and candid advice correspondingly diminished.

6.250 Agencies should therefore start with the assumption that public servants are obliged by their position to provide robust and frank advice at all times and that obligation will not be diminished by transparency of government activities.²¹⁵

6.251 The AAT has said there is an ‘essential balance that must be struck between making information held by government available to the public so that there can be increased public participation leading to better informed decision-making and increased scrutiny and review of the government’s activities and ensuring that government may function effectively and efficiently’.²¹⁶

²¹² *‘GI’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 51 [20].

²¹³ As per Popple SM in *Rovere and Secretary, Department of Education and Training* [2015] AATA 462 [42] and [48]–[53]. In *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General’s Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [100] Bennett J appears to give her approval to the position taken by Popple SM in *Rovere*.

²¹⁴ *‘GI’ and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2015] AICmr 51 [20].

²¹⁵ *Raymond Williams and Department of Defence (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 26 [65]–[76]; *Justin Warren and Services Australia (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 13 [66]–[71].

²¹⁶ As per Forgie DP in *Wood; Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and (Freedom of Information)* [2015] AATA 945 [69].

6.252 While frankness and candour claims may still be contemplated when considering deliberative material and weighing the public interest, they should be approached cautiously and in accordance with ss 3 and 11B. Generally, the circumstances will be special and specific.

Incoming government briefs and the public interest test

6.253 An incoming government brief is a briefing prepared by an Australian Government department during the caretaker period before a federal election. Incoming government briefs play an important role because ministers are considered to be immediately responsible for the portfolios they hold and therefore require comprehensive and frank briefs. Their purpose is to enable a smooth transition from one government to another following a general election.

6.254 The incoming government brief is prepared before the election outcome and the identity of the new Minister are known. As a result, incoming government briefs differ from other advice that may be prepared at the Minister's request or as part of the department's normal support and advising function.

6.255 In *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* the Information Commissioner found the claim that all incoming government briefs should be exempt under s 47C would fail on the basis that s 47C is a conditional exemption and access must be given unless disclosure of the document 'at the time would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest'.²¹⁷ Accordingly, each FOI request for access to an incoming government brief must be considered separately and with consideration to the public interest factors that apply at the time of the decision.

6.256 However, it will usually be contrary to the public interest under s 11A(5) to release deliberative matter in an incoming government brief, having regard in particular to the special purpose of the brief to provide frank and helpful advice to a new Minister at a critical juncture in the system of responsible parliamentary government.²¹⁸

6.257 Special treatment is given to the brief prepared for a party that does not form government.²¹⁹ This brief is not provided to the party, which does not have the opportunity to consider and respond to it. Relevant public interest considerations may include:

- The confidentiality of discussions and briefings provided to the new Minister are essential at that early stage in developing a relationship that accords with the conventions of responsible parliamentary government. Public release of any portion of the brief would compromise the department's role in managing the transition from one government to another.
- It is important, in the early days of a new government, that the public service is not drawn into political controversy, or is required publicly to defend the advice provided to a new government.²²⁰

²¹⁷ *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* [2013] AICmr 69 [40].

²¹⁸ *Parnell & Dreyfus and Attorney-General's Department* [2014] AICmr 71 [82]; *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [102].

²¹⁹ *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* [2013] AICmr 69 [91].

²²⁰ *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* [2013] AICmr 69 [85].

- It is unfair to the party that did not form government to make public the assessment of its policies by a department, when the party has not had an opportunity to adjust or implement those policies.

6.258 It is a convention of Cabinet government that the Cabinet papers of one government are not available to the Ministers of another. By extension, the high-level advice that was prepared for a party in the expectation that it may (but did not) form government should not be released publicly under the FOI Act.²²¹

6.259 However the Information Commissioner found that the same considerations also applied to incoming government briefs prepared for the party that forms government, and may also apply where the previous government is re-elected. In so finding, The Information Commissioner said that consideration of the damage that is likely to arise from disclosure of the incoming government brief should not be limited to damage relating to the relationship between current agencies and ministers in the present government, but should also include the likelihood of damage to relationships between agencies and their respective ministers in the future.²²²

²²¹ *Crowe and Department of the Treasury* [2013] AICmr 69 [91]–[92].

²²² *Dan Conifer and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (No. 2) (Freedom of information)* [2017] AICmr 117 [35]; *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [102], [105], [107].

PART 7 — AMENDMENT AND ANNOTATION OF PERSONAL RECORDS

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PART 7 – AMENDMENT AND ANNOTATION OF PERSONAL RECORDS

7.1 The FOI Act and the Privacy Act both generally allow individuals to seek access to their personal information and to have that information corrected or annotated. Part V of the FOI Act gives individuals the right to apply to an agency or minister to amend or annotate an incorrect record of their personal information kept by the agency or minister. The Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) in the Privacy Act give individuals the right to request an agency¹ to correct, or associate a statement with, their personal information held by the agency. An agency is also required by the APPs, independently of any request from an individual, to take reasonable steps to ensure that the personal information it holds is correct.

7.2 The amendment and annotation provisions in the FOI Act and Privacy Act coexist but operate independently of one another. Agencies are not required to advise individuals to proceed with an amendment request under the FOI Act rather than the Privacy Act. However, the FOI Act procedures, criteria and review mechanisms differ in important respects from those that apply under the APPs. Those differences are considered below at [7.6]–[7.8].

7.3 Neither the FOI Act nor the Privacy Act prevent an agency from correcting personal information under an informal administrative arrangement, provided the arrangement satisfies the minimum requirements of the Privacy Act.² For example, an agency may allow individuals to correct their personal information through an online portal.

Amendment and annotation of personal records under the FOI Act and Privacy Act

7.4 A fundamental principle of information privacy is that individuals are entitled to have access to their own personal information held by agencies, except where the law provides otherwise (APP 12 in the Privacy Act). Agencies must also take reasonable steps to correct personal information to ensure that, having regard to the purpose for which it is held, it is accurate, up-to-date, complete, relevant and not misleading (APP 13 in the Privacy Act). Agencies are expected to take all reasonable steps to ensure compliance. If an agency fails to comply with either APP 12 or APP 13, an individual may complain to the Information Commissioner under the Privacy Act.

7.5 The FOI Act provides a complementary procedure that gives individuals a legally enforceable right of access to documents (under Part III) and the right to request correction or update (Part V) of their personal information in agency records or the official documents of a minister. Part V enables records that are incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading to be amended on application by the affected person. An applicant may also ask for the record to be annotated to include a statement explaining their objection to the record of their personal information and the reasons for their objection (s 51).

Comparison of FOI Act procedures and APP 13

7.6 Part V of the FOI Act operates alongside the right to amend or annotate personal

¹ In the Privacy Act ‘agency’ includes a minister.

² For more information about APP 13 minimum procedural requirements, see Chapter 13 of the Information Commissioner’s APP Guidelines at www.oaic.gov.au.

information in APP 13. There is substantial overlap between the FOI Act and APP 13 procedures, but also some noteworthy differences.

7.7 While APP 13 sets out minimum procedural requirements, these are not as detailed as in the FOI Act. However, in two respects APP 13 goes further than the FOI Act:

- The grounds for correction in APP 13 are that the personal information is ‘inaccurate, out-of-date, incomplete, irrelevant or misleading’. The additional ground in APP 13 is that the information is ‘irrelevant’. The other wording difference — ‘inaccurate’ in APP 13, ‘incorrect’ in the FOI Act — is not substantive.
- If an agency corrects personal information the agency must, if requested by the individual, take reasonable steps under APP 13 to notify that change to any APP entity to which the personal information was previously disclosed unless it is unlawful or impracticable to do so. This requirement applies regardless of whether the correction was made under the Privacy Act or the FOI Act.

7.8 The options available to individuals to challenge a decision under the FOI Act and APP 13 also differ:

- Under the FOI Act, an individual may apply for internal review or IC review of an agency’s or minister’s decision to refuse to amend or annotate a record in accordance with the person’s request. The Information Commissioner may affirm, vary or set aside the agency or minister’s decision to amend or annotate a record.
- Under the Privacy Act, an individual may complain to the Information Commissioner about an agency’s failure to take reasonable steps to correct personal information (Privacy Act s 36). After investigating, the Commissioner may find that an agency has failed to take reasonable steps to correct personal information or to comply with the minimum procedural requirements under APP 13. The Commissioner may make a determination to that effect, and require, for example, the agency to correct the personal information or to comply with the minimum procedural requirements (Privacy Act s 52).

7.9 It is open to an individual to decide whether to make an application under the FOI Act or to make a request under APP 13. Agencies could ensure, in appropriate cases that people are made aware of both options and the substantive differences. An agency could refer to the FOI Act in the agency’s APP Privacy Policy.³ More detailed information could be provided by an agency in other ways. For instance, a separate document that sets out the procedures for requesting correction of personal information, through an ‘Access to information’ icon on the agency’s website,⁴ or on a case-by-case basis as the need arises.

7.10 As explained in Part 3 of these Guidelines, agencies should consider establishing administrative access arrangements that coexist but operate independently of the FOI Act and that provide an easier and less formal means for individuals to make information access requests (including requests to correct personal information).

7.11 The remainder of this Part deals with the amendment and annotation provisions in

³ APP 1 requires all APP entities to have a clearly expressed and up-to-date APP Privacy Policy about how it manages personal information.

⁴ See the OAIC’s Guidance for agency websites: ‘Access to information’ web page at www.oaic.gov.au.

the FOI Act. For more information about the operation of APP 13, see the APP Guidelines, Chapter 13.

Records that may be amended or annotated

7.12 A request for amendment or annotation of a record of personal information in a document under s 48 must meet all of the following criteria⁵:

- the document must be a document of an agency or an official document of a minister containing personal information about the applicant
- the document must be one to which the applicant has already been lawfully provided access, whether as a result of an access request under the FOI Act or otherwise
- the personal information in the document must be incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading
- the personal information has been used, is being used or is available for use by the agency or minister for an administrative purpose.

Applies only to personal information

7.13 The right to request amendment or annotation only extends to the applicant's personal information within the document.⁶ For example, a person cannot apply for correction or annotation of a policy document that contains no personal information about them.

7.14 An application for correction or annotation differs from the usual scheme of the FOI Act in that it is concerned with records of personal information about the applicant contained in documents, rather than the documents as such. A request for amendment or annotation extends to any record of personal information about the applicant that the agency or minister holds, if the information is used or is available for use for an administrative purpose (s 48(b)). For example, an applicant may claim that an agency document wrongly records their date of birth. The right to have that personal information about the applicant corrected extends to all active records of the applicant's date of birth that the agency has kept for administrative purposes.

7.15 The personal information must be:

- information (such as date of birth or residential address), or
- an opinion (such as a medical opinion)

about an identified individual, or an individual who is reasonably identifiable (s 4(1) of the FOI

⁵ See Agency Resource 3 'Processing requests for amendment or annotation of personal records' for further guidance.

⁶ See *'EG' and Department of Human Services* [2014] AICmr 149 [16]-[20] where the Information Commissioner found that information about the costs borne by the applicant in negotiations and dispute with the Child Support Agency was the applicant's personal information despite the Department's submissions to the contrary. In *Grass and Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AATA 751 [26]-[28], [30]-[31] Britton SM found that information that could be described as an expression of opinion about the manner in which an officer of the Department handled the FOI applicant's citizenship application was not personal information. Accordingly, the power to amend those records could not be exercised.

Act and s 6(1) of the Privacy Act).

7.16 Part V applies broadly to information that has been used, is being used, or is available for use for an administrative purpose. This includes information that was only used once.

Information incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading

The right to request amendment arises only where the applicant's personal information in the record is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading. The request may relate to several different pieces of information in one or more documents, or it may relate to only a single piece of information. A different reason may be claimed for each amendment sought. For example, the applicant may claim that part of the information is incorrect, another part is out of date and therefore the whole record is misleading.

Incorrect

7.17 'Incorrect' has its normal everyday meaning. Personal information is incorrect if it contains an error or defect. An example is inaccurate factual information about a person's name, date of birth, residential address or current or former employment.

7.18 An opinion about an individual given by a third party is not incorrect by reason only that the individual disagrees with that opinion or advice. The opinion may be 'correct' if:

- it is presented as an opinion and not objective fact,
- it correctly records the view held by the third party, and
- is an informed assessment that takes into account competing facts and views.

7.19 Other matters to consider where there is disagreement about the soundness of an opinion are whether the opinion is 'complete', 'up to date' and 'not misleading'.

Incomplete

7.20 Personal information is incomplete if it presents a partial or misleading picture, rather than a true or full picture. For example, a statement that an individual has only two rather than three children will be incomplete if that information is held for the purpose of, and is relevant to, assessing a person's eligibility for a benefit or service.

Misleading

7.21 Information is misleading if it could lead a reader into error or convey a second meaning which is untrue or inaccurate. For example, an applicant may claim that a record of opinion or advice is misleading because it does not contain information about the circumstances surrounding that opinion or recommendation. The applicant may seek to have incorporated in the document information that sets out the context for that opinion or recommendation.

Out of date

7.22 Personal information is out of date if it contains facts, opinions or other pieces of

information that are no longer current.⁷ An applicant may request that more recent information be inserted into the record as their circumstances change. For example, an applicant may request amendment of a statement that the applicant lacks a particular qualification or accreditation that they have subsequently obtained.

7.23 Personal information about a past event may have been accurate at the time it was recorded, but have been overtaken by a later development.⁸ Whether that information is out of date will depend on the purpose for which it is held. If point in time information from the past is required for the particular purpose, the information will not be out of date for that purpose. In these circumstances, an agency or minister must still ensure that the information is complete and not misleading.

Amendment of recorded opinions

7.24 An agency or minister should be careful where a request for amendment relates to a document containing advice, recommendations or opinions of a third party (including a group). Such records should be amended only if the information is incorrect or incomplete, or if the author was shown to be biased or unqualified to form the opinion or to have acted improperly, or if there is some other clear impropriety in the formation of the opinion. The applicant's disagreement with the opinion is not a sufficient reason to amend the record.⁹ This approach is consistent with the limitations on the Information Commissioner's power to direct amendments of records in s 55M of the FOI Act (see Part 10 of these Guidelines). The agency or minister should consider consulting the person who provided the advice, opinion or recommendation before amending it.

Amendment or annotation contingent on prior access

7.25 A person only has a right to seek amendment or annotation under the FOI Act if they have lawfully been provided with access to the document(s) in question (s 48). Lawful access includes access:

- granted under Part III of the FOI Act
- provided under an agency's general discretion to allow access to its documents
- required or permitted under any other law of the Commonwealth.

By contrast, a person does not need to have had access to a record of personal information to seek correction under the Privacy Act (APP 13).

⁷ In *Grass and Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AATA 751 [46]-[49], Britton SM considered the applicant's request to amend a document recording a decision by the Migration Review Tribunal on the basis that this decision did not accord with an FOI decision and was therefore 'out of date'. Britton SM indicated that where a decision-maker reaches a different finding to an earlier decision-maker, this does not render the earlier decision 'out of date' and the issue was not whether the finding by the Migration Review Tribunal was 'correct' but whether the statement correctly recorded the finding by the Migration Review Tribunal.

⁸ In *Grass and Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AATA 751 [52]-[56], Britton SM found that it would be open to exercise the power to amend file covers and an internal email that recorded an asserted date of birth that was found to be incorrect. Britton SM did not agree with the Secretary's argument that the information must be read in context and these documents were correct factual records of an historical event or historical data based on information provided at that time.

⁹ See *Grass and Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AATA 751 [39]-[44] per Britton SM.

How to apply for amendment or annotation

7.26 Sections 49 and 51A provide that an application for amendment or annotation must:

- be in writing
- specify certain information (discussed in more detail below at [7.31]–[7.33])
- provide an Australian address to which a notice can be sent
- be sent by post to the agency's or minister's office address, or be delivered to an officer in the agency or in the minister's office.

7.27 This differs from the Privacy Act (APP 13) which does not require a request for amendment to be in writing.

Sending an application and providing a return address

7.28 The application requirements for amendment or annotation are, in two respects, worded differently to the requirements for FOI access requests under Part III. As to FOI access requests, the FOI Act expressly provides that a request may be sent by electronic communication (s 15(2A)(c)) and that an applicant may provide an electronic address for service of notices (s 15(2)(c)). As to amendment and annotation applications, the FOI Act provides only that an application must be in writing (ss 49(a), 51A(a)) and must specify an Australian address to which a notice may be sent (ss 49(c), 51A(d)).

7.29 An application for an amendment or annotation to personal records under the FOI Act is not invalid because it takes place wholly or in part by means of electronic communication such as email (s 8 of the Electronic Transactions Act (ETA) 1999). The requirement for the application to be in writing can be satisfied by electronic communications such as email. Applicants may consent to receiving information from the OAIC by electronic communications such as email (s 9(1) of the ETA 1999).

7.30 Agencies and ministers should allow for the same electronic communication procedures that apply to access requests under Part III to applications under s 48 for amendment and annotation of personal information (see procedures in ss 49 and 51A). Specifically, an agency or minister should accept an application by email, and should accept an email address for service of notices.

Information which must be specified

7.31 Section 49 provides that a request for amendment should as far as practicable specify:

- the document(s) containing the information requiring amendment
- the relevant information to be amended and whether it is claimed to be incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading
- the applicant's reasons for claiming the information is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading
- the amendments being requested.

7.32 Section 51A provides that a request for annotation should:

- specify as far as practicable the document(s) which require(s) annotation
- be accompanied by a statement which specifies:
 - o the information that is claimed to be incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading and whether it is claimed to be incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading
 - o the applicant's reasons for so claiming
 - o any other information that would make the information complete, correct, up to date or not misleading.

7.33 The express obligation on agencies in s 15(3) to help applicants to make a request that complies with the FOI Act applies only to access requests. There is no corresponding provision applying to requests for amendment or annotation. Nevertheless, it is good administrative practice for agencies to treat those requests in the same way. Adopting an informal approach, for example by discussing matters with applicants by telephone, can help to resolve problems and minimise delay in making a decision.

Making amendment decisions

7.34 When assessing whether the information in the document is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading, a decision maker should consider:

- the nature of the information the applicant seeks to amend
- the evidence on which the decision is to be based, including the circumstances in which the original information was provided
- the consequences of amendment, where relevant.

7.35 An agency should apply its own procedures to satisfy itself of the person's identity before deciding whether to amend the record. Agencies should only seek the minimum amount of personal information required to establish the person's identity.

The evidence on which a decision should be based

7.36 As noted above at [7.31]–[7.32], an applicant must give particulars of the amendments being requested and the reasons for their request (ss 49 and 51A).

7.37 A decision to amend a record must be supported by a finding that the record is incorrect, incomplete, out of date or misleading (s 50). This requires a decision maker to undertake a reasonable investigation and to assess the available evidence. If an applicant does not provide evidence in support of their claim, an agency would be justified in refusing to amend the record. However, before refusing a request, a decision maker should give the applicant an opportunity to provide further evidence to substantiate their claims. For example, if the applicant claims that the information is out of date, the decision maker should ask the applicant for evidence of the current position.

7.38 The material that an applicant needs to provide to support their claim will vary according to each case. If an applicant can produce a document that supports the request, they should do so. An agency should also search its own records or other sources to find any evidence supporting an applicant's claims. The applicant's opinion is not determinative; it is for the agency to be reasonably satisfied that the applicant's claims are correct.

7.39 An agency or minister need not conduct a full, formal investigation into the matters that an applicant claims are incorrect or misleading. An investigation is required that is adequate to enable the agency or minister to be reasonably satisfied that an applicant's claims are either correct or incorrect, justified or not justified.

7.40 Agencies should give applicants reasonable assistance if it seems that an applicant has not pursued all likely avenues for obtaining evidence. This may require the agency to notify the applicant of the supporting material it requires and where this information may be obtained. Furthermore, applicants should be given a reasonable opportunity to comment on any adverse inferences drawn when the authenticity or relevance of the material they provide is assessed.

Assessing the evidence

7.41 When processing an application to amend personal information, it is the responsibility of an agency or minister to be reasonably satisfied that a current record of personal information is either not correct or should not be amended.¹⁰

7.42 The weight of evidence required to satisfy the agency or minister that the current record of personal information is incorrect depends on the significance of the amendment. On a more practical level, the evidentiary weight to be given to documents is assessed based on the circumstances in which the information was first provided and the determined authenticity of the documents.

Requisite weight of evidence

7.43 Generally, the more significant the effect of the amendment sought, the greater the weight of evidence that would be required to justify the amendment.¹¹

7.44 In *'NA' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112, the applicant sought an amendment to his date of birth of just under two years and in *'CT' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 94 the applicant sought an amendment of 2 years to his date of birth. The lesser weight of evidence required to justify the amendment in these cases reflects that these amendments are relatively minor.¹²

7.45 If the amendment sought is not significant, the weight of the evidence required to justify the amendment would be less than for a more significant amendment. Accordingly, this would make it more difficult for the agency to discharge its onus of establishing that its decision to refuse the amendment is justified, or the Commissioner should give a decision adverse to the applicant (s 55D).

Circumstances in which information was first provided

7.46 In assessing what weight to give to evidentiary documents, the decision maker

¹⁰ See *'K' and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20.

¹¹ See *'NA' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [30], *'M' and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 23 [8].

¹² *'CT' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 94 [41], *'NA' and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [30].

should consider the circumstances in which the information was first provided.¹³ This is particularly important where the applicant has no documents to support their application for amendment other than a statutory declaration stating their case. For example, incorrect information may have been placed in a record because the applicant or others (such as parents or relatives) misunderstood the questions they were asked, or made an error in supplying the information.¹⁴ Alternatively, the person collecting the information may have made a mistake, such as an error in translation, miscalculation of a date of birth or misspelling of a name.

7.47 In such cases, an amendment may be appropriate even if the alternative information is not supported by reliable documentation. This is because the information that is being amended is no more reliable than the information that replaces it.¹⁵ However, an agency must first make a finding as to the correctness of the information it has on record. The threshold question is not which piece of information is more reliable but whether the currently recorded information is incorrect.¹⁶

Authenticity of documents

7.48 It can be difficult to establish the authenticity of documents provided in support of an application for an amendment. While it may be unrealistic to insist on presentation of originals, an agency may give less weight to a copy, particularly where the authenticity of the original document is in question.¹⁷ Factors an agency or minister may wish to consider when weighing evidentiary documents include:

- whether a copy of a document has been certified and the identity and reliability of the certifier¹⁸
- whether a document is based on information reported by the applicant (self-reported information)¹⁹

¹³ For example, in *‘CI’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 79 [50]-[56] and [72,] the Information Commissioner took into account the fact that while the applicant had initially reported the recorded date of birth, this was during the resettlement process and found that it was not improbable that a person would be unwilling to correct it until after the resettlement process was complete in order to avoid any delays. The Information Commissioner took this approach again in *‘NA’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [79] and stated that he had previously accepted that individuals may be reluctant to amend records of personal information during the resettlement process for fear of delaying the process.

¹⁴ In *‘FD’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 22 [43], the Information Commissioner accepted the applicant’s explanation that he did not know his date of birth and chose the recorded year of birth because he was told he looked young. Nonetheless, in that matter the Information Commissioner found that the Department’s record of the applicant’s year of birth was not incorrect. In *‘NA’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [57], the Information Commissioner accepted as plausible the applicant’s explanation that the Department’s record was incorrect because the relatives who prepared his migration application may have estimated his date of birth in the absence of documentary evidence or information from his parents at that time.

¹⁵ See *‘K’ and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20 [41].

¹⁶ See *‘NA’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [86] – [88]; *‘N’ and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 26 [21].

¹⁷ See *‘O’ and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 27 [16].

¹⁸ See *‘T’ and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 35 [13], *‘IE’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 12 [22].

¹⁹ See *‘AU’ and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2013] AICmr 90 [14], [22], *‘CU’ and*

- where there appears to be little or no basis upon which the information could have been recorded accurately at the time the document was created²⁰
- the reliability of other documents issued by the same agency, organisation or individual²¹
- the quality of a translation of an original document and whether the translator is known or reputable²²
- damage to the document and/or an indication of tampering with the document²³
- previous statutory declarations that agree with or contradict a later statutory declaration by the same individual.²⁴

7.49 How far an agency goes to check a document's authenticity depends on how relevant it is to establishing the applicant's claims. Where a document is crucial and its authenticity is in doubt, the decision maker should seek the help of their agency fraud prevention services if available. If doubt remains about a document's authenticity, it may be preferable to annotate rather than amend the record.

Government records should reflect the closest approximation of the correct information

7.50 It is important that government records are as accurate as possible. Incorrect information recorded by an agency can have significant adverse consequences for individuals, including in relation to their eligibility for services or benefits.²⁵ An agency may be satisfied that a record of personal information is incorrect, but find it difficult to establish what the correct information is with certainty. In these circumstances, the agency should record the closest possible approximation of the correct information.²⁶ When an agency receives an application for amendment of personal records, it is not necessary that the agency be satisfied that the new information proposed by the applicant is correct before it can amend its record under s 50.²⁷ If the agency makes a finding that the existing

Department of Immigration and Border Protection [2014] AICmr 95 [51], '*CY*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 101 [45]-[50] and '*FD*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 22 [26] and [28].

²⁰ In '*CT*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2014] AICmr 94 [31], the Information Commissioner found that little weight could be given to a letter from the Office of the Surgeon General that certified the date of birth of an applicant in circumstances where the applicant had submitted that the original birth documents were either destroyed or unavailable and it was not clear on what basis the hospital was able to provide this information. In '*NA*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr [39], the Information Commissioner gave little weight to a church-issued birth certificate as evidence of the applicant's date of birth in circumstances where the document had not been issued by an official government authority and may have been issued on the basis of recent self-reported information.

²¹ See '*U*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 36 [12].

²² See '*A*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2013] AICmr 7 [22].

²³ See '*AU*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2013] AICmr 90 [16], '*FD*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2015] AICmr 22 [27]-[28].

²⁴ See '*P*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 29 [11].

²⁵ An agency should also be mindful of its obligation under the Privacy Act to take reasonable steps to ensure the quality of the personal information it collects, uses or discloses, independent of any amendment request from an individual.

²⁶ See '*K*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20 [39].

²⁷ See '*K*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20 [39]. In '*NA*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [23] – [25], the Information Commissioner explained

information in the record is incorrect, it should amend the record in accordance with the applicant's request if:

- the amendment proposed by the applicant is more likely to be correct than the information currently recorded, and
- there is no other amendment that is more likely to be correct.²⁸

7.51 It is open to an agency or minister to amend a record, under s 50, in a way that is different to the amendment proposed by the applicant, provided it is more likely to be correct than any other amendment option. For example, an agency may determine that an applicant's recorded date of birth is incorrect but be unable to determine with certainty that the new date proposed by the applicant is correct.²⁹ In this case, the agency should record the closest possible approximation of the correct date, whether this is the date proposed by the applicant, or another date that the agency believes, on reasonable grounds, is closer to the correct date. If the exact date of a person's birth cannot be established with certainty, a key consideration should be consistency of dates across the records held by multiple government agencies.³⁰

Consequences of amendment

7.52 Once it is determined that a record of personal information is incorrect and there is information that is more likely to be correct, the decision maker should take into consideration the consequences of the amendment being made and the amendment not being made.³¹

that in the IC review the onus is on the Department to demonstrate that the date of birth it has recorded is not incorrect or that it should not be amended. Where the Department is unable to establish, on the balance of probabilities, that the recorded date is 'correct', then the Department bears the onus of establishing that the incorrect date in its records should not be amended. The Information Commissioner disagreed with the approach taken by the AAT in *HFNB; Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 870. In that case the Member, Dr Gordon Hughes, found that the date of birth recorded was incorrect but that the proposed date of birth was not 'correct'. His view was that there is no power under the FOI Act to amend records of personal information to make information 'closer to correct' or 'more likely to be correct' ([30] – [34]). However in 'NA' the Information Commissioner considered that the approach in *HFNB* shifts the burden of onus from the agency to the applicant in the external review processes, and this is inconsistent with ss 55D(1) and 61(1) of the FOI Act ([24]).

²⁸ See '*K*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20 [39].

²⁹ See for instance '*JP*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 65 [47]-[49], where the Information Commissioner found that there was little reliable evidence to support either date of birth, but given the consistency with which the applicant had reported the date of birth he was seeking, the Information Commissioner found that that was more likely to be closer to the correct date of birth than the date on record. This decision was set aside by the AAT in *HFNB; Secretary, Department of Immigration and Border Protection (Freedom of information)* [2017] AATA 870. However, the Information Commissioner respectfully maintains that this approach, originally explained in '*K*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 20 and adopted in '*JP*' and '*NA*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 is consistent with the operation of s 50.

³⁰ See '*AM*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2013] AICmr 73 [21].

³¹ See '*IE*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 12 [41]-[42]. In '*IE*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 12, the applicant applied for his date of birth to be amended. The Department recorded the applicant's date of birth as 16 years of age at the time. On the basis of the applicant's contended date of birth, the applicant was 13 years of age at the time. The Information Commissioner took into account the applicant's mother's submissions that the applicant

7.53 However, the fact that an amendment of a record may benefit an applicant, and provide an incentive to make an amendment application, is generally not evidence for or against the correctness of the personal information in a record.³²

7.54 Sometimes an amendment to a record could have other unintended legal consequences. For example, if an applicant has previously provided incorrect information in a visa application and the information is amended, the visa may be liable to cancellation under the *Migration Act 1958*. If the agency or minister is aware of such possibilities, they should draw them to the applicant's attention. An agency or minister should also make the applicant aware that the amended information will be used in their future dealings. However, in giving such advice, the agency or minister should be careful to avoid appearing to dissuade an applicant from exercising their right to seek amendment. At the same time, an agency or minister is not obliged to represent the applicant's interests. The object is to ensure as far as possible that an applicant can make an informed decision.

Recording and notifying amendment decisions

7.55 An agency or minister who is satisfied the information is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading and that the information has been used, is being used or is available for use for an administrative purpose justified may decide to amend the record as requested (see [7.61]–[7.71] below). It is good practice to note on the relevant file, database or other appropriate place why the decision was made to amend the information, so that the reasons are clear to those who later use the information.

Notifying the applicant

7.56 Where an agency or minister has made a decision, they must give the applicant written notice of the decision (s 51D).³³ The notification should set out:

- the evidence (for and against the request) that the decision maker has examined
- the weighting given to the evidence

would be eligible to drive a car at the age of 13. The Commissioner considered that the applicant would also not be subject to legal age restrictions on obtaining access to alcohol, cigarettes and financial services if his date of birth was not amended. The Commissioner stated that 'Conversely, the negative consequences of making the amendment appear less significant. While potentially the applicant might remain a minor beyond his 'true' age of majority, and this may or may not unfairly entitle the family to some limited extra Government assistance, it appears the key concern is that a child is properly assessed for age and skills appropriate schooling'. In addition, the amendment to the applicant's date of birth would ensure that the applicant's birth certificate and the records held by various institutions including government agencies were consistent. The Commissioner took into account the challenges that the applicant could face in obtaining further identification documents if his date of birth was not consistent across existing records. In '*NA*' and *Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2017] AICmr 112 [85], the applicant applied for his date of birth to be amended. On the basis of the Department's recorded date of birth, the applicant was 19 years old at the time of the IC review decision. On the basis of his contended date of birth, the applicant was 17 years old. The Information Commissioner accepted the applicant's father's submissions that the difference between 17 years old and 19 years old may have an impact on whether the applicant is treated as a child or an adult, and may affect his educational and vocational opportunities.

³² See '*A*' and *Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2013] AICmr 7 [26].

³³ For further guidance on notifying a decision, see Part 3 of these Guidelines.

- the reasons for refusal
- information about the applicant's review rights, and
- information about the right to complain to the Information Commissioner about how the request was handled (s 26 as applied by s 51D(3)).

7.57 The agency or minister has the onus of justifying the decision on review by the Information Commissioner (s 55D(1)). The agency or minister need not prove the information was correct, but must establish that the Commissioner should affirm the decision or give a decision that is adverse to the applicant.

Implementing amendment decisions

7.58 The FOI Act does not specify how records are to be amended. Each agency can therefore adopt the procedure best suited to its record keeping practices.

7.59 Where an agency or minister decides to amend a record in response to a request, all relevant active records must be amended in whatever form those records are kept. It may be that only a central record, such as a database containing client details, need be amended rather than all related records. The records may be amended by correcting or updating them or by adding new information to make the record complete.

7.60 Care must be taken, however, to preserve the integrity of the record. Agencies and ministers should remember that the information being amended still has value as an historical record, and therefore should be retained as far as possible. Section 50(3) requires an agency or minister when making an amendment to ensure, as far as practicable, that the amendment does not obliterate the text of the record, as it originally existed. Removing or destroying part of a record would prejudice the record's integrity as an account of the information originally supplied. Such a record may still be necessary to explain an action taken on the basis of the original information. If this is not possible, the agency should keep a careful account of any changes made, cross-referencing to the file or database that contains the record of the amendment decision.

Amending paper records

7.61 Information on a paper document could be corrected by:

- ruling through the incorrect information
- writing the correct information next to, above or below the incorrect information
- inclusion of explanatory words such as: 'Amended on (insert date) under s 50 of the FOI Act'
- inclusion of cross-references to the amendment by adding the words 'see folio (x) of file (x)', and
- pre-printed stickers with the appropriate wording if there are a large number of amendments.

7.62 Additional or updated information can be recorded in a similar way with the words: 'Additional information provided under s 48 of the FOI Act on [insert date]' or 'updated under the FOI Act on [insert date]'. The date of amendment must always be recorded. The notation could refer to s 51 (where a prior application for amendment was unsuccessful) or

s 51B (where an application for annotation is made under s 48 without first seeking amendment).

7.63 A note that merely states the applicant's views without making a finding on the accuracy of the information the agency or minister holds is insufficient to constitute an amendment for the purposes of the FOI Act (see [7.37] above).

7.64 Where information cannot be amended on the document or in the database, the folio(s) or record(s) which contains this information should clearly cross-reference to the relevant file containing the correct information.

Amending electronic and other records

7.65 Non-paper records (for example, computer data and microfilm) should be amended where possible. As with paper records, where information cannot be altered on the document or in the database, the folio(s) or record(s) which contain this information should be clearly cross-referenced to the relevant place where the correct information is held.

7.66 Although information should be amended in a way that does not obliterate the original text of the record (see [7.60] above), this may not always be possible with electronic records. Agencies should consult their systems administrators or record managers for guidance on amending or annotating electronic records.

Making and implementing annotation decisions

7.67 A person can apply at any time for an annotation to a record. They do not have to apply for an amendment to the record first (s 48(d)).

7.68 Where an agency or minister has declined to amend a record either wholly or partly in accordance with a request, the applicant must be given an opportunity to submit a statement seeking annotation of the record that they claim is incorrect, incomplete, out of date or misleading (s 51(1)). Section 51A (discussed at [7.32] above) sets out the matters that an applicant needs to include in their submission.

7.69 The general rule is that an agency or minister must annotate a record as requested, as annotation, unlike amendment, is not discretionary. However, agencies or ministers are not obliged to annotate a record if they consider the applicant's statement is irrelevant, defamatory or unnecessarily voluminous (s 51(2)).

7.70 Whether a statement is unnecessarily voluminous will depend on the circumstances. For example, a longer statement may be appropriate in some instances, such as where there is a large volume of personal information that the agency has refused to correct. Where it is not reasonable for the agency to add an extensive statement to the personal information, the agency should give the applicant an opportunity to revise the statement. If it is not otherwise practicable to add an extensive statement to the personal information or create a link to the statement, a note could be included on, or attached to, the information referring to the statement and where it can be found.

7.71 Annotation is effected by adding the applicant's statement to the record, cross-indexed to the material claimed to be incorrect, incomplete, out of date or misleading. It does not entail changing the record itself. The statement should be added to all records

containing the information claimed by the applicant to be incorrect.

7.72 Agencies are encouraged to ensure that the existence of an annotation is clearly displayed on the cover of the applicant's active paper files and flagged against all relevant electronic files such as through a central customer database. This will assist future users of the records by drawing their attention to the information the applicant has supplied.

Other procedural matters

Transfer of amendment or annotation applications

7.73 An agency or minister may transfer an amendment or annotation application to another agency or minister who holds the documents requiring amendment or annotation or where the relevant documents contain subject matter which is more closely related to the other agency's or minister's functions (s 51C(1)).

7.74 The receiving agency or minister must agree to accept the transfer before it can take place — and, as a general rule, can be expected to agree to a transfer, unless there are exceptional circumstances. For further information on transfers see Part 3 of these Guidelines.

Mandatory transfer of documents from exempt agencies

7.75 Certain requests for amendment or annotation of personal information must be transferred as follows.

Table 1: Transfer requirements for documents originating with or received from an agency listed in Schedule 2

Document originated with...	and the document is more closely connected with...	the document must be transferred to...
an exempt agency listed in Division 1, Part I, Schedule 2 (eg, Auditor-General, Australian Secret Intelligence Service)	the functions of the exempt agency	the responsible portfolio department (s 51C(2)(c)).
an exempt agency that is a part of the Department of Defence listed in Division 2, Part I, Schedule 2 (eg, Australian Signals Directorate)	the functions of the exempt agency	the Department of Defence (s 51C(2)(d)).

an agency exempt in respect of particular documents, as listed in Part II or Part III of Schedule 2 (eg, documents in respect of commercial activities)	documents in respect of which the listed agency is exempt	the agency (s 51C(3)).

7.76 Because transfers to Schedule 2 agencies are mandatory, agencies and ministers should carefully examine the documents connected with an application for amendment or annotation early in the assessment process to ensure that they do not overlook any documents requiring transfer. For detailed advice about exempt and partly exempt agencies, see Part 2 of these Guidelines.

Transfer of applications involving multiple documents

7.77 Where a person applies for amendment or annotation of personal information held in multiple documents, a transfer provision may apply to one or more of the documents. In that case, the agency or minister can treat the application as though the person had applied separately to amend or annotate each document to which a transfer provision applies (s 51C(4)).

Notification of transfer

7.78 An agency or minister who transfers a request must advise the applicant (s 51C(5)(a)). The transferred request is treated as having been made to the receiving agency or minister (s 51C(6)). Transferring a request does not extend the processing period, which remains at 30 days from the date the application was first received by an agency or minister (s 51C(6)(b)).

7.79 An agency or minister who accepts a transfer of a request and decides to amend or annotate a record must notify the transferring agency or minister of the decision and the amendments or annotations made (s 51C(7)). The transferring agency or minister receiving such a notice must in turn amend or annotate in the same way any documents that they hold that contain the record of personal information to which the application relates (s 51C(8)).

Time limits

7.80 A decision must be made and notified as soon as practicable but not later than 30 days from the day after the request for amendment or annotation was received (s 51D(1)). Failure to comply with the time limit will result in a deemed refusal (s 51DA(2)). A deemed refusal is reviewable by the Information Commissioner (s 54L).

7.81 The provisions in Part III of the FOI Act for extending the processing period for access requests do not apply to requests for amendment or annotation. However, an agency or minister may apply to the Information Commissioner in writing for an extension of the processing period after the initial period has expired (s 51DA(3)). An agency or minister can also seek the applicant's informal agreement to an extension of time. If the applicant agrees to an extension the agreement will not be binding (unlike

an agreement with an applicant on an access request under s 15AA). The applicant is entitled to treat the agency's failure to decide within the 30 days as a deemed refusal under ss 51DA(1)–(2) and to apply for review by the Commissioner (see Part 10 of these Guidelines). However, the applicant's prior agreement is a factor that the Commissioner would take into account in deciding whether to give the agency an extension of time under s 51DA(3).

7.82 An agency should not normally seek an applicant's agreement to an extension of time longer than 30 days. If the agency believes a longer extension will be needed, it would be more appropriate to apply for an extension under s 51DA(3). The Commissioner may grant a period of extension that the Commissioner considers appropriate (s 51DA(4)). The Commissioner may also impose any conditions the Commissioner considers appropriate (s 51DA(5)). If the agency or minister fails to make a decision within the extended period or to comply with a condition, the decision is treated as a deemed refusal at the end of the extended period (s 51DA(7)).

7.83 All references to 'days' in Part V of the FOI Act are to calendar days, not business (working) days. The processing time starts from the day after the agency or minister receives the request. The following table sets out the time of receipt.

Table 2: Time of receipt of the application by the agency based on mode of delivery

Mode of delivery	Time of receipt (processing period commences on following day)
Pre-paid post to a specified address of the agency or minister	The time at which the letter would be delivered in the ordinary course of post ³⁴
Delivery to a central or regional office	The date of delivery
Electronic communication to a specified email or fax address	The date the communication is capable of being retrieved by the agency at the specified email or fax address. ³⁵

7.84 As noted above at [7.79]–[7.80], an agency or minister can seek an extension of time from the Information Commissioner if the initial 30-day period has expired (s 51DA(3)). In deciding whether to allow an extension of processing time, the Commissioner will take into account any non-working days falling within the original period.

7.85 Processing a request for amendment can take a considerable period of time if the material is complex or the authenticity of claims or evidence needs to be verified. If it appears that more than 30 days may be necessary, the agency or minister should

³⁴ *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* s 29.

³⁵ The time of receipt of electronic communications derives from s 14A of the Electronic Transactions Act 1999, which provides that an email or similar electronic communication is received at the time it is capable of being retrieved by the addressee. This is assumed to be the time it reaches the addressee's designated electronic address (this day could be a weekend or public holiday). This rule may be varied by a voluntary and informed agreement between the sender (the applicant) and the addressee (the agency or minister).

advise the applicant of the expected delay and their intention to apply to the Information Commissioner for an extension of time.

Acknowledging receipt

7.86 The FOI Act does not require agencies and ministers to acknowledge receipt of a request for amendment or annotation of personal information. However, it is good administrative practice for agencies and ministers to acknowledge receipt of an amendment or annotation request within 14 days, as required with requests for access to documents under the FOI Act.

Authorised decision making

7.87 Like decisions relating to requests for access to documents under Part III of the FOI Act, all decisions on the amendment of records held by agencies must be made by:

- the responsible minister
- the principal officer of the agency, or
- persons authorised under s 23 of the Act to make those decisions (see Part 3 of these Guidelines).

7.88 Requests made to ministers are treated differently. Section 23 does not provide for a minister to authorise decision makers. In practice, however, it is open to a minister to authorise a staff member in the minister's office or the responsible portfolio department to act on the minister's behalf. It would be prudent for such arrangements to be in writing. A decision maker in these circumstances will be acting as an agent of the minister and the decision will be regarded as a decision of the minister.

Charges

7.89 There are no charges for processing applications for amendment or annotation of records because they concern the applicant's own personal information (reg 5 of the Charges Regulations). For further guidance on charges see Part 4 of these Guidelines.

Comments on annotations

7.90 An agency or minister must attach a requested annotation to an applicant's document or file unless the annotation is irrelevant, defamatory or unnecessarily voluminous.

7.91 Section 51E provides that the agency or minister may also attach their own comments to an annotation under ss 51 or 51B. This would be appropriate if the annotation is complex or requires further explanation. Adding a relevant comment will help to ensure that the record presents a comprehensive picture to later readers who may not be aware of the circumstances leading to the annotation.

Reviews and complaints

7.92 A decision maker must advise the applicant of their review rights in the statement of reasons if a request for amendment or annotation is refused (see [7.55] above). Review

rights include internal review and IC review. A complaint can also be made to the Information Commissioner about the handling of a request.

7.93 Further guidance on the review and complaint processes, including AAT review of IC review decisions, is in Parts 9, 10 and 11 of these Guidelines.

7.94 A person may also complain to the Information Commissioner under the Privacy Act.³⁶

³⁶ The Privacy Act sets out a number of Australian Privacy Principles. In general, where an organisation breaches one of the principles, the individual can complain. APP 10 concerns the quality of personal information. APP 10.1 provides that 'An APP entity must take such steps as are reasonably necessary in the circumstances to ensure that the personal information that it collects is accurate, up-to-date and complete' and APP 10.2 provides that 'An APP entity must take such steps (if any) as are reasonable in the circumstances to ensure that the personal information that the entity uses or discloses is, having regard to the purpose of the use or disclosure, accurate, up-to-date, complete and relevant'. A person may complain to the Information Commissioner about a breach of APP 10.1 or 10.2.

Part 9 — Internal review

Version 1.5 – April 2024

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Availability and purpose of internal review

- 9.1 Part VI of the FOI Act provides for internal review of agency decisions in 2 circumstances:
- an FOI applicant whose FOI request is refused may apply to the agency for review of its original decision. The internal review can extend to a decision to refuse access either in full or in part, to defer access to a document, to a decision about FOI charges, to give access to a document to a qualified person, or to a refusal to amend or annotate a personal record.
 - a third party who is affected by a decision to grant access to a document in accordance with an FOI request may apply to the agency for internal review of its decision to grant access.
- 9.2 As a merits review process, an internal review is a new decision-making process in which an independent internal review decision-maker remakes the original access refusal or access grant decision.
- 9.3 The internal review decision-maker has all the powers of the original decision-maker, including clarifying the scope of the FOI request with the FOI applicant, searching for documents within the scope of the FOI request, redoing work done at the original decision-making stage, producing documents under s 17 of the FOI Act, providing a different form of access and consulting affected third parties.
- 9.4 The internal review decision-maker is not limited to the evidence before the original decision-maker and must have regard to any change in circumstances or new information or evidence that has come to light since the original decision was made.

Choice between internal review or IC review

- 9.5 An FOI applicant or affected third party who is dissatisfied with an agency's original decision can apply for either internal review or Information Commissioner (IC) review of that decision. The FOI applicant or affected third party is not required to apply for internal review before applying for IC review. The purpose of giving the option of proceeding straight to IC review, without first applying for internal review, is to encourage agencies to make the best decision in the first instance.¹
- 9.6 The Information Commissioner is of the view that it is usually better for a person to seek internal review of an agency decision first, before applying for IC review. Internal review can be quicker than external review and enables an agency to take a fresh look at its original decision. An internal review also enables agencies to monitor and improve its systems for managing FOI process at the earliest possible juncture.
- 9.7 The Information Commissioner therefore suggests that agencies include in the advice they send to FOI applicants about their review rights, information to the effect that the agency commits to expeditious processing of internal reviews in accordance with s 54C(3) (that is, within 30 days), noting that a timeframe for completion does not apply to the Information Commissioner under the FOI Act. An agency will be able

¹ See the [Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment \(Reform\) Bill 2009](#)

to consider the request more quickly if they apply for internal review in the first instance, rather than applying for external review by the Information Commissioner.

9.8 FOI applicants and affected third parties should not apply for internal review and IC review at the same time. The FOI applicant or affected third party may first apply for internal review and, following completion of the internal review, apply for IC review.² The FOI Act anticipates that only one review will be conducted at a time. If an FOI applicant has applied for internal review, they should wait for an internal review decision to be made before applying for IC review. Alternatively, the FOI applicant or affected third party may proceed directly to IC review, bypassing internal review.

9.9 An internal review is not available if the original decision was made:

- by a minister (or a person the minister has authorised to make a decision on their behalf)³ or
- personally, by the principal officer of an agency

This includes a deemed access refusal decision made by a minister or principal officer of the agency (see [9.18] below). For this reason, a person dissatisfied with the original decision will need to apply for IC review.

Decisions subject to internal review

9.10 Internal review is available to both an FOI applicant dissatisfied with an access refusal decision (see [9.11]) and an affected third party dissatisfied with an access grant decision (see [9.13]).

Access refusal decisions

9.11 An access refusal decision is defined in s 53A to include any of the following:

- a) a decision refusing to give access to a document in accordance with an FOI request
- b) a decision giving access to a document but not giving, in accordance with the FOI request, access to all documents to which the request relates
- c) a decision purporting to give access to all documents to which an FOI request relates, but not actually giving that access
- d) a decision to defer the provision of access to a document (other than a document that a minister thinks should first be provided to Parliament in accordance with s 21(1)(d))
- e) a decision under s 29 relating to the imposition of a charge or the amount of a charge

² See [1.17] of the [‘Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by applicants in information commissioner reviews’](#) which is available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au.

³ See [Part 2.26](#) of the FOI Guidelines for further information about authorising a person to make FOI decisions on behalf of a minister.

- f) a decision to give access to a document to a qualified person under s 47F(5)
- g) a decision refusing to amend a record of personal information in accordance with an application made under s 48
- h) a decision refusing to annotate a record of personal information in accordance with an application made under s 48.

9.12 An internal review of an access refusal decision can reconsider the entire decision and is not limited to the FOI applicant's contentions regarding the decision.

Access grant decisions

9.13 An access grant decision is defined in s 53B and includes the following decisions:

- a) a decision giving the FOI applicant access to a document, or an edited copy of a document, where consultation with a State is required under s 26A.
- b) a decision giving the FOI applicant access to a document, or an edited copy of a document, where consultation with a person, organisation or proprietor of an undertaking is required under s 27.
- c) a decision giving the FOI applicant access to a document, or an edited copy of a document, where consultation with a person or their legal representative is required under s 27A .

9.14 An internal review of an access grant decision is limited to considering the affected third party's contentions in relation to the specified exemptions. This is because affected third parties are only consulted on the application of s 47B (State-Commonwealth relations) (under s 26A), s 47F (personal information) (under s 27A) and ss 47 and 47G (trade secrets or business information) (under s 27).

9.15 Where there is more than one affected third party internal review application, the internal review decision-maker should deal with each application separately. This is because an internal review of an access grant decision is limited to the affected third party's contentions about the original decision and the grounds for review in the case of each affected third party are likely to be different.

Who can apply for internal review?

9.16 An FOI applicant may apply for internal review of an access refusal decision (s 54(2)).

9.17 The following are affected third parties who may apply for internal review of an access grant decision (s 54A(2)):

- the State consulted under s 26A in relation to documents affecting Commonwealth-State relations
- the person or organisation consulted under s 27 in relation to documents containing business information or trade secrets
- the person consulted under s 27A in relation to documents containing personal information about a living person

- the legal personal representative consulted under s 27A in relation to documents containing personal information about a deceased person.

9.18 Internal review is not available where:

- a State, person or organisation was invited to make a submission in relation to documents affecting Commonwealth-State relations (s 26A), documents containing business information (s 27) or documents containing personal information (s 27A), but did not do so. There is no requirement to notify the State, person or organisation of the access grant decision if they failed to make a submission.
- a State, person or organisation was not consulted under ss 26A, 27 or 27A. A State, person or organisation is not entitled to apply for internal or IC review of an access grant decision. (A third party who believes they should have been consulted can complain to the Information Commissioner. For further information about FOI complaints see [Part 11](#) of these Guidelines.)
- an access refusal decision or access grant decision was made by a minister or a person the minister has authorised to make a decision on their behalf (ss 54(1) and 54A(1)) or made personally by the principal officer of an agency (ss 54(1) and 54A(1))
- a foreign government or international organisation was consulted under s 15(7)
- a decision is not made within the statutory timeframe and consequently a decision is deemed to have been made refusing access to a document under s 15AC, or refusing to amend or annotate a personal record under s 51DA (s 54E(b)) or
- where the original decision has already been the subject of an internal review (s 54E(a)).

Procedure in an internal review

Making an application for internal review

9.19 An application for internal review must:

- be in writing (electronic communications are considered to be in writing under the *Electronic Transactions Act 1999*) and
- be made within the specified time limit (s 54B(1)).⁴

9.20 If the applicant for internal review includes their reasons for applying for internal review, this will allow the agency to conduct the internal review more quickly and efficiently. For example, the applicant for internal review may ask for additional

⁴ Subsection 15(2A) provides that the original FOI request must be sent to an officer of an agency, or a member of staff of the minister, at the address of any central or regional office of the agency or minister specified in a current telephone directory. The FOI Act contains no comparable requirement for internal review applications but it is recommended that applicants for internal review follow this procedure.

searches to be undertaken or they may contest the application of a specific exemption as part of their internal review application.

- 9.21 An internal review applicant cannot expand the scope of their FOI request during an internal review. This is to ensure that the internal review is not used to create a new FOI request or to change the scope of the request as agreed during the s 24AB request consultation process.

Time for applying

- 9.22 A person or entity has 30 calendar days after being notified of an agency's access refusal or access grant decision to apply for internal review (s 54B(1)(a)).
- 9.23 Access is not always provided to documents at the same time as an FOI decision is made under s 26, for example, where charges are outstanding at the time of notifying a decision. To avoid prejudice if an agency fails to provide access to documents at the same time as notifying its decision, a period longer than 30 days may apply to the following access refusal decisions (see [9.25]):
- a decision giving access to documents in accordance with a request but which does not give access to all the documents to which the request relates (s 53A(b))
 - a decision purporting to give access to documents in accordance with a request but not in fact doing so (s 53A(c)) or
 - a decision giving access to documents to a qualified person rather than the applicant (s 53A(f)).
- 9.24 In these cases, the time limit for applying for internal review is either 30 calendar days after the day the FOI applicant is notified of the original decision (or such further period as the agency allows), or 15 calendar days after access to documents is given or purported to be given, whichever period is longer (s 54B(1)(b)). A period longer than 30 days will apply if access was given or purported to be given more than 15 calendar days after notification of the original decision.

Extension of time for applying

- 9.25 Sometimes when an internal review applicant is seeking an extension of the time to apply for internal review, their application will already be out of time. An agency may extend the period for an applicant to apply for internal review, even if the statutory period has already expired (s 54B(2)).
- 9.26 The FOI Act does not specify any criteria that an agency must consider however an agency is encouraged to adopt a liberal approach and grant an extension of time unless there are sound reasons not to do so.
- 9.27 The following factors should be considered when deciding whether to grant an extension of time:
- there is urgency in providing the FOI applicant with access to the requested documents, for example, the documents may be needed for imminent legal

proceedings or to support an application that is subject to a timeframe that would be missed if the extension of time was not granted

- the time elapsed since the original decision and any adverse impact upon the agency caused by the passage of time, for example administrative difficulties or prejudice in conducting the internal review
- the applicant has not satisfactorily explained the reason for the delay
- there would be no practical benefit in extending the time to apply for internal review of an access grant decision because the documents have already been released

- 9.28 Where an extension of time is sought by an affected third party, it is important to communicate with the FOI applicant so they are aware of the process and notified that provision of access to the requested documents will be delayed until an internal review decision is made. In some cases, for example where an FOI applicant has sought access to their own personal information which comprises joint personal information, it may be appropriate to consult the FOI applicant when deciding whether to grant the affected third party additional time to apply for internal review.
- 9.29 In granting an extension of time to apply for internal review, it is reasonable for an agency to require an applicant to apply for internal review within a short and specified time, for example, 20 days.
- 9.30 A decision to refuse an extension of time to apply for internal review of an access refusal decision is an IC reviewable decision (s 54L(2)(c)). The agency bears the onus of establishing that the refusal to grant extra time was justified (s 55D).
- 9.31 Affected third parties to access grant decisions should be advised to apply for internal or IC review before the relevant statutory timeframes expire. If they fail to do so, the agency may release the requested documents in accordance with the decision, making the option of internal or IC review of no practical effect.
- 9.32 An affected third party cannot apply for IC review of an agency's refusal to extend the time to apply for internal review of an access grant decision. However, the affected third party can apply to the Information Commissioner for an extension of time to apply for IC review under s 54T of the FOI Act.

The internal review decision-maker

- 9.33 An agency must, as soon as practicable after receiving an application for internal review, arrange for a person other than the original FOI decision-maker to make the internal review decision (s 54C(2)). The person must be an officer of the agency, appointed as an authorised officer under arrangements approved by the minister or principal officer of the agency under s 23.
- 9.34 The role of the internal review decision-maker is to bring a fresh, independent and impartial mind to the internal review.
- 9.35 To the extent that it is possible, the internal review decision-maker should be senior to the original decision-maker and not involved in making the original decision. However, an internal review decision-maker at the same level may be appointed if

they have had no prior involvement in the decision that is subject to internal review. If no suitable person can be appointed, the agency should consider discussing with the applicant the option of applying for IC review.⁵

- 9.36 It is desirable that any person appointed to conduct an internal review have a background in administrative decision making and have undertaken FOI training so they can bring an independent mind to the internal review and are not reliant on the original decision-maker for guidance in applying the FOI Act.

Internal review decision-making

- 9.37 The FOI Act does not prescribe any procedure or criteria for internal review decision-making⁶ but the usual administrative decision-making principles apply. The internal review decision-maker:

- makes a new decision
- exercises all the powers available to the original decision-maker
- should have access to all the material that was available to the original FOI decision-maker and may also consider any additional relevant material or submissions not considered by the original decision-maker
- must consider all issues raised by the applicant for internal review and may contact that person to seek further information or to discuss the issues raised by the application
- must bring an independent mind to the internal review and must not act at the direction or behest of any other officer.

- 9.38 Internal review of an access refusal decision may consider all of the original decision to refuse access and is not limited to the refusal of access to specific documents or the applicant's contentions.

- 9.39 Internal review of an access grant decision is limited to review of the original decision to grant access to specific documents, and the affected third party's contentions regarding the decision to grant access.

- 9.40 An internal review decision-maker has all the powers of the original decision-maker and can do any of the following:

- undertake further searches for documents
- reconsider all the material available to the original decision-maker and any additional relevant material or submissions not considered by the original FOI decision-maker
- consider all issues raised by the applicant for internal review, including by contacting that person to seek further information or to discuss the issues

⁵ For more information about IC review, see [Part 10](#) of the FOI Guidelines.

⁶ For further information on internal review decision-making principles, see the [Administrative Review Council, Internal Review of Agency Decision Making, Report No 44 \(2001\)](#).

raised by the internal review application, including the option of refining or narrowing the scope of the application

- produce documents under s 17 of the FOI Act and provide a different form of access
- if the decision-maker decides to release documents containing the personal or business information of an affected third party or information affecting Commonwealth-State relations, access to the documents must not be given until an affected third party's review or appeal opportunities have been exhausted (ss 26A(4), 27(4) and 27A(6)) (see [Part 3](#) of the FOI Guidelines)
- undertake third party consultation where documents contain information about a person or business who was not consulted earlier, or where the consultation did not address issues that have subsequently arisen during the internal review and the affected third party might reasonably wish to make an exemption contention (ss 26A, 27 and 27A). Where an affected third party is given an opportunity to make an exemption contention, there is no extension of time to the period for notifying a decision (that is, there is no equivalent to s 15(6) in an internal review).

9.41 The internal review decision-maker may find the original decision-maker misunderstood the scope of the FOI request and that if the scope had been properly understood in the first instance, it would have attracted a practical refusal reason. In this circumstance, the internal review decision-maker may decide to commence a request consultation process (s 24AB). If this occurs, it is important to note that:

- as s 24AB(8) only provides for the consultation period to be disregarded for the purpose of working out the 30-day period in s 15(5)(b), the 30-day processing period in s 54C(3) cannot be extended as a result of consultation under s 24AB. This means consultation needs to be undertaken within the 30-day internal review timeframe.
- the estimate of the time to process the FOI request can only include the time needed to process the FOI request at the internal review stage. However, the time taken to process the original request may inform the calculation of how long it will take to process the remaining part of the request. (See [Part 3](#) of the FOI Guidelines for more information about practical refusal decisions).

9.42 If an internal review of an access grant decision overturns the original decision and decides that the document, subject to submissions from an affected third party, is exempt from disclosure, the FOI applicant may apply for IC review of the internal review decision.

Extension of time for making an internal review decision

9.43 The agency must notify the applicant for internal review of a decision on internal review within 30 calendar days of receiving the internal review application (ss 54C(3)).

9.44 If an agency does not make an internal review decision within 30 days of the internal review application being received, the principal officer of the agency is deemed to

have made and notified a decision affirming the original FOI decision (ss 54D(2)). The applicant for internal review may then apply for IC review of the agency's deemed decision (see [Part 10](#) of these Guidelines).

- 9.45 Unlike the original FOI decision-making process, the FOI Act does not provide for an extension of time to decide the internal review with the agreement of the internal review applicant.
- 9.46 An agency may apply to the Information Commissioner for an extension of time to finalise an internal review (s 54D(3)). An extension of time application under s 54D must be made after the internal review processing period has ended and there is a deemed internal review decision. The Information Commissioner has a discretion to extend the internal review decision-making-period as considered appropriate (s 54D(4)), and may also impose conditions (s 54D(5)), for example that the agency must give notice of the extended time to the applicant for internal review.
- 9.47 The FOI Act does not specify any criteria the Information Commissioner must consider when deciding whether to grant an extension of time to make an internal review decision. Generally, the Information Commissioner will consider whether it is reasonable in all the circumstances to grant an extension, having regard to the agency's reasons for making the application and any views expressed by the applicant for internal review.
- 9.48 Relevant factors may include:
- the scope of the FOI request and the number of documents in scope
 - the work already undertaken by the original decision-maker and the amount of additional work needed to complete the internal review
 - whether any other agencies or parties have an interest in the subject matter of the internal review
 - the measures to be taken by the agency to ensure a decision will be made within the extended time period and to keep the applicant for internal review informed about the progress of the internal review.⁷ Factors including the prejudice to the parties will also inform these decisions.
- 9.49 If the Information Commissioner grants an extension of time, the agency will not be deemed to have affirmed the original FOI decision (s 54D(6)) as long as the agency makes a decision within the extended time and complies with any conditions imposed (s 54D(5)). The purpose of this provision is to avoid the need for an applicant for internal review to apply for IC review.⁸
- 9.50 If an agency does not make an internal review decision within the extended period or does not comply with any conditions, the agency is deemed to have affirmed the original decision (s 54D(7)). In this case, the Information Commissioner has no power

⁷ For guidance about applying for an extension of time, see: 'Extension of time for processing requests' at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/extension-of-time-for-processing-requests/>.

⁸ See the [Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment \(Reform\) Bill 2009](#).

to allow a further extension of time to make an internal review decision and the applicant for internal review may apply for IC review (s 54D(8)).

- 9.51 If an agency is deemed to have affirmed the original decision because the statutory time to make a decision has passed, the agency is encouraged to continue processing the internal review and to release any documents administratively. This approach supports the objects of the FOI Act. However this approach is not available if the internal review applicant has applied for IC review of the deemed decision. The agency can also consider applying in writing to the Information Commissioner for further time to consider the deemed affirmation of the original decision (s 54D(3)). (See Part 10 of these Guidelines for guidance on how agencies can resolve a deemed FOI decision subject to IC review).

Notifying the applicant of an internal review decision

- 9.52 The agency must notify the applicant for internal review of a decision within 30 calendar days after the day the internal review application was received (ss 54C(3) and 54D). If the internal review applicant does not receive notice of the internal review decision within 30 days after the day the application was received, the principal officer of the agency is deemed to have made and notified a decision affirming the original FOI decision on the 30th day (s 54D(2)). The applicant for internal review may then apply for IC review of the agency's deemed decision (see Part 10 of these Guidelines).
- 9.53 A decision affirming the refusal of access to a document, or deferring access to a document, must include the following particulars specified in s 26:
- the findings on any material questions of fact, referring to the material on which those findings were based and the reasons for the decision
 - the reasons for any public interest factors taken into account
 - the name and designation of the person making the decision
 - the internal review applicant's review rights, right to complain to the Information Commissioner, and the procedures for exercising those rights. This should be included because even if the internal review decision is to provide access to the documents requested, the applicant may wish to seek IC review on the basis that not all documents covered by an FOI request were identified by the agency. Additionally the applicant may wish to lodge a complaint.

Charges and internal reviews

- 9.54 Charges for processing an FOI request cannot be imposed on internal review. The *Note to regulation 6 of the Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 2019* (Regulations) states that because the FOI Act defines 'request' as an application made under s 15(1) of the FOI Act, regulation 6(a) does not apply to an application for internal review under ss 54 or 54A of the FOI Act.
- 9.55 Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Regulations lists the following processing activities in respect of which agencies cannot impose a charge when conducting an internal review:

- the time spent by the agency or minister in searching for, or retrieving, the document
- the production of a document containing information in a discrete form by the use of a computer or other equipment that is ordinarily available to the agency for retrieving or collating stored information
- the production of a written transcript
- the time spent by an agency or minister in deciding whether to grant, refuse or defer access to a document or to grant access to a copy of a document with deletions, including time spent in examining documents, consulting with a person or body, redacting a document and notifying an interim or final decision on the request.

9.56 However, charges for providing access to documents identified in Part 2 of Schedule 1 to the Regulations may be imposed on internal review.

Reporting internal reviews

9.57 Statistical data about internal reviews needs to be included at items 8B-8D on page 2 of the FOI quarterly statistical return form on the OAIC FOI statistics portal (at <https://foistats.oaic.gov.au/>).⁹

9.58 Agencies need to keep accurate records of internal review applications and how the internal reviews were decided. The following information must be reported on the FOIstats portal at the end of each quarter:

- the number of applications for internal review received by the agency during the quarter
- the number of internal review decisions made in the following categories:
 - where the original decision was affirmed
 - if the agency decision was varied on review, whether more access was given (access granted in full); greater access was given (access granted but not in full); access was granted after deferment; access was granted in another form; charges were reduced or not imposed or lesser access was given
 - applications withdrawn by the applicant for internal review without any concession by the agency.

9.59 The number of internal review applications and every outcome must be reported on the basis of whether the FOI request sought ‘predominantly personal’ or ‘other’ information.

⁹ See the FOIstats guide - <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/foistats-guide/>.

Part 10 —

Review by the Information Commissioner

Version 1.11, 1 July 2024

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Overview

- 10.1 Part 10 of the FOI Guidelines sets out general principles and procedures for Information Commissioner review (IC review), as contained in Part VII of the FOI Act. Part 10 also provides guidance to agencies and ministers (the respondent) in relation to the practice of the Information Commissioner (IC) with respect to the steps in an IC review, the IC's decision, and relevant appeal rights.¹
- 10.2 Part 10 of the FOI Guidelines should be read in conjunction with the *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* and the *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by applicants in IC reviews*.²

What decisions can the Information Commissioner review?

- 10.3 A person³ who disagrees with an agency's or minister's decision following an FOI request for access to a document, or an application for amendment or annotation of personal records, may apply to the IC for review under Part VII. It is not necessary to apply for internal review before applying for IC review, however the IC considers it is usually better for a person to seek internal review of an agency decision before applying for an IC review.⁴ Internal review by an agency gives the agency an opportunity to reconsider the initial decision, usually at a more senior level, and the result may well provide a more robust decision or facilitate the release of information. These outcomes will generally be more timely and use agency resources more efficiently than an IC review. Internal review is not available if the decision was made by a minister or personally by the principal officer of an agency.⁵
- 10.4 The IC can review the following decisions by an agency or minister:
- an 'access refusal decision' (s 54L(2)(a), discussed below at [10.8])
 - an 'access grant decision' (s 54M(2)(a), discussed below at [10.9])
 - a refusal to extend the period for applying for internal review under s 54B (s 54L(2)(c))
 - an agency internal review decision made under s 54C (ss 54L(2)(b) and 54M(2)(b)).

¹ The Office of the Information Commissioner has issued a Freedom of Information Regulatory Action Policy which provides guidance on the Australian Information Commissioner's approach to the exercise of FOI regulatory powers, including in undertaking IC reviews, investigating FOI complaints and initiating investigations. The Regulatory Action Policy is available on the OAIC website - [Freedom of information regulatory action policy | OAIC](#).

² Both documents are available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au.

³ A reference to 'person' includes a body politic or corporate as well as an individual (see s 2C of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* (Cth)).

⁴ If the FOI decision has been made personally by the principal officer of an agency, or the responsible Minister, there is no right to internal review; the person must apply for IC review if they disagree with the decision (see s 54A).

⁵ For detailed information about internal review see Part 9 of these Guidelines. See also Part 2 of the Guidelines which explains that a person who is authorised by the minister to make FOI decisions does so on behalf of the minister, not in their own right as an authorised person.

Deemed decisions

- 10.5 The IC may also review decisions that are deemed to have been made by an agency or minister where the statutory timeframe has not been met. This may happen:
- at first instance (following a request for access to documents (s 15AC) or for amendment to a personal record (s 51DA)) or
 - following an application for internal review (where the original decision is taken to have been affirmed under s 54D).
- 10.6 An application for IC review may be made for a deemed access refusal decision. In these circumstances the IC may allow the respondent further time to make an actual decision. If the respondent makes a new decision that decision is substituted for the deemed access refusal decision for the purposes of the IC review (s 54Y(2)).
- 10.7 If a respondent varies their original decision that new decision becomes the subject of the IC review.

Access refusal decisions

- 10.8 An ‘access refusal decision’ encompasses more than a refusal to grant access to a document. ‘Access refusal decision’ is defined in s 53A to mean:
- a) a decision refusing to give access to a document in accordance with a request
 - b) a decision giving access to a document, but not giving access to all documents to which the request relates
 - c) a decision purporting to give access to all documents to which a request relates, but not actually giving that access
 - d) a decision to defer access to a document for a specified period under s 21 (see Part 3 of these Guidelines) (other than a document covered by s 21(1)(d), that is, where Parliament should be informed)
 - e) a decision under s 29 relating to the imposition of a charge or the amount of a charge (see Part 4 of these Guidelines)
 - f) a decision to give access to a document to a ‘qualified person’ under s 47F(5) (when disclosing the information to the FOI applicant might be detrimental to the FOI applicant’s physical or mental health or well-being — see Part 6 of these Guidelines)
 - g) a decision refusing to amend a record of personal information in accordance with an application under s 48 (see Part 7 of these Guidelines)
 - h) a decision refusing to annotate a record of personal information in accordance with an application under s 48 (see Part 7 of these Guidelines).

Access grant decisions

- 10.9 An ‘access grant decision’ is defined in s 53B to mean a decision to grant access to a document where there is a requirement to consult with a third party under ss 26A, 27 or 27A. The agency or minister will have decided that the document:
- is not exempt under s 47 (trade secrets or commercially valuable information)

- is not conditionally exempt under s 47B (Commonwealth-State relations), s 47G (business documents) or s 47F (personal privacy) or
- is conditionally exempt under ss 47B, 47G or 47F, but access would not be contrary to the public interest (see Part 6 of these Guidelines).

10.10 A decision that an applicant's FOI request falls outside the FOI Act. For example, a decision that a document is not an 'official document of a minister'⁶ or a decision that a document is open to public access as part of a public register where access is subject to a fee⁷ may be reviewed by the Information Commissioner.

Who can seek IC review?

10.11 Different applicants can apply for review of different decisions. In summary:

- where the respondent's decision is an access refusal decision (including a decision about charges and a refusal to amend or annotate a record of personal information) — the person who made the FOI request (that is, the FOI applicant) (s 54L(3))
- where the decision is to grant access — a third party consulted under s 26A(2) (s 54M(3)(a))
- where the decision is to grant access — a third party invited to make a submission in support of an exemption contention under ss 27 or 27A and who did so (s 54M(3)(a))
- where the decision is made after internal review of the original access refusal decision — the person who applied for internal review (that is, the original FOI applicant) (s 54L(3))
- where the agency's decision on internal review is an access refusal decision — the person who made the FOI request (that is, the FOI applicant) (s 54L(2)(b))
- where the agency's decision on internal review is an access grant decision — a third party invited to make a submission in support of an exemption contention and did so (s 54M(3)(b))
- where the decision is to refuse to allow a further period to apply for internal review of an access refusal decision (under s 54B) — the person who was seeking internal review (that is, the original FOI applicant).

10.12 Another person may apply on behalf of the person who made the FOI request or the affected third party (ss 54L(3) and 54M(3)). The IC must be satisfied that the other person has authority to act on behalf of the FOI applicant or third party.

10.13 For instance, in circumstances where the representative is not a legal practitioner the IC may ask for written authority, signed by the FOI applicant, that indicates that the representative will be acting for the FOI applicant for the purposes of the IC review.

10.14 In some circumstances other legislative requirements may apply in relation to whether the information can be disclosed to the representative (for instance, see subdivision 355-B of Schedule 1 to the *Taxation Administration Act 1953*).

⁶ For example, see *Philip Morris Ltd and Treasurer* [2013] AICmr 88.

⁷ For example, *Mentink and Australian Federal Police* [2014] AICmr 64.

Onus

- 10.15 The respondent has the onus of establishing that the decision is justified or that the IC should give a decision adverse to the IC review applicant in an IC review (s 15) or an application to amend personal records (s 48).⁸ The respondent must also bear in mind their obligation to use their best endeavours to assist the IC to make the correct or preferable decision (s 55DA).⁹
- 10.16 Section 55D(1) does not operate to automatically require or support a decision against a respondent and in favour of an IC review applicant if a respondent does not **engage** fully with the IC review or does not provide further evidence to support the IC reviewable decision. However as noted by the FOI Commissioner in *South East Forest Rescue and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water*, deficiencies in engagement with the IC review process can adversely impact respondents. For example, a failure to provide submissions may lead to a decision adverse to the agency.¹⁰ In such circumstances the IC will make a decision on the merits having regard to the evidence before them and applying all applicable administrative law principles. However, in the absence of sufficient evidence being provided by a respondent, and absent any other material provided by or relevant to a third party, maintaining the respondent's contentions in a decision on IC review may in some cases be significantly less likely than would otherwise be the case.¹¹
- 10.17 In an IC review of an access grant decision, the affected third party (the IC review applicant) has the onus of establishing that a decision refusing the FOI request is justified or that the IC should give a decision adverse to the person who made the FOI request (s 55D(2)).

Principles of IC review

- 10.18 IC review of decisions about access to government documents (and amendment of personal records) is designed around several key principles. The IC review is:
- a merit review process where the IC makes the correct or preferable decision at the time of the decision
 - intended to be as informal and cost effective as possible
 - intended to be timely and responsive and
 - intended to be proportionate.

Merit review

- 10.19 In the IC review the IC determines the correct or preferable decision in all the circumstances. The IC can access all relevant material, including material the respondent claims is exempt. The IC can also consider additional material or submissions not

⁸ Section 55D(1) of the FOI Act

⁹ This requirement is consistent with the general obligation of agencies to act as a model litigant. The nature of this obligation is explained in Appendix B to the *Legal Services Directions 2017*.

¹⁰ *South East Forest Rescue and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 90 [37].

¹¹ *Christis Tombazos and Australian Research Council (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 14 [5]. See also *Paul Farrell and Department of Home Affairs (No. 5) (Freedom of information)* [2023] AICmr 99 [13].

considered by the original decision maker, including relevant new material that has come to light since the original FOI decision was made. For example, for the purpose of deciding whether a document is conditionally exempt, the IC can take account of contemporary developments that shed light on whether disclosure would be contrary to the public interest. However, the IC cannot determine the exempt status of documents that have become documents of an agency or minister after the date of the applicant's FOI request.¹²

- 10.20 If the IC decides that the original decision was not correct at law or not the preferable decision, the decision can be varied or set aside and a new decision substituted. For example, the IC may decide that a document is not an exempt document under the FOI Act or that a charge was not correctly applied.

Informal

- 10.21 IC reviews are intended to be a simple, cost-effective method of external merit review. This is consistent with the objects of the FOI Act, which provide that functions and powers under the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4)).
- 10.22 Consistent with the object of promoting public access to information, the IC will provide appropriate assistance to IC review applicants to make their applications (s 54N(3)), which includes, for example, explaining what information they must provide with their IC review application and confirming the aspects of the decision they disagree with.
- 10.23 Consistent with the object of providing prompt and cost-effective access to information, most reviews will be conducted on the papers rather than through formal hearings and the IC expects that general information will be shared between the parties. Although the IC has formal information gathering powers (see Division 8 of Part VII), documents may be requested informally from agencies. The IC's formal powers may be used to compel respondents who do not respond to informal requests by the OAIC.¹³ This practice reflects the escalation of regulatory powers by resorting to the use of coercive powers when informal interventions are unsuccessful in eliciting a response from the respondent.

Cost-effective

- 10.24 To reduce formality and costs all parties are encouraged to minimise their use of legal representation in IC reviews. The IC expects to receive responses from the respondent rather than a legal representative, even where the respondent chooses to seek legal advice on particular issues.
- 10.25 The IC also encourages parties to reach agreement as to the terms of a decision on an IC review. The IC may then make a decision in accordance with those terms without completing the IC review (s 55F) (further information about agreements made under s 55F can be found at [10.117] – [10.121]).

Timely and responsive

- 10.26 IC review is intended to be efficient and lead to resolution as quickly as possible. Respondents must use their best endeavours to assist the IC to make the correct or preferable IC review decision (s 55DA). This duty is consistent with the obligation on the

¹² *Lobo and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2010] AATA 583.

¹³ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* [3.16] (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

Commonwealth and its agencies to act as model litigants — that is, with complete propriety, fairly, and in accordance with the highest professional standards as a party to proceedings, including tribunal proceedings.

10.27 To maintain efficiency, the OAIC relies on:

- respondents making genuine attempts to resolve the IC review application with applicants: The respondent may make a revised decision under s 55G (see [10.75] – [10.83] below), or the parties may agree as to the terms of a decision on an IC review. The IC may then make a decision in accordance with those terms without completing the IC review (s 55F).
- the use of directions and information gathering powers to take timely and necessary action
- timely responses to requests for the documents at issue and submissions from the parties, and
- preliminary views, which may be provided by an IC review officer, to the parties after review of the documents at issue and submissions, where appropriate.

Proportionate

10.28 In conducting an IC review, the IC will use their powers proportionately, consistent with the expectations to provide a timely and responsive IC review process.

10.29 The IC may decide to expedite an IC review application in response to a request from the IC review applicant, or for other reasons. When considering whether to expedite an IC review application, the IC may have regard to any of the following factors:

- whether expedition will best facilitate and promote prompt public access to information. For example, this factor may be relevant where the IC review application may delay the FOI applicant from accessing documents found not to be exempt. This may be relevant where an affected third party applies for IC review of an access grant decision (under s 54M) and the FOI applicant's access to the documents in dispute is delayed because of the IC review application.
- whether expedition will best facilitate public access to information at the lowest reasonable cost. For example, it is relevant to consider whether:
 - an IC review decision will address a novel issue
 - an IC review decision will resolve issues raised in a number of other related IC review applications which may result in the resolution of the other IC review applications at the lowest reasonable cost and
 - whether it is administratively more efficient and timely to consider related IC review applications or IC review applications that raise similar issues together
 - whether the decision will provide broader guidance to an agency or agencies
- the objects of the FOI Act
- any other factors the Information Commissioner considers relevant in the circumstances.

10.30 If the IC review is expedited, this may be reflected by changes to the IC review process. For example, it may be appropriate for the IC to provide the parties with shorter timeframes for responses and require the provision of submissions that can be shared with the other party

to eliminate delays incurred when parties initially seek to only provide submissions on a confidential basis.

Procedures in an IC review

Parties to an IC review

10.31 The parties to an IC review (as specified in s 55A) are:

- a) the IC review applicant (see [10.11] above)
- b) the principal officer of the agency, or the minister, to whom the FOI access request was made
- c) an affected third party required to be notified of an IC review application under s 54P (discussed below at [10.51] – [10.52])
- d) a person who is joined by the IC to the IC review proceedings as a person whose interests are affected (discussed below at [10.54] – [10.57]).

10.32 Where a minister is the respondent to an IC review and there is a change of minister during the IC review, the new minister is the respondent. The obligation to respond to the IC review does not automatically cease when the individual who holds a ministerial office changes. The IC review will continue, with the relevant minister remaining the respondent, despite a different individual holding that office. The new minister, in responding to the IC review application, needs to make factual enquiries as to whether the document at issue is in their possession. The status of the document as an ‘official document of a minister’ is to be decided by the facts and circumstances that existed at the time the FOI request was received.¹⁴ However, further judicial examination of this issue is anticipated.

Application for IC review

Making an application

10.33 An application for IC review must be in writing (s 54N), which includes email. The application must:

- give details of how notices may be sent to the IC review applicant (for example, by providing an email address)
- include a copy of the notice of the decision given by the respondent under s 26.

10.34 Including a copy of the s 26 notice enables the IC to readily identify the respondent and the matters in dispute.

10.35 The IC review application may also contain particulars of the basis on which the IC review applicant disputes the reviewable decision (s 54N(2)). It will assist prompt handling of the IC review if the IC review applicant sets out the following matters in the application:

- any grounds on which the IC review applicant disputes the reasons given for a decision that a document is exempt or conditionally exempt

¹⁴ *Patrick v Attorney-General (Cth)* [2024] FCA 268 [99].

- any grounds on which the IC review applicant considers that the public interest in giving access outweighs the reasons given for not granting access
- if an FOI request has been refused on the ground that processing the request will substantially and unreasonably divert the respondent's resources from their operations or the performance of a minister's functions (ss 24 and 24AA) — reasons why the IC review applicant believes the FOI request will not have that impact.

10.36 The OAIC must provide 'appropriate assistance' when an IC review applicant needs help to make or prepare their IC review application (s 54N(3)). This may arise, for example, where the IC review applicant has language or literacy difficulties or other factors that affect their capacity to prepare an application.

Access grant decision

10.37 An IC review applicant who is a third-party seeking IC review of an access grant decision should provide a copy of the access grant decision with their IC review application (s 54N(1)(b)).

10.38 The IC review application may also contain particulars of the basis on which the applicant disputes the reviewable decision (s 54N(2)). It will assist prompt handling of the IC review if the affected third party applicant sets out the following matters:

- any grounds on which they dispute the reasons given for a decision that a document is not exempt under s 47 or conditionally exempt under ss 47B, 47F or 47G and
- any grounds on which they consider that it would be contrary to the public interest to give access to the document.

Deemed decisions

10.39 An agency or minister is deemed to have refused access to documents requested under s 15 of the FOI Act and given notice of that refusal if a decision is not made within the statutory timeframe (s 15AC(3)). An agency or minister is deemed to have refused to amend or annotate a record of personal information and given notice of that refusal if a decision is not made within the statutory timeframe (s 51DA(2)). An agency or minister is deemed to have affirmed an original decision and given notice of that decision if a decision is not made on internal review within the statutory timeframe (s 54D).

10.40 A person will not receive a copy of the decision when notice is deemed to have been given. As a result, the IC review application should include details of the agency or minister to which the FOI request was made and state whether the deemed decision relates to the initial FOI request, an amendment application, or to internal review. If the decision under IC review is a deemed decision on internal review, the IC review applicant should provide the OAIC with the s 26 statement of reasons for the initial decision.

10.41 If, after a person applies for IC review of a deemed decision, the IC allows the respondent further time to make an actual decision and the respondent does so within the extra time allowed, the actual decision made is substituted for the deemed decision for the purpose of the IC review (s 54Y(2)). At any time during an IC review a respondent may substitute a deemed or an actual access refusal decision with a decision that is in the applicant's favour (see s 55G and [10.75] – [10.83]).

Withdrawing an application

- 10.42 An IC review applicant may withdraw, in writing, their application for IC review at any time before the IC makes a decision (s 54R(1)). A withdrawn application is taken never to have been made (s 54R(2)). If an IC review application is withdrawn, the IC will notify the respondent.

Time for applying

- 10.43 An application for IC review must be made within 60 days of notice being given of an access refusal decision (s 54S(1)) or 30 days of notice being given of an access grant decision (s 54S(2)).
- 10.44 An FOI applicant must apply for IC review of an access refusal decision within 60 days after the day notice of the decision was given under s 26 (s 54S(1)). This time limit also applies to deemed refusals, as notice is deemed to have been given under s 26 of the FOI Act on the last day of the initial decision period (s 15AC(3) and Part 3 of these Guidelines). Where the FOI applicant sought internal review and the agency did not make a decision within 30 days and no extension was granted, the original decision to refuse access is taken to have been affirmed on the last day of the decision period, which is 30 days after the date that the FOI request was made (s 54D and Part 9 of these Guidelines).
- 10.45 An affected third party must apply for IC review of an access grant decision within 30 days after the day they were given notice under ss 26A(3), 27(6) or 27A(5). As an alternative to IC review, an affected third party may apply for internal review. As noted at [10.3] the IC is of the view that it is usually better for a person to seek internal review of an agency decision before applying for IC review. If the affected third party does not apply for IC review within 30 days of being given notice of the access grant decision, the agency or minister may provide access to the document, unless the IC grants an extension of time to the affected third party (ss 26A(4), 27(7) and 27A(6)). The IC will notify a respondent if an affected third party has applied for an extension of time. The IC will provide a further notice after making a decision on the application to extend the time to apply for IC review under s 54T. To minimise the possibility of dispute about the propriety or timing of a decision to release documents when a third party objects, agencies and ministers should contact the OAIC after the appeal period has expired to confirm whether an IC review application has been received and separately confirm with the third party whether they have applied for IC review.

Extension of time for applying

- 10.46 An FOI applicant or an affected third party may ask the IC for an extension of time to apply for IC review (s 54T(1)). The IC may extend the time if satisfied that it is reasonable in all the circumstances to do so, even if the time to apply for IC review has ended (ss 54T(2) and (3)). The IC review applicant should set out the reasons for the delay as part of their application. As a practical matter, an affected third party will not be able to apply for an extension of time if the respondent has already given the FOI applicant access to the documents after the time for applying for internal review or IC review has expired (see [10.45] above).
- 10.47 There may be a delay between an FOI applicant receiving notice of a decision to grant access to documents and when they receive those documents. The FOI applicant has the option of applying for internal review within 15 days of receiving access to the documents they requested (s 54B(1)(b)(ii)) — for more information see Part 9 of these Guidelines.

- 10.48 When an IC review application is made outside of the 60-day timeframe in s 54S (for an access refusal decision) due to a deemed access refusal, the IC may consider the lodgement of the IC review application to be an application under s 54T for an extension of time to make an IC review application.
- 10.49 Before granting an extension of time, the IC may require the IC review applicant to give notice of the application to any person the IC considers is affected (s 54T(4)). For example, the IC may require the IC review applicant to notify the respondent or an affected third party. The respondent or the affected third party may notify the IC in writing that they oppose the application, and must do so within the time the IC specifies (s 54T(5)). Unless there are special reasons to do otherwise, the IC will allow 14 days for a response.
- 10.50 The IC must give the IC review applicant and any person opposing the extension a reasonable opportunity to present their case before determining the application for an extension (s 54T(6)).

Respondent must notify third parties

- 10.51 The respondent must notify an affected third party when an FOI applicant has applied for IC review of a decision to refuse access to a document to which a consultation requirement applies (s 54P). This obligation applies whether the affected third party made a submission, or was invited to make a submission but did not do so, under s 26A (documents affecting Commonwealth-State relations), s 27 (business documents) or s 27A (personal privacy) (s 54P(1) — see Part 6 of these Guidelines). The affected third party has a right to be a party in the IC review. In this context, the affected third party will seek to support the respondent's decision that access should be refused to a document that affects them.
- 10.52 The respondent must, as soon as practicable, take all reasonable steps to notify the affected third party (s 54P(2)). The respondent must also give a copy of the notice to the IC as soon as practicable (s 54P(3)). The s 54P notice is generally requested by the IC review officer.¹⁵
- 10.53 Section 54Q provides that the IC may, on the respondent's application, order that this notice requirement does not apply to a document to which a consultation requirement applies under s 27 (business documents) or s 27A (documents affecting personal privacy). This may be done if the IC is satisfied that notification of the IC review would not be appropriate because it would, or could reasonably be expected to:
- a) prejudice the conduct of an investigation of a breach, or possible breach, of the law or a failure, or possible failure, to comply with a law relating to taxation (for example, if the person who would otherwise be notified is under investigation)
 - b) prejudice the enforcement or proper administration of the law in a particular instance
 - c) disclose, or enable a person to ascertain the existence or non-existence of a confidential source of information, in relation to the enforcement or administration of the law
 - d) endanger anyone's life or physical safety
 - e) damage the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth (s 54Q(3)).

¹⁵ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* [3.14] and [3.31]–[3.32] (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

Joining other parties to the IC review

- 10.54 The IC may join a person whose interests are affected as a party to an IC review (s 55A(3)) if that person applies in writing (s 55A(2)).
- 10.55 This could arise, for example, when the IC review applicant is an affected third party who disagrees with an agency's or minister's decision to grant access to a document. In that case, the IC may join the original FOI applicant to the IC review.
- 10.56 Another example is where an affected third party is not given notice of an IC review application because one of the reasons in s 54Q applies (see [10.53]). If the IC, on considering the IC review application, is not satisfied that the document concerning that person is exempt, the IC may decide to join the person to the IC review under s 55A(1)(d).
- 10.57 In some cases, the FOI decision may include documents that involve more than one agency or minister. An agency or minister has the option of transferring an FOI request to another agency or minister under s 16 where appropriate if the other agency or minister agrees. If the agency or minister decides not to transfer the FOI request, the agency or minister is responsible for consulting relevant agencies and ministers, both before making an FOI decision and throughout the IC review. In exceptional circumstances, where an agency or minister other than the decision maker applies to be joined as a party to an IC review, the Information Commissioner may decide to grant the application.

General procedure

- 10.58 IC reviews are intended to provide a simple, practical and cost-effective means of external merit review. To achieve this aim, the IC may conduct an IC review in whatever way the IC considers appropriate (s 55(2)(a)) and must use as little formality and technicality as possible (s 55(4)(a)). It is intended that most IC reviews will be determined on the basis of the documents and submissions (see [10.70]).

Using alternative dispute resolution

- 10.59 The s 54Z notice sent agencies to notify of the commencement of an IC review will include a request that the respondent engage with, or make reasonable attempts to engage with, the IC review applicant during the IC review for the purpose of genuinely attempting to resolve or narrow the issues in dispute. The respondent will be required to provide the OAIC with information that demonstrates the engagement or reasonable attempts at engagement.¹⁶
- 10.60 Alternative dispute resolution methods and early appraisal can clarify, at an early stage, the issues to be resolved or the information to be provided by either review party in support of their claims. For instance, the OAIC's IC review officer may review the material submitted by both review parties and provide a preliminary view as to the merits of the application to the relevant party. That party then has the opportunity to make further submissions or take other action as may be appropriate (for example, by withdrawing the IC review application or issuing a revised decision under s 55G). The IC review officer can also facilitate a teleconference between the parties if this would assist in resolving the IC review.

¹⁶ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* [3.5], [3.8] and [3.11] (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

Participation by various means

10.61 The IC may allow a person to participate by any means of communication (s 55(2)(c)). For example, a person may be allowed to participate by telephone or video conference, or to provide a written submission. Appropriate arrangements may also be made to assist a person with a disability.

Obtaining information

10.62 The IC may obtain any information from any person and make any inquiries that the IC considers appropriate (s 55(2)(d)). For example, the IC may request information about the respondent's decision early in the IC review. Those inquiries may help the IC form a preliminary view about the issues to be addressed or the merit of the reviewable decision. The IC also has a specific power to make preliminary inquiries to determine whether to undertake an IC review (discussed below at [10.97]) and the power to compel agencies to participate in a number of information gathering processes (discussed at [10.107] – [10.115]). The IC can also seek expert assistance from agency staff or another party where documents involve complex or technical issues.

Written directions

10.63 The IC may give written directions about the procedure to be followed in IC reviews generally, and in a particular IC review (s 55(2)(e)).

10.64 The IC has issued the following general procedure directions:

- a direction setting out the general procedure to be followed by agencies and ministers for the production of documents and submissions in IC reviews¹⁷
- a direction as to certain procedures to be followed by applicants in IC reviews.¹⁸

10.65 In relation to directions in a particular IC review, the IC can, for example, direct that publication of certain evidence in a particular IC review be prohibited or restricted if satisfied the evidence should be kept confidential.

10.66 If a respondent fails to comply with a direction of the IC, the IC may proceed to make a decision under s 55K on the basis that the respondent has failed to discharge their onus (s 55D(1)).¹⁹

10.67 The IC may decide not to undertake an IC review or not to continue to undertake an IC review if the IC review applicant fails to comply with a direction of the IC (s 54W(c)).

When the reasons for a decision are inadequate

10.68 The IC may require a respondent to give reasons for their decision if the IC believes the reasons given are inadequate or if no reasons have been provided (s 55E).

¹⁷ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

¹⁸ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by applicants in Information Commissioner reviews* (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

¹⁹ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews* [3.24] (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

- 10.69 The IC may specify when a respondent must provide reasons. If no period is specified, the respondent must provide reasons within 28 days (s 55E(3)). For guidance on preparing good statements of reasons for decisions see Part 3 of these Guidelines.

Hearings

- 10.70 Hearings are not intended to be a common part of IC reviews because they can increase contestability, introduce more formality, and prolong the IC review. In general, IC reviews will be conducted on the papers (s 55(1)).²⁰
- 10.71 However, a review party may apply to the IC for a hearing at any time before a decision is made (s 55B(1)). An application for a hearing must identify the reasons why a hearing should be held in relation to the IC review and why a review conducted on the papers would not be appropriate in the circumstances.
- 10.72 The IC will only decide to hold a hearing if satisfied that a special reason exists that warrants a hearing being held. The IC will notify the other review parties of the application and give all review parties a reasonable opportunity to make submissions on the application.²¹
- 10.73 The IC must conduct hearings in public unless satisfied there are reasons to hold a hearing (in whole or part) in private (s 55(5)(a)). This means that part of a hearing may be held in the absence of one or more of the review parties and their representatives if the IC considers it necessary to prevent the disclosure of confidential matters.
- 10.74 A review party may be represented by another person at a hearing (s 55C), including a legal representative. For example, a review party may wish to be represented by an advocate, friend or family member.

Revising the decision during an IC review

- 10.75 After an application is made to the IC for IC review, an agency or minister may (at any time following the commencement of the IC review) revoke or vary an access refusal decision²² to favour the IC review applicant by:
- giving access to a document in accordance with the request (s 55G(1)(a))
 - relieving the IC review applicant from liability to pay a charge (s 55G(1)(b)) or
 - requiring a record of personal information to be amended or annotated in accordance with the application (s 55G(1)(c)).
- 10.76 During an IC review, where a respondent no longer contends that material is exempt under Part IV of the FOI Act, or has identified further material within the scope of the FOI request, the respondent is encouraged to make a s 55G decision. A revised decision under s 55G facilitates the prompt release of further material to the IC review applicant.

²⁰ Section 55(1) provides that review can be carried out on the documents or other available material if: the Information Commissioner considers the matter can be adequately determined in the absence of the review parties, the Information Commissioner is satisfied that there are no unusual circumstances that warrant a hearing, or none of the parties has applied for a hearing.

²¹ See *McKinnon and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 34.

²² A minister or agency cannot vary an access grant decision once the matter is under IC review (that is, there is no equivalent to s 55G, which applies only to access refusal decisions).

- 10.77 Where a deemed access refusal decision is the subject of the IC review, revising the decision under s 55G facilitates release under the FOI Act where the statutory processing period has passed.
- 10.78 The respondent must notify the IC in writing of the revised decision (s 55G(2)(a)).
- 10.79 A revised decision does not automatically conclude the IC review. The revised decision becomes the decision under review (s 55G(2)(b)). The OAIC will generally consult the IC review applicant as to whether they want to continue the IC review on the basis of the revised decision.
- 10.80 If the original decision under IC review is a decision refusing to give access to a document in accordance with a request under s 53A(a), the revised decision must have the effect of releasing more material to the IC review applicant.²³ That will include releasing part of a document because a ‘document’ under s 4(1) of the FOI Act is defined to also include any part of a document.²⁴ A revised decision may still be an access refusal decision in relation to other material within the scope of an FOI request, as long as the variation is made ‘in a manner that favours the applicant’.²⁵
- 10.81 The power under s 55G to make a revised decision during the IC review should be understood bearing in mind the purpose and context of the section. The provision only applies to decisions ‘that essentially benefit the applicant’,²⁶ does not require agreement between the parties,²⁷ and is a prescribed procedure within the IC review process (see Division 6 of Part VII of the FOI Act).
- 10.82 Accordingly, it is not in the spirit of a revised decision under s 55G to include further exemption claims in relation to the remaining material to which access is refused which would have the effect of disadvantaging an IC review applicant.
- 10.83 Any new contentions that further or different exemptions apply to the documents at issue should be put forward as part of the IC review in the form of submissions and not as a revised decision under s 55G. Any new contentions must be supported by detailed reasons that justify the respondent’s changed position, including how any new circumstances or information has given rise to new exemption contentions.²⁸ Respondents should bear in mind the lowest reasonable cost objective of the FOI Act under s 3(4) in ensuring that any such contentions are justified at a later stage of an IC review

Protections when information is supplied

- 10.84 A claim for legal professional privilege can still apply to a document or information produced for the purpose of an IC review. The act of producing the document does not of itself constitute waiver of the privilege (s 55Y).
- 10.85 A person is immune from civil proceedings and any criminal or civil penalty if the person gives information, produces a document or answers a question in good faith for an IC review (s 55Z). The immunity applies whether the information was supplied voluntarily or

²³ *Thomson and Australian Federal Police* [2013] AICmr 83 [12].

²⁴ See [2.26] – [2.28] of the FOI Guidelines.

²⁵ *Australian Associated Press Pty Ltd and Department of Immigration and Border Protection* [2016] AICmr 25 [18] [22] and [24].

²⁶ See Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009 33.

²⁷ As distinct from s 55F of the FOI Act.

²⁸ See *Paul Farrell and Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (Freedom of information)* [2024] AICmr 20 [8].

supplied because the Information Commissioner compelled production of the information (for example, under s 55(2)(d) — see [10.107] – [10.115]).

Evidence by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security

- 10.86 Before deciding that a document an agency or minister claims is exempt under the national security exemption (s 33) is not exempt, the IC must ask the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (Inspector-General) to give evidence on the likely damage if access was granted (ss 55ZA–55ZD — for guidance about s 33, see Part 5 of these Guidelines).²⁹ There are similar provisions in relation to Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) proceedings (s 60A). The Inspector-General must comply with the IC’s request unless the Inspector-General believes they are not appropriately qualified to give evidence on those matters (s 55ZC).
- 10.87 The purpose of this requirement is to assist the IC make a decision through the provision of expert advice. In IC reviews involving s 33, the IC will require the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Federal Police to provide information about whether the document(s) subject to IC review relate directly or indirectly to their intelligence functions and to provide information as to which intelligence function or functions the document relates (as identified in s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*).
- 10.88 Because the Inspector-General is an independent statutory office holder, the evidence given is not evidence by the agency or minister who made the FOI decision. The IC and the Inspector-General have entered into a memorandum of understanding establishing agreed procedures for the exercise of this discretion.³⁰
- 10.89 For IC reviews that commenced before 12 August 2023,³¹ this requirement applies to all documents said to be exempt under s 33 (national security, defence, international relations, or divulge information communicated in confidence).³²
- 10.90 For IC reviews that commenced on or after 12 August 2023, the requirement for the Inspector-General to give evidence only arises if the documents are said to be exempt under s 33, the documents are not documents of the Inspector-General, and only if the documents relate directly or indirectly to:
1. the performance of the functions or duties, or the exercise of the powers, of a body mentioned in paragraph (a) of the definition of **intelligence agency** in ss 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*³³ or

²⁹ See Penny Wong and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [2016] AICmr 6 [16] and Wake and Australian Broadcasting Corporation [2013] AICmr 45 [9].

³⁰ Available on the OAIC website at [Current memorandums of understanding | OAIC](#).

³¹ An IC review commences when a notice under s 54Z of the FOI Act is sent to the respondent (or the person who made the request in the case of an access grant decision).

³² See s 7 of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* (Cth).

³³ **Intelligence agency** is defined in s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986* to mean the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, the Defence Signals Directorate, the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation, the Defence Intelligence Organisation, the Office of National Assessments and the 2 agencies that have an intelligence function – the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Federal Police. Section s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986* specifies the intelligence functions for both these agencies.

2. the performance of an **intelligence function** (within the meaning of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*) of a body mentioned in paragraph (b) of that definition.³⁴
- 10.91 The effect of this provision is that the Inspector-General is required to give evidence only in relation to agencies within their jurisdiction.
- 10.92 The Inspector-General must comply with the IC's request unless the Inspector-General believes they are not appropriately qualified to give evidence on those matters (s 55ZC).
- 10.93 In IC reviews involving s 33, the IC will require the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission and the Australian Federal Police to provide information about whether the document(s) subject to IC review relate directly or indirectly to their intelligence functions and to provide information as to which intelligence function or functions the document relates (as identified in s 3(1) of the *Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security Act 1986*).
- 10.94 Before receiving evidence from the Inspector-General personally, the IC must receive any evidence or submissions made by the agency or minister to whom the request was made for access to the document (s 55ZB(3)). The IC is not bound by the Inspector-General's opinion (s 55ZB(4)).
- 10.95 This requirement does not apply if the IC considers there is sufficient material to affirm the agency's or minister's decision to exempt the document.

The Information Commissioner's options

- 10.96 After receiving an IC application, the IC has 2 options:
- to review the decision if satisfied it is a decision that is reviewable, or
 - not to review the decision if satisfied on certain grounds (discussed at [10.100] below).

Preliminary inquiries

- 10.97 The IC may make preliminary inquiries of the parties to help determine whether to undertake an IC review (s 54V). Such inquiries might be made to clarify whether the FOI decision falls within the IC's jurisdiction, or to clarify whether an internal review is currently on foot. Where an application for IC review is made in relation to an FOI request that is deemed to have been refused under ss 15AC(3), 51DA(2) or 54D(2) of the FOI Act, the IC will undertake preliminary inquiries.³⁵

³⁴ **Intelligence functions** for the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission means:

- (i) the collection, correlation, analysis, production and dissemination of intelligence obtained by ACIC from the execution of a network activity warrant; or
- (ii) the performance of a function, or the exercise of a power, conferred on a law enforcement officer of ACIC by the network activity warrant provisions of the *Surveillance Devices Act 2004*; or

Intelligence functions for the Australian Federal Police means:

- (i) the collection, correlation, analysis, production and dissemination of intelligence obtained by the Australian Federal Police from the execution of a network activity warrant; or
- (ii) the performance of a function, or the exercise of a power, conferred on a law enforcement officer of the Australian Federal Police by the network activity warrant provisions of the *Surveillance Devices Act 2004*.

³⁵ See [2.1]–[2.3] of Appendix A.1 to the Australian Information Commissioner's *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed in IC reviews*.

Who conducts the review?

10.98 Staff from the OAIC will manage the application for IC review. However, only the IC, FOI Commissioner, Privacy Commissioner or delegate can make the final decision on an IC review (AIC Act ss 10, 11, 12 and 25(e)).

Timeframe for a review

10.99 The FOI Act does not specify a time for completion of an IC review.³⁶ The time taken will depend on a number of factors, including:

- the type and range of issues involved in the IC review
- the number and type of documents involved
- whether there is a need to refine the scope of the issues the applicant has raised
- whether the respondent needs to undertake further searches for documents
- whether parties other than the respondent and the applicant need to be consulted or joined to the IC review
- any new issues the parties have introduced during the IC review
- the time parties take to respond to requests for information or other issues raised by the IC review officer and
- the extent to which the parties are willing to engage in informal resolution processes (where appropriate).

When the Information Commissioner will not undertake an IC review

10.100 The IC has the discretion not to undertake an IC review, or not to continue a IC review, if:

- a) the IC review applicant fails to comply with a direction by the IC (s 54W(c))³⁷ or
- b) if the IC is satisfied:
 - i) the IC review application is frivolous, vexatious, misconceived, lacking in substance or not made in good faith
 - ii) the IC review applicant has failed to cooperate in progressing the IC review application or the IC review without reasonable excuse
 - iii) the IC cannot contact the IC review applicant after making reasonable attempts (s 54W(a))
- c) if the IC is satisfied the IC reviewable decision should be considered by the AAT (s 54W(b) — see [10.104] – [10.105] below).

³⁶ The OAIC aims to finalise 80% of all IC reviews within 12 months of receipt. See OAIC *Corporate Plan 2023-24* at www.oaic.gov.au.

³⁷ See Australian Information Commissioner, *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by applicants in Information Commissioner reviews* [2.21] and [3.2] (available on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au).

- 10.101 An IC review application seeking review of a decision to impose a charge will be considered to lack substance if the respondent waives the charge.³⁸ The circumstances in which an IC review application can be described as ‘frivolous or vexatious’ have been examined in various cases³⁹ These circumstances include where it is open to conclude that a series of FOI requests were made to annoy or harass agency staff and none of the requests is capable of conferring a practical benefit on the FOI applicant.⁴⁰ See Part 12 of these Guidelines for information about vexatious applicant declarations.
- 10.102 Where an IC review applicant expresses their wish for a decision not to be published because they are concerned about their privacy, this does not constitute failure to cooperate (but if the IC review proceeds the decision is nevertheless required to be published (s 55K(8)).⁴¹

Reviewing part of a matter

- 10.103 The IC may decide to review only part of an IC reviewable decision (see s 54U).

AAT review as an alternative to IC review

- 10.104 The IC may decline to undertake an IC review if satisfied ‘that the interests of the administration of the [FOI] Act make it desirable’ that the AAT consider the IC reviewable decision (s 54W(b)). It is intended that the IC will resolve most IC review applications. Circumstances in which the IC may decide that it is desirable for the AAT to consider the IC reviewable decision instead of the IC continuing with the IC review include:⁴²
- where the IC review is linked to ongoing proceedings before the AAT or a court
 - where there is an apparent inconsistency between earlier IC review decisions and AAT decisions
 - where, should the IC review application progress to an IC review decision, the IC review decision is likely to be taken on appeal to the AAT on a disputed issue of fact
 - where the FOI decision under review is of a level of complexity that it will be more appropriately handled through the procedures of the AAT
 - where there may be a perceived or actual conflict of interest in the IC undertaking the IC review, including where:
 - the FOI request under review was made to, or decided by, the IC or their delegate
 - the FOI request or documents at issue relate to specific functions exercised by the IC under the Privacy Act
 - the IC review applicant has active matters in other forums, including the AAT or Federal Court, and the IC is the respondent
 - where consideration by the AAT will further the objects of the FOI Act, particularly in relation to the performance and exercise of functions and powers given by the FOI Act

³⁸ *Knowles v Australian Information Commissioner* [2018] FCA 1212.

³⁹ For an example of abuse of process generally see *Bringolf and Secretary, Department of Human Services (Freedom of information)* [2018] AATA 2004.

⁴⁰ *Ford v Child Support Registrar* [2009] FCA 328, applying *Attorney-General (Vic) v Wentworth* (1998) 14 NSWLR 481.

⁴¹ *Giddings v Australian Information Commissioner* [2017] FCA 677.

⁴² See also *McKinnon and Department of Immigration and Citizenship* [2012] AICmr 34.

to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4)).

10.105 The OAI may take into account the views of the parties to an IC review before concluding an IC review pursuant to s 54W(b). While the IC will consider the views of the review parties before finalising an IC review under s 54W(b), the decision whether it is more appropriate for the AAT to consider the IC reviewable decision ultimately rests with the IC. Through the functions conferred on the IC under the FOI Act, the IC will be in the most informed position to determine whether the interests of the administration of the FOI Act make it desirable for the AAT consider the IC reviewable decision.

Parties to be notified of decision not to undertake a review

10.106 If the IC decides not to undertake an IC review, the IC must give the parties written notice of the decision (s 54X(2)). Where the IC has decided it would be desirable for the AAT to undertake the review, the notice must state that the applicant may apply to the AAT for review (s 54X(3)(b)).

The Information Commissioner's powers to gather information

10.107 The IC has a range of powers to compel respondents to participate in procedures to gather information needed to properly review the merits of a decision. In addition to the power to require an agency or minister to give adequate reasons for a decision (discussed at [10.68] – [10.69]), the IC has the power to:

- require a person to produce information and documents
- require a respondent to produce a document claimed to be exempt (with some qualification where the claimed exemption relates to national security, Cabinet or Parliamentary Budget Office documents)
- order a respondent to undertake further searches for documents
- require a person to attend to answer questions and to take an oath or affirmation that the answers given will be true.

10.108 Each of these is discussed below. The IC's information gathering powers are similar to those of the AAT.

Producing information and documents

10.109 The IC can issue a notice requiring a person to produce information and documents if the IC reasonably believes they are relevant to an IC review (s 55R(3)). Failure to comply with a notice to produce is an offence punishable by 6 months imprisonment (s 55R(5)). The IC may take possession, copy and take extracts and hold those documents for as long as necessary for the purposes of the IC review (s 55S(1)).

Producing documents claimed to be exempt: general

10.110 The IC may require the respondent to produce a document claimed to be exempt, other than a document claimed to be exempt under the national security, Cabinet or

Parliamentary Budget Office documents exemptions (s 55T(1)). As a general rule, the IC will require the respondent to provide a copy of all documents that are claimed to be exempt to enable the IC to undertake merit review of the decision to refuse access). If satisfied the document is exempt, the IC must return the document to the respondent (s 55T(3)).

- 10.111 No person other than the IC, the FOI Commissioner, the Privacy Commissioner or a member of the IC's staff may have access to a document that is claimed to be exempt (s 55T(5)). (The IC must take all reasonable steps to ensure relevant OAIC staff are given appropriate security clearances (s 89P)).

Producing documents claimed to be exempt: national security, Cabinet and Parliamentary Budget Office documents

- 10.112 The IC may only require the respondent to produce a document they claim is exempt under the national security exemption (s 33), Cabinet documents exemption (s 34) or Parliamentary Budget Office documents exemption (s 45A) if the IC is not satisfied by evidence on affidavit or other evidence that the document is exempt (s 55U(3)).

Further searches for documents

- 10.113 The IC may require a respondent to undertake further searches for documents, including where access to a document has been granted but not actually given (s 55V(2)).⁴³

Attending to answer questions

- 10.114 The IC may require a person to attend to answer questions for the purposes of an IC review (s 55W(1)). The IC must give the person a written notice that specifies the time and place when the person must attend, with the time to be not less than 14 days after the person is given the notice (s 55W(2)). Failure to comply with the notice is an offence punishable by 6 months imprisonment (s 55W(3)).
- 10.115 The IC may also require a person who appears before the IC pursuant to a notice under s 55W(1) to take an oath or affirmation that the answers the person will give will be true (s 55X). Breaching that requirement (for example, if the person refuses to take an oath or affirmation, or knowingly gives false answers) is an offence punishable by 6 months imprisonment (s 55X(3)).

Steps in an Information Commissioner review

- 10.116 The FOI Act establishes a process for the conduct of IC reviews. These requirements inform specific guidance developed by the OAIC. For further information about the stages and timeframes applied in an IC review, respondents should have regard to *Direction as to certain procedures to be followed by agencies and ministers in IC reviews*.⁴⁴

⁴³ See for example 'ADN' and the Australian Taxation Office (Freedom of information) [2023] AICmr 44 [20].

⁴⁴ Available on the OAIC's website www.oaic.gov.au.

The Information Commissioner's decision

Where the review parties reach agreement

- 10.117 At any stage during an IC review, the review parties may reach agreement under s 55F of the FOI Act as to the terms of a decision in the IC review. The agreement may relate to all or some of the issues to be decided in the IC review or it may be in relation to a matter arising out of the IC review application (see s 55F(1)(a)).
- 10.118 Respondents should be specific and clear about the terms being agreed to, for example, by specifying in the agreement the documents to be released in whole or in part (if applicable), or the revised scope, including relevant processing timeframes (in the case of a practical refusal decision). It should also be clear from its terms that the effect of the agreement is to resolve the IC review, either in its entirety, or in part. Respondents are encouraged to discuss any proposed s 55F agreements with the OAIC prior to submitting a signed agreement, to help ensure that the terms of the agreement reached with an IC review applicant are within the IC's powers to give effect to.
- 10.119 The agreement must be in writing, be signed by the review parties and submitted to the IC. The IC may then make a decision in accordance with the agreement without completing the IC review. If the parties come to an agreement about part of the IC review application, the IC review will continue but only address the issues not dealt with in the agreement.
- 10.120 Before making the decision under s 55F(2), the IC must be satisfied that the terms of the written agreement would be within the powers of the IC⁴⁵ and that all parties have agreed to the terms.⁴⁶ This means that the agreement must be about something the IC could have decided had the IC review continued to a decision under s 55K. For example, a decision that documents are exempt (or not exempt), or that charges should be waived, or that a practical refusal reason does or does not exist. Examples of terms that are not be within the IC's powers include an agreement that an agency apologise or take some other remedial action, or provide a timeline for agreed action not taken from the FOI Act.
- 10.121 All the review parties must agree to the terms of the agreement. If there are affected third parties involved in the IC review, they must also agree to the proposed terms and cannot be excluded from an agreement between the IC review applicant and the respondent. Particular care should be taken in the context of an IC review of an access grant decision. The proposed terms must be agreed to by the parties to the IC review which will include the IC review applicant, the original FOI applicant and the respondent.

Where the review parties do not reach agreement

- 10.122 If the review parties do not reach an agreement, and unless the IC review applicant withdraws their application under s 54R, or the IC decides not to undertake an IC review, or continue to undertake an IC review under s 54W, the IC must make a decision after a merit review of the IC review application. The IC has 3 options:
- to affirm the respondent's decision (s 55K(1)(a))

⁴⁵ See s 55F(1)(d) of the FOI Act.

⁴⁶ Section 55F(1)(c) of the FOI Act.

- to vary the respondent's decision (s 55K(1)(b))
- to set aside the respondent's decision and make a fresh decision (s 55K(1)(c)).

Written reasons to be given

10.123 The IC must give written reasons for the decision to all the parties to the IC review (ss 55K(1) and (6)) and must publish the decision in a way that makes it publicly available (s 55K(8)). The statements of reasons for IC review decisions are published on the Australasian Legal Information Institute website (AustLII) in the Australian Information Commissioner database.⁴⁷ The IC's published decision will not include any exempt matter or information about the existence or non-existence of a document that would be exempt under ss 33, 37 or 45A (see ss 55K(5)(a) and 25(1)), or any other matter that would cause the statement of reasons to be an exempt document (s 55K(5)(b)). In addition, where appropriate to protect against the unreasonable disclosure of personal information about an IC review applicant or third party, including details of their identity, the IC will not include such personal information in the decision published on the website. The identities of third parties may also be removed from the decision given to the IC review applicant, if including this information would involve an unreasonable disclosure of personal information about another person.

10.124 However the IC will generally publish the names of businesses or organisations where those entities are the IC review applicant or an affected third party to an IC review. This is because in most cases doing so will not result in the unreasonable disclosure of personal information. If a business is concerned about publication or disclosure of their name they can ask for a pseudonym to be allocated. An application for de-identification of a business's or organisation's identity must be supported by clear reasons. Each application will be treated on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the pro disclosure objects of the FOI Act.

Exempt documents

10.125 If the IC decides that a document is exempt, the IC has no power to decide that access to the document is to be given (s 55L). This includes a document that:

- has been found to be exempt because a specific exemption under Part IV Division 2 of the FOI Act applies
- is conditionally exempt (under Part IV Division 3) and access to the document would be contrary to the public interest, or
- is a document of a person, body or agency exempt from the operation of the FOI Act (s 7 — see Part 2 of these Guidelines).

Requiring records to be amended

10.126 Part V of the FOI Act enables a person to apply for amendment or annotation of personal information that an agency or minister uses for administrative purposes (see Part 7 of these Guidelines).

⁴⁷ See www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/AICmr/.

10.127 The IC's decision can require an amendment to be made to a record of personal information (subject to 2 limitations):

- a) *Opinions* — The IC may only require amendment of a record that relates to an opinion if satisfied:
 - i) the opinion was based on a mistake of fact or
 - ii) the author of the opinion was biased, unqualified to form the opinion or acted improperly in conducting the factual inquiries that led to the formation of the opinion (s 55M(1)).
- b) *Court or tribunal decision* — The IC cannot require that a record of a decision under an enactment by a court, tribunal, authority or person be amended (s 55M(2)(a)). Nor can the IC require that a record be amended if that would involve determining an issue that a person either is, or could be, entitled to have decided in another process — by an agency (on internal review), the IC, a court or tribunal (s 55M(2)(b)). This means that the IC does not have the power to require amendments that rely on the IC making another decision first that could be made by an agency (such as where an agency must first determine a person's eligibility for a benefit), the IC (such as deciding an FOI request for access to the relevant documents) or a court (such as deciding whether a person is bankrupt) or tribunal (such as deciding whether a person is eligible for a visa).

Practical refusal, searches and charges

10.128 Other decisions that the IC can affirm, vary or set aside include:

- access refusal decisions based on the existence of a practical refusal reason with respect to an FOI request following a request consultation process (s 24)
- access refusal decisions based on the contention that all reasonable steps have been taken to find a document and the document cannot be found or does not exist (s 24A). The FOI Act provides individuals with a right of access to documents that exist. There is no right of access to documents that do not exist or cannot be found. The Information Commissioner cannot consider whether documents should not have been destroyed or removed⁴⁸ or matters where the IC review applicant disputes the nature of the documents produced⁴⁹ and
- decisions with respect to charges (s 29).

Compliance with the Information Commissioner's decision

10.129 Parties to an IC review are notified of the IC's written reasons for decision at the conclusion of the IC review and are provided with a copy of those reasons.

10.130 At the time of notifying the review parties of the written reasons for decision, the IC will seek confirmation that the respondent will fully implemented the IC's decision, or alternatively, advice that the respondent is applying for review of the decision by the AAT. This information is to be provided to the IC within 28 days of notification of the decision.

⁴⁸ *Josh Taylor and Prime Minister of Australia (Freedom of information)* [2018] AICmr 42.

⁴⁹ See for example *'WW' and Department of Veterans' Affairs (Freedom of information)* [2021] AICmr 10.

10.131 The IC will also seek confirmation that the respondent has published relevant documents on its disclosure log (as required under s 11C of the FOI Act) and that documents have been published on the respondent's website for the purposes of the Information Publication Scheme (IPS) under Part II of the FOI Act (where relevant).

Enforcement of the Information Commissioner's decision

10.132 A respondent must comply with an IC review decision (s 55N). If a respondent fails to comply, the IC or the IC review applicant may apply to the Federal Court for an order directing them to comply (s 55P(1)). The application under s 55P can only be made after the period a respondent has to apply to the AAT for review of the IC's decision has expired - 28 days (*Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* (AAT Act) s 29(2)). There is a similar scheme for enforcing determinations by the Privacy Commissioner (Privacy Act ss 55A and 62).

10.133 In exercising the power to enforce an IC review decision, the IC may consider the following factors:

- whether exercising the power to enforce an IC review decision will best facilitate and promote public access to information (for example, it is relevant to consider whether enforcement of an IC review decision will result in the respondent releasing documents to the IC review applicant and, more generally, increase compliance by the respondent with IC review decisions)
- whether exercising the power to enforce an IC review decision will best increase the promptness of public access to information (for example, it is relevant to consider whether this will impact the speed with which the respondent in question complies with IC review decisions)
- whether exercising the power to enforce an IC review decision will best facilitate public access to information at the lowest reasonable cost (for example, it is relevant to consider whether enforcement by the Federal Court of Australia is a cost effective way to increase compliance with the FOI Act)
- whether exercising the power to enforce an IC review decision will promote the objects of the FOI Act to give the Australian community access to information held by the Australian Government by requiring agencies to publish information and enforcing a right of access to documents and
- any other factors the IC considers relevant in the circumstances.

Correcting errors in the Information Commissioner's decision

10.134 The IC has a discretionary power to correct obvious errors in their decision, either on their own initiative or on application by a review party (s 55Q).

Federal Court proceedings

10.135 The Federal Court may determine matters in 2 situations:

- deciding questions of law referred by the IC (s 55H)
- on appeal by an IC review party on a question of law, from the IC's decision (s 56).

10.136 The Federal Court may also direct a respondent to comply with the IC's decision (see [10.132]–[10.133] above).

Referring questions of law

10.137 The IC may refer a question of law to the Federal Court at any time during the review (s 55H), and must act consistently with the Federal Court's decision (s 55H(5)). This power is intended to ensure that the IC makes decisions that are correct in law and that their decisions can finally resolve a matter.

10.138 If a reference is made to the Federal Court, the IC must send all relevant documents and information in their possession to the Court (s 55J).

10.139 In exercising the power to refer a question of law to the Federal Court, the IC may consider the following factors:

- whether referring a question of law to the Federal Court will best facilitate and promote public access to information (for example if there is uncertainty with respect to the interpretation of the FOI Act)
- whether referring a question of law to the Federal Court will best increase the promptness of public access to information (for example if resolving a particular question of law will result in a positive impact on the processing of FOI requests and the conduct of IC reviews)
- whether referring a question of law to the Federal Court will best facilitate public access to information at the lowest reasonable cost (for example if the Federal Court's response to the question of law binds future decision makers and results in more efficient and therefore more cost effective processing of FOI requests)
- whether referring a question of law to the Federal Court will promote the objects of the FOI Act to give the Australian community access to information held by the Australian Government by requiring agencies to publish information and enforcing a right of access to documents, and
- any other factors which the IC considers relevant in the circumstances.

Appeal to the Federal Court

10.140 A review party has the right to appeal to the Federal Court on a question of law from a decision of the IC (s 56).

10.141 A review party may choose to apply to the Federal Court rather than seek merit review by the AAT if, for example, the review party believes the IC wrongly interpreted and applied the FOI Act. If the Federal Court remits a decision to the IC for reconsideration, a review party can later apply to the AAT for review of the IC's subsequent decision.

10.142 Section 56A(1)(b) provides that in determining the matter, the Federal Court may make findings of fact if its findings of fact are not inconsistent with findings of fact made by the IC (other than findings resulting from an error of law), and it appears to the Court to be convenient. In determining whether it is convenient, the Court must have regard to all the following factors:

- i) the extent to which it is necessary for facts to be found

- ii) the means of establishing those facts
- iii) the expeditious and efficient resolution of the whole of the matter to which the IC review relates
- iv) the relative expense to the parties if the Court, rather than the IC, makes the findings of fact
- v) the relative delay to the parties if the Court, rather than the IC, makes the findings of fact
- vi) whether any of the parties considers that it is appropriate for the Court, rather than the IC, to make the findings of fact
- vii) such other matters (if any) as the Court considers relevant.

Review by the AAT

When can a person apply to the AAT?

10.143 A person can apply to the AAT for review of:

- the IC's decision to affirm, vary or set aside a decision after the IC has undertaken an IC review (ss 55K and 57A(1)(a))
- the agency's or minister's decision where the IC has decided not to undertake an IC review on the basis that it is desirable that the AAT undertakes the review (ss 54W(b) and 57A(1)(b))
- the IC's declaration of a person as a vexatious applicant (ss 89K and 89N).

10.144 A person cannot apply to the AAT directly for review of an agency or a minister's decision – the person must apply for IC review first.⁵⁰ However, when applying for IC review an IC review applicant may make submissions as to why the IC should decline the review under s 54W(b), thus enabling the person to apply to the AAT.

10.145 A person cannot apply to the AAT for review of the IC's decision not to undertake or not to continue an IC review under ss 54W(a)(i)-(iii) or 54W(c). A person can however seek judicial review by the Federal Court of Australia or the Federal Circuit Court of Australia of the decision not to undertake or continue an IC review under the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977*.

Time limit

10.146 A person must apply to the AAT within 28 days after the day they receive the IC's decision (AAT Act s 29(2)). The same time limit applies where the IC declines to consider the IC review on the ground that it would be better dealt with by the AAT (s 57A(2)).

Parties to AAT proceedings

10.147 The parties to an AAT review are:

⁵⁰ *Scholes and Decision Maker (Freedom of information)* [2018] AATA 4091 [12]–[15].

- the person who applies to the AAT for review (s 60(3)(a))
- the original FOI applicant, that is, the person who made the request for access to documents or for amendment or annotation of a personal record (s 60(3)(b))
- the principal officer of the agency or the minister to whom the request was made (s 60(3)(c))
- any other person who is made a party to the proceeding by the AAT (s 60(3)(d)).

10.148 The AAT has a discretionary power under s 30(1A) of the AAT Act to join a person whose interests are affected by the decision.

10.149 The IC is not a party to proceedings in the AAT, except in relation to review under s 89N of a declaration that a person is a vexatious applicant. Consequently, the IC does not play any role in the proceedings in defending their decision. In deciding the correct or preferable decision, the AAT will be guided by the submissions of the parties, who will ordinarily be the FOI applicant and the agency or minister who made the IC reviewable decision. As noted below in [10.157], s 61A of the FOI Act modifies relevant provisions of the AAT Act to spell out the role in the proceedings of the agency or minister who made the IC reviewable decision. Further, s 58(1) of the FOI Act provides that the AAT may decide any matter in relation to the FOI request that could be decided by the agency or minister.

10.150 In relation to review of a declaration that a person is a vexatious applicant (see Part 12 of these Guidelines), note 3 to s 89N expressly refers to s 30 of the AAT Act, which sets out the parties to AAT proceedings. Section 30 states that the decision maker (in this case, the IC) will be a party to the proceedings. The IC's role is to assist the AAT and not to be a protagonist in the proceedings.⁵¹ An agency or minister may also apply to the AAT to be made a party to those proceedings (AAT Act s 30(1A)).

Notifying third parties

10.151 An agency or minister must notify affected third parties if an FOI applicant seeks review by the AAT of a decision to refuse access to third party information (s 60AA). This is the same as the notice requirement where an application is made for an IC review. An affected third party may apply to become a party to the AAT proceedings under s 30(1A) of the AAT Act (s 30(3)(d)).

10.152 The AAT may order that an agency or minister does not need to give notice to an affected third party of an AAT review application if it would not be appropriate to do so in the circumstances (s 60AB). An agency or minister must apply to the AAT for an order to be excused from the requirement to give notice (s 60AB(2)).

10.153 Section 60AB(3) provides the circumstances to which the AAT must have regard when determining if the requirement to give notice is not appropriate. Those circumstances are whether notifying the affected third party would or could reasonably be expected to:

⁵¹ In line with the view expressed in *R v Australian Broadcasting Tribunal; ex parte Hardiman* [1980] HCA 13; (1980) 144 CLR 13 [54]. See also AAT Act s 33(1AA).

- a) prejudice the conduct of an investigation of a breach of the law, or a failure to comply with a law relating to taxation (for example, if a document includes information about a person under criminal investigation)
- b) prejudice the enforcement or proper administration of the law in a particular instance
- c) disclose, or enable a person to ascertain, the existence or identity of a confidential source of information, or the non-existence of a confidential source of information, in relation to the enforcement or administration of the law
- d) endanger the life or physical safety of any person
- e) cause damage to the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth.

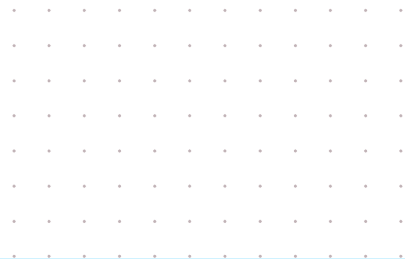
Onus

10.154 In AAT proceedings to review an FOI decision, the agency or minister who made a decision on the FOI request or the application for amendment of personal records has the onus of establishing that a decision adverse to the FOI applicant should be given. The agency or minister has that onus when:

- the agency or minister seeks review of the IC's decision (for example, that access should be given to a document because an exemption does not apply) — in this case the AAT will review a decision of the IC (s 61(1)(a))
- the FOI applicant seeks review of a decision made by the IC (for example, affirming that an exemption applies to a document and that access may be refused) — in this case the AAT will review the IC's decision (s 61(1)(b))
- the FOI applicant applies for IC review of a decision and the IC declines to undertake a review on the ground that it is desirable that the AAT undertake the review — in this case the AAT will review the decision of the agency or minister (s 61(1)(b)).

10.155 The FOI applicant does not bear an onus in either IC review or AAT review.

10.156 If an affected third party is a party to the proceeding, the third party has the onus of establishing that a decision refusing to give access to the document is justified, or the AAT should give a decision adverse to the person who made the request (s 61(2)).



Who bears the onus?	Nature of request for AAT review	Section of the FOI Act
Agency or minister that received the FOI request or the application for amendment of personal records	Review of the IC's decision sought by the agency or minister	s 61(1)(a)
	Review of the IC's decision sought by the applicant requesting documents or amendment of personal records	s 61(1)(b)
	Review of an agency's or minister's decision that the IC has declined to review under s 54W on the ground that it is desirable that the AAT undertake review	s 61(1)(b)
Affected third party that is a party to the AAT proceeding	Review of an access grant decision to which a consultation requirement applies under ss 26A, 27 or 27A	s 61(2)



Modifications to references in the AAT Act

10.157 Because agency and minister's FOI decisions are reviewed by the IC, and generally the AAT's role is to review decisions made by the IC, various provisions in the AAT Act that previously referred to 'the person who made the decision' are now taken to mean either the agency, minister or the person who made the IC reviewable decision, or each of the review parties, as the context requires. These modifications are listed in s 61A.

Part 11 — Investigations and complaints

Version 1.5, February 2021

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Information Commissioner investigations

- 11.1 Under Part VIIB of the FOI Act, the Information Commissioner can investigate an action taken by an agency in the performance of its functions or the exercise of its powers under the FOI Act. This involves investigating complaints (s 69(1)), as well as conducting investigations at the Commissioner's initiative (Commissioner initiated investigations (CIIs)) (s 69(2)).¹
- 11.2 The Information Commissioner cannot investigate a minister's handling of FOI matters..
- 11.3 The complaints process set out in Part VIIB is intended to deal with the way agencies handle FOI requests and procedural compliance matters. Examples include:
- a complaint that an agency did not provide adequate assistance to an FOI applicant to make an FOI request
 - a complaint by a third party that an agency failed to consult them before deciding to release a document
 - a complaint that an agency did not make a decision on their FOI request within the applicable statutory timeframe
 - a complaint alleging a conflict of interest by the decision maker.
- 11.4 Under Part V of the FOI Act, a person has the right to apply for amendment or annotation of an incorrect record of personal information used by an agency for administrative purposes (see Part 7 of these Guidelines). As part of a CII or complaint investigation, the Information Commissioner is able to recommend that incorrect records be amended, except if the affected individual is, or has been, entitled to have the amendment determined by the agency, the Information Commissioner (using the Information Commissioner's powers under Part VII), a court or a tribunal. Further, the Information Commissioner cannot recommend amendment of court or tribunal decisions (s 89D).

Relationship with IC reviews

- 11.5 The Information Commissioner's view is that making a complaint is not an appropriate mechanism where IC review is available, unless there is a special reason to undertake an investigation and the matter can be dealt with more appropriately and effectively in that manner. IC review will ordinarily be the more appropriate avenue for a person to seek review of the merits of an FOI decision, particularly an access refusal or access grant decision.²
- 11.6 There may be some instances where the Information Commissioner may consider it appropriate to conduct both an IC review and an investigation into an FOI complaint. An example is when the outcome sought by the applicant is both access to documents, and a remedy to address procedural or processing issues, including non-compliance with statutory timeframes or a breach of specific legislative requirements. In such circumstances, the investigation of a complaint may be put on hold until the IC review has been finalised. This

¹ The OAIC has issued a *Freedom of Information Regulatory Action Policy* which provides guidance on the Information Commissioner's approach to the exercise of FOI regulatory powers, including the investigation of complaints and conducting CIIs. See *Freedom of Information Regulatory Action Policy* on the OAIC website <https://www.oaic.gov.au/about-us/our-regulatory-approach/freedom-of-information-regulatory-action-policy/> ..

² See *What is the difference between a complaint and an application for review of a freedom of information decision?* on the OAIC website, <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/frequently-asked-questions/what-is-the-difference-between-a-complaint-and-an-application-for-review-of-a-freedom-of-information-decision/>.

may be appropriate when it seems likely that processing deficiencies will be addressed during the IC review and will require no further investigation.

Power to investigate

- 11.7 The Information Commissioner may investigate an agency's actions in performing its functions or exercising its powers under the FOI Act in response to a complaint made under s 70 of the FOI Act (s 69(1)), or at the Information Commissioner's own initiative (s 69(2)).³ The investigation may look at a single agency decision or action, at a systemic problem or recurring pattern in an agency's practices and processes in handling FOI matters, or at a practice or problem occurring in more than one agency. The issue to be investigated may come to the attention of the Information Commissioner as a result of an IC review, a series of applications for IC review, or in some other way.
- 11.8 When deciding whether to commence an investigation, the Information Commissioner will take into consideration:⁴
- the objects of the FOI Act
 - the risks and impact of non-compliance
 - whether the practice complained of is systemic
 - whether significant issues are raised
 - whether there has been non-compliance with statutory timeframes
 - the outcome sought.

How to make a complaint

- 11.9 A person may complain to the Information Commissioner about an action taken by an agency under the FOI Act (s 70(1)).⁵ A complaint must be in writing and identify the agency against which the complaint is made (s 70(2)). The OAIC must give 'appropriate assistance' to anyone who wishes to complain and needs help to formulate their complaint (s 70(3)). This need may arise, for example, if a person has language or literacy difficulties or otherwise needs assistance ascertaining the scope of an agency's obligations under the FOI Act or making a complaint against an agency.

Decision to investigate

Preliminary inquiries

- 11.10 The Information Commissioner may make preliminary inquiries for the purpose of determining whether or not to investigate a complaint (s 72). This can be done, for example,

³ See for example the following CII reports (referred to as own motion investigations): *FOI at the Department of Human Services*, published on 2 December 2014, and *Processing of non-routine FOI requests by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship*, published on 26 September 2012, on the OAIC website, <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/foi-reports/>.

⁴ For further information about the Information Commissioner's regulatory approach see 'Freedom of information regulatory action policy' on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au.

⁵ See *Make an FOI Complaint* on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au.

to determine whether the complaint relates to an action taken by an agency under the FOI Act or whether the process to which the complaint relates has been rectified by the agency.

Deciding not to investigate

11.11 The Information Commissioner has a discretion not to investigate, or not to continue to investigate, a complaint in the following circumstances (set out in s 73):

- the action is not related to an agency performing its functions or exercising its powers under the FOI Act (s73(a))
- the complainant has or had a right to have the action reviewed by the agency, a court or a tribunal, or by the Information Commissioner under Part VII of the FOI Act, and has not exercised that right when it would be reasonable to do so (s 73(b))
- the complainant has or had a right to complain to another body and has not exercised that right when it would be reasonable to do so (s 73(c))
- the agency has dealt, or is dealing, adequately with the complaint, or has not yet had an adequate opportunity to do so (s 73(d))
- the complaint is frivolous, vexatious, misconceived, lacking in substance or not made in good faith (s 73(e))
- the complainant does not have a sufficient interest in the subject matter of the complaint (s 73(f)).

11.12 Where a person has applied for IC review and made an FOI complaint and the issues raised are more appropriately dealt with in the IC review, it is open to the Information Commissioner to decline to investigate the FOI complaint under s 73(b) of the FOI Act on the basis that the IC review has not had a reasonable opportunity to be conducted. The Information Commissioner may exercise this discretion prior to the commencement of an investigation or during the course of an investigation.

11.13 If the Information Commissioner decides not to investigate, or not to continue to investigate, a complaint, the Information Commissioner must give a written notice (with reasons) to the complainant and to the agency (s 75). An agency must also be notified if the Information Commissioner discontinues a Commissioner initiated investigation (s 75(2)(b)).

11.14 The Information Commissioner does not have the same power as the Commonwealth Ombudsman to decline to investigate a complaint that relates to action that occurred more than 12 months previously (see s 6(1)(a) of the *Ombudsman Act 1976*). However, this is a matter that the Information Commissioner will take into account in formulating the investigation results following completion of an investigation (see [11.33]–[11.38] below).

Transfer to Commonwealth Ombudsman

11.15 Under the *Ombudsman Act 1976*, the Commonwealth Ombudsman retains authority to investigate a complaint about action taken by an agency under the FOI Act (s 89F). However this is qualified by s 6C(2) of the *Ombudsman Act 1976* which requires the Ombudsman to consult the Information Commissioner before deciding to investigate a complaint about a matter that is the subject of a completed investigation by the Information Commissioner, or that is or could be the subject of a complaint to the Information Commissioner which could be dealt with more appropriately or effectively by the Information Commissioner. The Ombudsman and the Information Commissioner must consult with a view to avoiding the

same matter being investigated by both offices. If the Ombudsman decides not to investigate a complaint on this basis, the Ombudsman must transfer the complaint and all relevant documents and information to the Information Commissioner and notify the complainant in writing (with reasons for the decision) (s 6C(3) of the *Ombudsman Act 1976*). The Information Commissioner must then deal with the matter as a complaint under Part VII B of the FOI Act (s 6C(4) of the *Ombudsman Act 1976*).

11.16 The Information Commissioner has a similar power to transfer a complaint (or part of a complaint) to the Ombudsman if the Information Commissioner is satisfied that it could be dealt with more effectively or appropriately by the Ombudsman (s 74). Two examples of such situations are given in the FOI Act:

- when the complaint is about how the Information Commissioner dealt with an IC review
- when the FOI complaint is part of a wider grievance about an agency's actions.

11.17 The factors that the Information Commissioner may consider when deciding whether to transfer a complaint to the Ombudsman include:

- whether the complaint is about actions by the OAIC, including how the OAIC has dealt with:
 - an IC review
 - an FOI complaint
 - a vexatious applicant declaration application
 - an FOI request, or
 - an extension of time application
- whether there may be a perceived or actual conflict of interest in the Information Commissioner considering the complaint, including where:
 - the complainant has complaints under the Privacy Act in which the Information Commissioner is the respondent
 - the complaint relates to specific functions exercised by the Information Commissioner under the Privacy Act
 - the complainant has matters in other forums, including the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or Federal Court and the Information Commissioner is the respondent
- whether the issues raised relate to other active complaints lodged with the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

11.18 The Information Commissioner must consult the Ombudsman to avoid any overlap in inquiries, and may decide not to investigate or not to continue to investigate, after consulting (s 74(2)). If the Information Commissioner decides not to investigate a complaint on this basis, the Information Commissioner must transfer the complaint and all relevant documents and information to the Ombudsman, and notify the complainant in writing (with reasons for the decision) (ss 74(3) and 74(4)).

Giving notice of an investigation

11.19 The Information Commissioner must notify the agency before investigating a complaint or a Commissioner initiated investigation is commenced (s 75(1)). The investigation notice may ask the agency to provide information to the Information Commissioner, for example, copies of correspondence, an explanation or reasons for a particular course of action being

adopted, the agency's procedures and practices in relation to the complaint issues, or submissions in response to the issues raised.

- 11.20 Similarly, the Information Commissioner must give written notice (with reasons) to the agency and the complainant (if there is one) if the Information Commissioner decides not to investigate, or not to continue to investigate (ss 75(2)–(4)).

Investigation procedure

Conduct of investigations

- 11.21 The FOI Act sets out rules that apply to the conduct of the Information Commissioner's complaint investigations. The guiding principle is that an investigation shall be conducted in private and in a way the Information Commissioner thinks fit (s 76(1)).
- 11.22 The Information Commissioner may decide to prioritise the investigation of a complaint because it informs issues being investigated in a CII, or other FOI complaints have been made to the Information Commissioner which raise the same issues and it is more efficient and effective to deal with these complaints at the same time.

General powers

- 11.23 The Information Commissioner may obtain information from any officer of an agency, and make any inquiry, that he or she thinks is relevant to the investigation (s 76(2)). The request for information may include:
- procedural documents such as a processing manual or relevant guidance provided to staff and/or decision-makers
 - documents relating to the process followed in processing relevant FOI request(s)
 - statistical information relevant to the issues under investigation
 - submissions in response to the allegations made by the complainant (if any).
- 11.24 The request for information will specify a timeframe for provision of information and/or documents. The period of time given will depend on the nature of the issues under investigation, the type of information required to be produced and the volume of documents requested.
- 11.25 Where an agency fails to provide information and documents within the initial or extended timeframe, the Information Commissioner may require the provision of information and documents pursuant to s 79 of the FOI Act. The Information Commissioner also has specific powers to compel the production of information by agencies (discussed below at [11.31]–[11.32]).

Entering premises

- 11.26 The Information Commissioner has a limited power to enter premises to carry out an investigation or to inspect documents on the premises. This can be done, for example, to inspect agency documents, or to investigate whether an agency conducted a proper search for documents (s 77).
- 11.27 An *authorised person* may enter premises occupied by an agency, or premises occupied by a contracted service provider that are used predominantly for the purposes of a

Commonwealth contract (ss 77(1), (2)). An authorised person means an information officer (the Information Commissioner, the FOI Commissioner or the Privacy Commissioner, as defined in the *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010*), or an APS employee at Executive Level 2 or above in the OAIC who has been authorised by the Information Commissioner for the purposes of s 77 (s 77(6)).

11.28 The power to enter premises is conditional on the consent of the principal officer of the agency or, in the case of a contracted service provider, the person in charge (s 77(3)). The authorised person must leave the premises if the consenting person asks (s 77(4)).

11.29 Entry to certain places requires written ministerial approval (s 78(1)). These are:

- a place referred to in s 80(c) of the *Crimes Act 1914* (mainly defence-related places)
- a place that is a prohibited area for the purposes of the *Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952*
- a restricted area declared under s 14 of the *Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952*.

11.30 The Attorney-General may also prohibit entry to a place by declaration if satisfied an investigation at that place may prejudice the security or defence of the Commonwealth (ss 78(3) and (4)). These requirements are consistent with the rules applying to the Ombudsman's powers of entry for an investigation (*Ombudsman Act 1976* ss 14(2) and (3)).

Obliging production of information and documents

11.31 The Information Commissioner has certain compulsory powers:

- to require production of information and documents
- to require production of exempt documents
- to require a person to attend to answer questions and to take an oath or affirmation.

11.32 Each of these powers is discussed below. The powers are the same as the Information Commissioner's powers when conducting an IC review (see ss 55R–55U and 55W–55X and Part 10 of these Guidelines).

Production of information and documents

11.33 The Information Commissioner can, by written notice, require the production of information and documents in connection with an investigation (s 79). This power ensures the Information Commissioner can obtain all the material relevant to an investigation. Failure to comply with a production notice is an offence punishable by six months imprisonment (s 79(5)).

11.34 The Information Commissioner can take possession of the documents, make copies, take extracts and hold the documents as long as is necessary for the investigation (s 80(1)). While the Information Commissioner holds the documents, the Information Commissioner must permit a person to exercise any right they might otherwise have to inspect the documents (s 80(2)).

Exempt documents

11.35 The Information Commissioner has the same power to require production of exempt documents in conducting investigations as in exercising the IC review function (s 81). The limitations that apply to the exercise of this power under the IC review function, including in relation to national security and cabinet documents, also apply to investigations. These

include the requirement to return exempt documents and to ensure they are not disclosed to people other than OAIC staff in the course of performing their duties. For more information about these limitations, see Part 10 of these Guidelines.

Obliging persons to appear

- 11.36 The Information Commissioner can, by written notice, require a person to attend to answer questions for the purpose of an investigation (ss 82(1) and (2)). Failure to comply with a notice is an offence punishable by six months imprisonment (s 82(3)).
- 11.37 A person who appears before the Information Commissioner pursuant to a notice under s 82 can be required to take an oath or affirmation that their answers will be true (ss 83(1) and (2)). Refusing to take an oath or affirmation, refusing to answer a question, or giving false evidence are offences punishable by six months imprisonment (s 83(3)).

Protections for those involved

- 11.38 A claim for legal professional privilege is preserved in respect of information or a document given to the Information Commissioner in connection with an investigation (s 84).
- 11.39 A person is immune from civil proceedings and from criminal or civil penalty, for the action of giving information, producing a document or answering a question in good faith for the purposes of an investigation (s 85). The protection applies even if the person did not produce information in response to the exercise by the Information Commissioner of powers to compel production of information (a person can voluntarily give information under s 76(2) which gives the Information Commissioner the power to obtain information from any officer of an agency that he or she thinks is relevant to the investigation).
- 11.40 A person who complains to the Commissioner under s 70 is also immune from civil proceedings, provided the complaint is made in good faith (s 89E).

Outcome of an investigation

Notice on completion

- 11.41 On completing an investigation, the Information Commissioner must provide a 'notice on completion' to the agency and to the complainant (if there is one) (s 86). The Information Commissioner's notice on completion must include the investigation results, the investigation recommendations (if any), and the reasons for those results and any recommendations (s 86(2)). A notice on completion must not include exempt matter or information about the existence or non-existence of a document that would be exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A (ss 89C and 25(1)).
- 11.42 The investigation results under s 87 are:
- the matters the Information Commissioner has investigated
 - any opinion the Information Commissioner has formed in relation to those matters
 - any conclusions the Information Commissioner has reached
 - any suggestions the Information Commissioner believes might improve the agency's processes, and
 - any other information of which the Information Commissioner believes the agency should be aware.

11.43 The Information Commissioner will provide the agency with an opportunity to provide comments about the notice (agency comments) (s 86(3)). The agency will be given a reasonable period of time, generally two weeks from the date of issue, to provide comments.⁶

11.44 The complainant will be given the following in accordance with s 86(4):

- the notice of completion under s 86
- agency comments (if any) ⁷
- any further comments the Information Commissioner may wish to make.

Publication of the outcome of an investigation

11.45 After providing the complainant with a copy of the finalised notice (with exempt material or material to which s 25(1) applies removed, see s 89C(2)), the Information Commissioner may publish a summary of the notice on the OAIC website. Any notice will include the name of the agency but not the name of the complainant (where there is one).

11.46 The Information Commissioner may also publish a copy or extract of the agency's comments made in response to the s 86 notice on completion.

Failure to implement investigation recommendation

11.47 In addition to including opinions, conclusions or suggestions in a notice on completion, the Information Commissioner may also make investigation recommendations, which are 'formal recommendations to the respondent agency that the Information Commissioner believes that the agency ought to implement' (s 88).

11.48 The agency will be given a timeframe in which to consider the recommendations and take action that is adequate and appropriate in the circumstances to implement the recommendation(s). The agency will be asked to advise the information Commissioner of the action taken to respond to the formal recommendations made in the notice of completion by the end of the timeframe given for implementation.

11.49 If the Information Commissioner is not satisfied the agency has taken adequate and appropriate action to implement the formal recommendation(s), the Information Commissioner may issue a written 'implementation notice' requiring the agency to provide within a specified time particulars of any action the agency will take to implement the Information Commissioner's recommendations (s 89). The Information Commissioner will take agency comments into account in deciding whether to take further action.

11.50 The implementation notice will require the agency to outline particulars of any action the agency proposes to take to implement the investigation recommendations.

11.51 In the implementation notice, the Information Commissioner will give the agency a specified time to respond. This will normally be 30 days, but this can be extended depending on the nature of the investigation recommendations.

⁶ See for example the Department of Home Affairs' response to the Commissioner-initiated investigation: *Department of Home Affairs' compliance with the statutory processing requirements under the Freedom of Information Act 1982 in relation to requests for non-personal information* (Attachment C) on the OAIC website www.oaic.gov.au.

⁷ If the agency does not provide comments in response to the Information Commissioner's conclusions in the notice on completion within the specified period, the notice on completion will be provided to the complainant.

11.52 The agency must comply with the implementation notice (s 89(3)).

Report to responsible Ministers

11.53 The Information Commissioner may subsequently report to the minister responsible for the agency and the minister responsible for the FOI Act if the Information Commissioner is not satisfied the agency has taken adequate and appropriate action to implement formal recommendations, or has not responded to the implementation notice within the specified time (s 89A). The minister responsible for the FOI Act must table the report before each House of the Parliament (s 89A(5)).

11.54 Section 89B prescribes the matters that must be addressed in a report to ministers. A report to the minister must contain the following:

- the notice on completion
- the implementation notice
- any agency response to the implementation notice
- a statement by the Information Commissioner that the Information Commissioner is not satisfied, in the circumstances, that the agency has taken adequate and appropriate action to implement the investigation recommendations
- a statement by the Information Commissioner detailing the action that the Information Commissioner believes, if taken by the agency, would be adequate and appropriate in the circumstances to implement the investigation recommendations.

11.55 The report to the minister must not include exempt matter or information about the existence or non-existence of a document that would be exempt under ss 33, 37(1) or 45A (ss 89C and 25(1)). If a report to the minister contains such information, the Information Commissioner must prepare a copy of the report that does not contain this information.

11.56 In deciding whether to exercise the power to report, the Information Commissioner will have regard to relevant factors in the circumstances including whether the action would:

- facilitate and promote public access to information
- increase the promptness of public access to information
- facilitate public access to information at the lowest reasonable cost.

11.57 If the Information Commissioner gives a report to the responsible Minister, a copy of the report must be also given to the FOI Minister. The FOI Minister is the Minister responsible for the administration of the FOI Act.

Part 12 — Vexatious applicant declarations

Version 1.5, October 2021

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Introduction

- 12.1 The Information Commissioner may declare a person to be a vexatious applicant, either on the Commissioner's own initiative or on the application of an agency or minister (s 89K).¹ A declaration has effect in accordance with the terms and conditions stated in the declaration (s 89M).
- 12.2 A decision by the Information Commissioner to make a vexatious applicant declaration will be based on the facts of the matter, after considering any application or submissions made by an agency or minister and any submissions from the person against whom a declaration may be made.
- 12.3 The Information Commissioner's power to make a vexatious applicant declaration is similar to the powers exercisable by courts and tribunals to declare either proceedings or a litigant to be vexatious. However caution is required in applying principles developed in the civil litigation context to the FOI context.²

Grounds for declaration

- 12.4 The Information Commissioner may declare a person to be a vexatious applicant only if the Commissioner is satisfied that:
- a) the person has repeatedly engaged in access actions that involve an abuse of process
 - b) the person is engaging in a particular access action that would involve an abuse of process, or
 - c) a particular access action by the person would be manifestly unreasonable (s 89L(1)).
- 12.5 An 'access action' is defined under s 89L(2) as:
- making a request under s 15
 - making an application for amendment or annotation of a record of personal information under s 48
 - applying for internal review (s 54B)
 - applying for Information Commissioner review (s 54N).
- 12.6 'Abuse of process' includes but is not limited to:

¹ This power is separate to the Commissioner's discretion not to undertake or continue an IC review application on the basis that it is frivolous, vexatious or not made in good faith (s 54W(a)) (see Part 10 of these Guidelines).

² *Department of Defence and 'W'* [2013] AICmr 2 [18]. Matters that may be considered by a court or tribunal faced with a vexatious litigant issue include a person's motive in commencing proceedings, their relationship with or attitude to the other parties in the proceedings, the legal merit of their claim, and the utility of the proceedings. Those matters are not usually relevant in an FOI context (see [12.10]). Nevertheless, the 'legally enforceable right to obtain access' declared in s 11(1) is expressed to be 'subject to this Act', which contains provisions relating to vexatious applicants. It may therefore be appropriate in applying those provisions to take into account matters that would otherwise be ignored in FOI processing.

- harassing or intimidating an individual or an agency employee
- unreasonably interfering with an agency's operations
- seeking to use the FOI Act to circumvent access restrictions imposed by a court (s 89L(4)).

General considerations

- 12.7 A declaration has the practical effect of preventing a person from exercising an important legal right conferred by the FOI Act. For that reason, a declaration will not be lightly made, and an agency that applies for a declaration must establish a clear and convincing need for a declaration. To date, no Information Commissioner has made a decision to declare a person a vexatious applicant on their own initiative and there would need to be compelling circumstances for the Information Commissioner to consider exercising this discretion.
- 12.8 On the other hand, the power conferred on the Information Commissioner to make a declaration is an important element of the balance in the FOI Act between conferring a right of access to government documents while ensuring that access requests do not interfere unreasonably with agency operations. This is apparent from the terms of s 89L, which expresses a principle that the legal right of access should not be abused by conduct that harasses or intimidates agency staff, unreasonably interferes with the operations of agencies, circumvents court imposed restrictions on document access, or is manifestly unreasonable.³
- 12.9 The power to make a declaration is discretionary.⁴ In addition to considering the grounds for a declaration specified in s 89L, the Information Commissioner may consider other relevant features of a person's access actions, or FOI administration by the agency that has applied for a declaration.
- 12.10 Aspects of the FOI Act that must be taken into account in balancing the interests of agencies and an FOI applicant include:⁵
- the objects of the FOI Act to give the Australian community access to information held by government (s 3(1) and promote Australia's representative democracy by:
 - increasing public participation in government processes
 - increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of government's activities (s 3(2))
 - the FOI Act specifies that government-held information is a national resource, to be managed for public purposes (s 3(3))

³ *Department of Defence and 'W'* [2013] AICmr 2 [12].

⁴ *Re Sweeney and Australian Information Commissioner & Ors* [2014] AATA 531 [81] (hereafter *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission*) [81].

⁵ *Australian Securities and Investments Commission and Sweeney* [2013] AICmr 62 [15].

- the lowest reasonable costs objective of the FOI Act: that the functions and powers under the FOI Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4))
- the FOI Act provides an important avenue for individuals to seek access to their own personal information (s 15(1)) and amendment of that information (s 48(1))
- the FOI Act does not limit the number of FOI requests a person can make in a given period, nor the number or type of documents a person can seek in an individual request to an agency subject to the FOI Act
- the formal requirements for making a request are minimal and allow a person to make a request by email without payment of an application fee (s 15(2))
- the FOI Act requires agencies to assist an applicant to make a valid request (s 15) and have an obligation to consult with the applicant before deciding to refuse a request for a practical refusal reason because the request does not satisfy the identification requirements of s 15(2)(b) or would substantially and unreasonably divert the agency from its other operations (s 24AB)
- a person's right of access is not affected by any reason they give for seeking access, or an agency's belief as to their reasons for seeking access (s 11(2))
- no charge is payable if an applicant requests access to a document that contains their own personal information.⁶

12.11 The FOI Act enables an agency to take steps (other than applying for a vexatious applicant declaration) to regulate or reduce the impact that individual requests may have on the workload or operations of the agency. An agency's recourse to these other measures in relation to a particular applicant may be a relevant consideration for the Information Commissioner in deciding whether to make a declaration against that person. Alternatives available to an agency include:

- consulting an applicant about the nature of a request (s 15(3)) and other means of satisfying the applicant's desire to obtain government information (see Part 3 of these Guidelines)
- seeking an applicant's agreement to an extension of processing time (s 15AA)
- applying to the OAIC for an extension of processing time if the FOI request is complex or voluminous (s 15AB), or after a decision has become a deemed refusal decision (s 15AC, 54D and 51DA)
- requiring an applicant to engage in a request consultation process if the agency believes there may be a practical refusal reason for refusing a request that substantially and unreasonably diverts the resources of the agency from its other operations, or if the request does not adequately identify the documents requested (ss 24, 24AA, 24AB)

⁶ *Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 2019*, s 7(1).

- notifying an applicant that a charge is payable for a request for information other than personal information that involves more than five hours of decision-making time (s 29).

12.12 The Information Commissioner may consider the conduct of a person after they are notified that a declaration is being considered.⁷ In particular, the Commissioner may take into account: a person's willingness to discuss their access actions and whether these constitute an abuse of process or are manifestly unreasonable; and whether the person engages in fresh access actions, directed either at the agency or the OAIC that are similar in nature to access actions under consideration by the Commissioner. The Commissioner's general view is that, at this active stage of the proceedings, it is inappropriate for a person to make fresh FOI requests for documents in the possession of the agency, or the OAIC, relating to the decision to apply for or commence consideration of a vexatious applicant declaration. The person will have an opportunity in the proceedings initiated by the Commissioner to raise issues of concern or to request information about the matters under consideration.

12.13 The Information Commissioner may consider an agency's FOI administration, either generally or in relation to the person whose actions are under consideration. In particular, the Commissioner may consider whether:

- deficiencies in agency administration impaired its processing of the person's requests
- actions taken by the agency contributed to or might explain the person's access actions⁸
- the agency consulted with the person about their access actions before applying to the Commissioner for a declaration
- deficiencies in agency FOI administration should be addressed by the agency before further consideration is given to making a declaration.⁹

12.14 In deciding whether a ground has been established under s 89L, the Commissioner cannot consider contact between a person and an agency that is not part of an access action (for example, complaints and general correspondence).¹⁰ A broader pattern of contact between a person and an agency may nevertheless be relevant in deciding whether as a matter of discretion a declaration should be made under s 89K.

12.15 In considering whether the discretion to make a declaration is justified on the material, the Information Commissioner is not bound to only consider the limb of s 89L(1) that is advanced by the agency or minister in its application for a declaration. The Commissioner can decide that a different ground has been established.¹¹

⁷ See *Official Trustee in Bankruptcy v Gargan (No 2)* [2009] FCA 398 [12] and *Attorney-General v Tareq Altaranesi* [2013] NSWSC 63 [16].

⁸ See *Registrar of Indigenous Corporations and 'IO'* [2016] AICmr 34.

⁹ See *Registrar of Indigenous Corporations and 'IO'* [2016] AICmr 34.

¹⁰ *Re Sweeney and Australian Information Commissioner and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (Joined Party)* [2014] AATA 539 [49]-[50] (hereafter *Re Sweeney and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority*).

¹¹ *Francis v Administrative Appeals Tribunal* [2016] FCA 639 [40].

Repeatedly engaging in access actions

- 12.16 One ground on which a declaration may be made is that a person has ‘repeatedly engaged’ in access actions that involve an abuse of process (s 89L(1)(a)). The term ‘repeatedly’ is not defined in the FOI Act and can be interpreted within its ordinary meaning: ‘done, made or said again and again’.¹²
- 12.17 There is no fixed number of access actions required to establish a pattern of repeated requests. Whether such a pattern exists will depend in part on the nature of the abuse of process that is said to be involved. For example, if it is asserted that a person is repeating a request that has earlier been processed and decided by an agency, or is harassing agency employees,¹³ a small number of requests may establish a pattern. On the other hand, if it is asserted that a person has repeatedly made different requests that in combination unreasonably interfere with an agency’s operations, a higher number of requests may be required to establish a pattern of repeated requests.
- 12.18 The agency or minister is not required to show that all of the conduct of the person is an abuse of process. For the purposes of s 89L(1)(a), ‘[i]t is sufficient that some of the access actions can be characterised as an ‘abuse of process for the access action.’¹⁴
- 12.19 There may be overlap with the other grounds for making a declaration, namely, that a person is engaging in ‘a particular access action’ that would either involve an abuse of process (s 89L(1)(b)) or be manifestly unreasonable (s 89L(1)(c)). In a case in which access actions may independently be regarded as an abuse of process or unreasonable, deciding whether those actions are part of a pattern of repeated requests may not be a decisive issue.

Engaging in a particular access action

- 12.20 A declaration may be based on one access action only – specifically, ‘a particular access action’ that would involve either an abuse of process (s 89L(1)(b)) or be manifestly unreasonable (s 89L(1)(c)).¹⁵
- 12.21 A declaration that is based on one access action may include terms or conditions that go beyond that access action.¹⁶ For example, the declaration may provide that an agency is not required to consider future requests from the person (either of the same kind or generally) unless the person has the written permission of the Information Commissioner to proceed. (See below at [12.45].)

¹² *Re Sweeney and Australian Information Commissioner and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [43], quoting the Macquarie Dictionary; *National Archives Australia and Ronald Price (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 16 [33].

¹³ See for example, *Commonwealth Ombudsman and ‘S’* [2013] AICmr 31 [10] (seven FOI requests plus internal review requests).

¹⁴ *Re Sweeney and Australian Information Commissioner and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [47].

¹⁵ See for example, *Department of Defence and Ronald Francis* [2014] AICmr 68 [12].

¹⁶ *Department of Defence and Ronald Francis* [2014] AICmr 68 [34]; and below at [12.45].

Abuse of process — harassment and intimidation

12.22 The terms ‘harassing’ and ‘intimidating’ are not defined in the FOI Act and therefore have their ordinary meaning. To ‘harass’ a person is to disturb them persistently or torment them; and to ‘intimidate’ a person is to use fear to force or deter the actions of the person, or to overawe them.¹⁷

12.23 The occurrence of harassment or intimidation must be approached objectively.¹⁸ The issue to be resolved is whether a person has engaged in behaviour that could reasonably be expected on at least some occasions to have the effect of, for example, tormenting, threatening or disturbing agency employees. An agency will be expected to explain or provide evidence of the impact that a person’s access actions have had on agency employees, though this evidence must be considered in context with other matters.¹⁹ Relevant evidence might include any workplace health and safety measures that the agency has taken, the involvement of police, or whether a workplace protection order has been sought.

12.24 Harassment and intimidation may be established by a variety of circumstances that include:

- the content, tone and language of a person’s correspondence with an agency, especially if language is used that is insulting, offensive or abusive
- unsubstantiated, derogatory or inflammatory allegations against agency staff²⁰
- requests that are targeted at personal information of agency employees²¹
- requests that are designed to intimidate agency staff and force them to capitulate on another issue²²
- requests of a repetitive nature that are apparently made with the intention of annoying or harassing agency staff²³
- a person’s refusal or failure to alter dubious conduct after being requested by an agency to do so.²⁴

12.25 Those circumstances, if present in an individual case, must nevertheless be assessed objectively in a broader FOI context. It is not contrary to the requirements or spirit of the

¹⁷ Macquarie Online Dictionary.

¹⁸ *Department of Defence and ‘W’* [2013] AICmr 2 [31]; *Commonwealth Ombudsman and ‘S’* [2013] AICmr 31 [22] and *Comcare and Price* [2014] AICmr 24 [19].

¹⁹ In *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [57] the AAT, while affirming the objective test, commented that ‘an individual or employee must be shown to have felt harassed and/or intimidated in fact’. This evidence can be presented in an agency submission, by way of description of the agency’s experience of the person’s access actions.

²⁰ *Department of Defence and ‘W’* [2013] AICmr 2 [28]–[32]; *Comcare and Price* [2014] AICmr 24 [16]–[20] and *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [60].

²¹ *Commonwealth Ombudsman and ‘S’* [2013] AICmr 31 [16]–[18].

²² *Commonwealth Ombudsman and ‘S’* [2013] AICmr 31 [19]–[20].

²³ *Ford v Child Support Registrar* [2009] FCA 328.

²⁴ *Department of Defence and ‘W’* [2013] AICmr 2 [33]; *Comcare and Price* [2014] AICmr 24 [21].

FOI Act that an FOI request will contain additional commentary or complaints by the FOI applicant.²⁵ These may provide context for a request, or be compatible with the stated objects of the FOI Act of facilitating scrutiny, comment and review of government activity.

Abuse of process — unreasonable interference with agency operations

12.26 An abuse of process that is grounded in unreasonably interfering with an agency's operations can, under s 89L, arise from either a particular access action (s 89L(1)(b)) or a pattern of repeated access actions (s 89L(1)(a)). The more usual situation will be a pattern of repeated requests, bearing in mind that an agency can initiate a practical refusal process for a particular access action that could have an unreasonable workload impact on the agency (s 24).

12.27 Factors that may be considered in deciding whether there is a pattern of repeated access actions that unreasonably interfere with an agency's operations include:²⁶

- the total number of a person's access actions to the agency in a specific period, and in particular, whether a high number of access actions has led to a substantial or prolonged processing burden on the agency or a burden that is excessive and disproportionate to a reasonable exercise by an applicant of the right to engage in access actions
- the impact of the person's access actions on FOI administration in the agency, and in particular, whether a substantial workload impact has arisen from the nature of a person's access actions, such as multiple FOI requests that are poorly-framed or for documents that do not exist, requests for documents that have already been provided or to which access was refused, or requests that are difficult to discern and distinguish from other complaints a person has against the agency. It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that an individual, who may lack both expertise in dealing with government and a close knowledge of an agency's records management systems, may make access requests that are poorly framed, overlapping or cause inconvenience to an agency
- the impact of the person's access actions on other work in the agency, and in particular, whether specialist or senior staff have to be redeployed from other tasks to deal with FOI requests, or whether the requests have caused distress to staff or raised security concerns that required separate action

²⁵ *Australian Securities and Investments Commission and Sweeney* [2013] AICmr 62 [43], [49].

²⁶ These factors may be relevant also to the exercise of the discretionary power to make or not make a declaration. The application of the factors is discussed in *Australian Securities and Investments Commission and Sweeney* [2013] AICmr 62 [18]-[20], [30]-[49]; *Australian Prudential Regulation Authority and Sweeney* [2013] AICmr 63 [31]-[41]; and *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission* [63]-[78]. See also *Davies and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* [2013] AICmr 10 concerning factors relevant in deciding if a practical refusal reason exists for refusing a request.

- whether the agency has used other provisions under the FOI Act to lessen the impact of the person's access actions on its operations (see [12.11] above)
- the size of the agency and the resources it can reasonably allocate to FOI processing
- whether the person has cooperated reasonably with the agency to enable efficient FOI processing, including whether the person's access actions portray an immoderate prolongation of a separate grievance the person has against the agency, or the continued pursuit of a matter that has already been settled through proceedings in another dispute resolution forum
- whether the person has previously been declared vexatious
- whether deficiencies in an agency's FOI processing or general administration have contributed to or might explain a person's access actions (see [12.13] above).

12.28 The reference to 'unreasonable interference with agency operations' in s 89L(4) should be read alongside a similar phrase in s 24AA(1)(a)(i) for deciding whether a practical refusal reason exists in relation to an FOI request (namely, 'would substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the agency from its other operations', see Part 3 of these Guidelines). Both sections raise similar but not identical issues. The practical refusal power applies to a single FOI request (or two or more similar requests) that will have an unreasonable workload impact on an agency; whereas the vexatious applicant declaration power is more usually focused on whether the pattern of an applicant's behaviour may be interfering unreasonably with an agency's operations.²⁷

Abuse of process — circumventing court-imposed access restrictions

12.29 It will be a question of fact in the individual case whether a person has made an FOI access request or requests that are 'seeking to use the [FOI] Act for the purpose of circumventing restrictions on access to a document (or documents) imposed by a court' (s 89L(4)(c)).²⁸ It will be necessary to compare the terms of a person's request with the terms of a court order.

Abuse of process — other types

12.30 The three categories of 'abuse of process' listed in s 89L(4) are not an exhaustive list. 'Abuse of process' can include behaviour of another kind, as illustrated by the following examples of declarations under s 89K:

²⁷ *Australian Securities and Investments Commission and Sweeney* [2013] AICmr 62 [16]-[18].

²⁸ See also the exemption under section 46 of the FOI Act; where disclosure would be in contempt of court and Part 5 of these Guidelines.

- a declaration made against a person who had not cooperated reasonably with an agency in removing offensive language from FOI access requests and endeavouring to comply with the formal requirements of the Act for making requests²⁹
- a declaration made against a person whose particular access action (to amend personal records) repeated an issue that had been addressed and resolved in earlier tribunal proceedings and did not raise any new issues.³⁰
- a declaration made against a person who made multiple access requests directed to documents held by judicial officers after being advised that s 5(1)(b) of the FOI Act excludes the holder of judicial office from its operation.³¹

A particular access action that would be manifestly unreasonable

12.31 This ground applies only to a particular access action that would be manifestly unreasonable. The term ‘manifestly unreasonable’ is not defined in the FOI Act. The factors that are relevant in applying this ground are likely to be similar to those discussed above in relation to whether a particular access action or series of actions would be an abuse of process under the FOI Act. It will also be relevant to consider whether an agency could more appropriately respond to a manifestly unreasonable access action in other ways, such as consultation with the applicant, either informally or under s 24AB, to establish if a practical refusal reason exists for refusing a request.

Procedure

Applying for a vexatious applicant declaration

12.32 An agency or minister who applies for a vexatious applicant declaration has the onus of establishing that the declaration should be made (s 89K(3)). As noted above at [12.7], an agency must establish a clear and convincing need for a declaration.

12.33 In general, prior to deciding to apply for a declaration an agency should tell the person concerned that the option is being considered and invite them to consult with a view to removing the need for a declaration. If this has not occurred, the agency should include the reasons for not telling the person concerned in their application to the Information Commissioner.

12.34 An application for a vexatious applicant declaration must include:

²⁹ *Department of Defence and ‘W’* [2013] AICmr 2 [38]-[42]; *Comcare and Price* [2014] AICmr 24 [20]-[22].

³⁰ *Department of Defence and Ronald Francis* [2014] AICmr 68 [13], [30].

³¹ *Federal Court of Australia and Garrett* [2015] AICmr 4 [57]-[60].

- background information about the person's access actions and how the agency or minister dealt with those access actions
- a clear statement of the grounds on which the agency or minister seeks the declaration
- evidence that supports those grounds, such as copies of correspondence with the person, or file notes documenting interactions between the person and agency staff
- any proposed terms or conditions which the agency or minister believes the declaration should include (see [12.45] for examples of previous terms and conditions in declarations).

12.35 In preparing the proposed terms or conditions, the agency or minister should consider:

- the length of the declaration sought (in general, the Information Commissioner is of the view that a declaration should be made for definite period, however, extenuating circumstances may require an ongoing declaration)
- whether the declaration should apply to any outstanding access actions (see [12.38]-[12.44]), and
- whether the agency or minister is seeking that the person be named in the published decision (see [12.48]).

12.36 If the agency or minister contends there has been unreasonable interference with the operations of an agency under s 89L(4)(b), an agency should provide:

- information about the proportion of requests by the person in relation to requests by other FOI applicants, and
- submissions on the number of hours spent on the person's access actions.

Submissions from the person

12.37 The Information Commissioner cannot make a vexatious applicant declaration without first giving the person concerned an opportunity to make written or oral submissions (s 89L(3)). The person will be given the opportunity to make written submissions and, if required, oral submissions.

12.38 The OAIC encourages the agency or minister to provide the person with a copy of their application and attachments at the same time as making its application to the OAIC. If the applicant has not already been provided a copy of the application, the OAIC will generally share the application with the applicant. Similarly, where the Commissioner has decided on his or her own initiative that a declaration may be warranted, the Commissioner will provide the person with the same kind of information that would have been expected in an application from an agency or minister. Submissions will generally be shared between the parties.

Status of current and future access actions

- 12.39 In making a declaration, the Information Commissioner may decide that an agency is no longer required to process an existing access action³² or that an agency is not required to process access actions commenced after a particular date.³³ Such a term is likely to only be made in circumstances where the specific access actions on hand are shown to involve an abuse of process.
- 12.40 In exercising a discretionary power which impacts an individual, the Information Commissioner will have regard to the principle that ‘the impact on the individual should be proportionate to the interests which the decision maker is seeking to protect’.³⁴ The decision will involve balancing the person’s right of access to documents under the FOI Act against the principle that the legal right of access should not be abused.
- 12.41 In *Registrar of Indigenous Corporations and ‘IO’* [2016] AICmr 34, the Information Commissioner decided that a declaration would apply to access actions made after the person was advised that the application was being considered by the agency, on the basis that repeated engagement in access actions after that date involved an abuse of process for some of the individual access actions and when viewed as a whole, and because of the likely burden of processing the outstanding requests on the agency (see [75]-[80]).³⁵ In *Federal Court of Australia and Garrett* [2015] AICmr 4, the Commissioner declined to make such an order in relation to three access actions, including two requests made after the application for a declaration was made (at [72]).
- 12.42 The FOI Act does not expressly state whether an agency or minister is required to continue processing access actions that were on hand when the agency or minister applied to the Information Commissioner for a declaration, or were received while the Information Commissioner is considering the application. Given the significance of suspending a person’s rights under the FOI Act, it will usually be prudent for agencies to continue to process the access actions. Deficiencies in an agency’s administration in processing FOI requests of a person sought to be declared vexatious may be a factor weighing against making a declaration.³⁶ The OAIC should be advised if any fresh access actions are made while the application is being considered by the Commissioner.
- 12.43 In circumstances where an agency or minister is making an application to the Information Commissioner for a term of the declaration providing that the agency or minister is not required to process existing access actions, the agency or minister should consult the OAIC about whether existing access actions must be processed, including any fresh actions made while the matter is being considered by the Commissioner.

³² *Francis v Australian Information Commissioner* [2015] AATA 936; *Commonwealth Ombudsman and ‘S’* [2013] AICmr 31.

³³ *Australian Taxation Office and Garrett* [2015] AICmr 33; *Registrar of Indigenous Corporations and ‘IO’* [2016] AICmr 34.

³⁴ *Re Sweeney and Australian Information Commissioner and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority* [76], citing *Edelsten v Wilcox and FC* (1988) 15 ALD 546.

³⁵ See also *Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations and ‘PW’ (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 6 [60]-[64].

³⁶ *National Archives Australia and Ronald Price (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 16 [68]-[79].

- 12.44 The Information Commissioner may approve an extension of time for processing an FOI request, for example under s 15AC of the FOI Act, until a decision is made on the application for a declaration. The Commissioner may also discuss the processing of those actions with the person during consideration of the application for a declaration. Where an agency submits that a particular IC review application is an abuse of process for that particular access action, the relevant IC review will be put on hold pending the OAIC's consideration of the application for a vexatious applicant declaration.
- 12.45 Agencies and ministers should be aware that even if an extension of time is sought and approved, the Commissioner may ultimately decline to make a declaration in the terms sought.

Terms and conditions

- 12.46 A declaration may be made subject to terms and conditions (s 89M(1)), including that an agency or minister may refuse to deal with an access action without the written permission of the Information Commissioner, and the Commissioner may refuse to consider an IC review application from the person (s 89M(2)). In all previous cases in which the Information Commissioner has declared an individual to be a vexatious applicant under s 89K of the FOI Act, the terms of the declaration have had effect with reference to the particular agency that sought the declaration. Terms and conditions that have been imposed on declarations made under the FOI Act include that:

- an agency was not required to consider any fresh access actions from the person unless: the person directed the FOI request or application to the nominated email address or fax number for FOI requests and did not address or send requests to any other officer, individual, government or non-government entity; the correspondence was appropriately marked and confined to describing the documents to which access was sought or the reasons for seeking internal review; the correspondence did not contain obscene or abusive language or allegations of wrongdoing against employees³⁷
- the OAIC would not consider any request by the person under s 15 of the FOI Act for access to a document relating to any matter between the person and the agency unless the terms of the request were submitted in writing by the person and the request met the requirements of s 15(2)(b) of the FOI Act and was not vexatious in nature³⁸
- an agency was not required to consider any fresh access actions from the person without the written permission of the Information Commissioner, who would first decide whether the request met the requirements of s 15(2)(b) of the FOI Act and was not vexatious in nature³⁹
- an agency was not required to process a particular FOI request referred to in an agency's application for a declaration, or to consider any future request from the

³⁷ *National Archives Australia and Ronald Price (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 16 [2].

³⁸ *National Archives Australia and Ronald Price (Freedom of information)* [2019] AICmr 16 [2].

³⁹ *Department of Defence and 'W'* [2013] AICmr 2; *Comcare and Price* [2014] AICmr 24.

person for access to documents relating to the personal affairs of staff of the agency, without the written permission of the Information Commissioner⁴⁰

- an agency was not required to consider any future application from a person to amend or annotate a personal record, if the application related to three specified documents, without the written permission of the Information Commissioner⁴¹
- a person could only engage in access actions with respect to a particular agency on specified terms and conditions, including that the person shall not engage in:
 - more than one access action in any calendar month
 - an access action within 14 days of a previous action⁴²
- a person could not engage in particular requests:
 - that seek access to more than three documents
 - that include material not essential to the making of a request or application
 - for documents previously within the possession or control of the applicant or provided by the agency to the applicant or that were the subject of an access action by or on behalf of the applicant
 - that use a pseudonym to make a request, or
 - made by an agent⁴³
- an agency was not required to consider any future FOI requests from a person that duplicates or substantially duplicates any earlier request, or where the documents requested:
 - relate to current proceedings involving the person before a court or tribunal and it would be reasonable for the person to use the procedures of the court or tribunal to seek access to those documents
 - relate to the taxation affairs of some other individual or entity and the person has not provided an authority or consent from that other individual or entity, or
 - relate to the administration of a prior FOI request or the investigation of a complaint the person has made against the agency, until that request or complaint has been finalised.

However, if one of these circumstances existed, the person could apply to the Information Commissioner for written permission to make the request⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Commonwealth Ombudsman and 'S'* [2013] AICmr 31.

⁴¹ *Francis and Australian Information Commissioner (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 936.

⁴² *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission*.

⁴³ *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission*.

⁴⁴ *Australian Taxation Office and Garrett* [2015] AICmr 33.

- two agencies, which were Commonwealth courts, were not required to consider any future FOI or internal review request, unless the Information Commissioner granted written permission for the request or application to be made. The Commissioner would not consider any request unless it met the requirements of s 5 and sought documents relating to the management and administration of registry and office resources.⁴⁵

12.47 An agency can nevertheless decide to process a person's access request to which a declaration would otherwise apply.

General considerations

12.48 Although declarations have been made including an express term that a person is not permitted to engage in particular FOI requests using either a pseudonym or an agent, the Information Commissioner considers those inclusions to be useful in some circumstances to provide clarity to the parties but not required by law. Requests made using a pseudonym or through an agent are included in vexatious declarations by operation of law in the absence of an express provision. In both cases, it is the subject of a declaration who is making the access request – either through a pseudonym or as the principal in an agency relationship.

12.49 The agency involved must form a reasonable view that the pseudonymous applicant is, in fact, the subject of the declaration before considering the request in the context of an existing declaration. Similarly, the government agency must be reasonably satisfied that an agency relationship exists between a third-party applicant and the subject of a declaration based on the particular facts and circumstances of each matter before considering the request in the context of an existing declaration.

12.50 Where a third-party makes an access request in their own personal capacity in the same or substantially the same terms as an access request made by a subject of a declaration, the agency must process that access request in accordance with the FOI Act.

Publication of declaration and decision

12.51 The Information Commissioner will generally publish reasons for making a declaration, but will generally not publish reasons for not making a declaration (this may be reported in the OAIC Annual Report).

12.52 Published reasons may either name the person concerned or identify them using a pseudonym. If the person is not named, the declaration may provide that an agency named in the declaration, in performing functions or exercising powers under the FOI Act, may disclose the person's name to another agency or minister to which the FOI Act applies.

Recent decisions in which a declaration not made

12.53 Decisions in which the Information Commissioner decided not to make a declaration include:

⁴⁵ Federal Court of Australia and Garrett [2015] AICmr 4.

- An agency received 31 access actions between December 2012 and November 2015, 20 of which were made in the last financial year. While that constituted repeated engagement in access actions, the Information Commissioner was not satisfied that there had been an unreasonable interference with the operations of the agency. The decision noted that the individual requests did not appear complex or repetitive in nature and were related to the applicant's personal information.
- An agency received more than 62 access actions between January 2010 and October 2015. The Information Commissioner decided that the access actions in question did not involve harassment and intimidation. While correspondence that could be considered disturbing or harassing was sent to staff, it was outside the FOI process and there was no evidence that the FOI process or requests were used as a way to harass or intimidate staff. The Commissioner also did not consider there to have been an unreasonable interference with the operations of the agency, given that there had been only six access actions in the latest three year period.
- An agency received five FOI requests on one day from an applicant in the week after a complaint was said to have been made about the handling of an earlier FOI request. Without consulting the person, the agency interpreted the requests to be motivated by that grievance. The Information Commissioner found that the agency had provided no evidence to substantiate a claim that there had been harassment or intimidation of an individual or an employee of the agency as alleged and that the tone of the requests was cooperative and courteous.
- An agency received three FOI requests for documents in circumstances where access to those documents had been refused by the Federal Court during the discovery process. The Information Commissioner found that the agency's application and submissions had not identified any authorities to support its contention that it would be an abuse of process for a person to seek to rely on a document obtained under the FOI Act during court proceedings in circumstances where access to that document had been refused during the discovery process. The Court's decision did not have the effect of placing restrictions on access to the documents by other means.

Making, revoking or varying a vexatious applicant declaration

- 12.54 A vexatious applicant declaration must be made in writing. The person against whom a declaration is made must be notified as soon as practicable by the agency, minister or the Information Commissioner (as the case requires) (ss 89K(4), 89M(3)).
- 12.55 A vexatious applicant declaration may be revoked or varied (s 33 of the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901* (the AI Act)).
- 12.56 The power to revoke or vary a vexatious applicant declaration under s 33(3) of the AI Act is exercisable 'in the like manner and subject to the like conditions' as the original decision. In order to vary a vexatious applicant declaration, the Information Commissioner must be satisfied of the grounds in s 89L at the time of the variation. While the information relied

upon in making the original decision may continue to be relevant, the Information Commissioner will also need to consider any new, relevant information that has arisen since that time and comply with procedural fairness obligations contained in s 89L(3).

Review

12.57 A decision by the Information Commissioner to declare a person to be a vexatious applicant is a decision that can be reviewed by the AAT (s 89N).⁴⁶ The decision can also be subject to review by the Federal Court of Australia or the Federal Circuit Court of Australia.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Declarations made by the Commissioner were reviewed by the AAT in *Re Sweeney and Australian Securities and Investments Commission, Re Sweeney and Australian Prudential Regulation Authority and Francis and Australian Information Commissioner (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 936.

⁴⁷ *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977*.



Australian Government

Office of the Australian Information Commissioner

Part 13 – Information Publication Scheme

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Angelene Falk
Australian Information Commissioner

OAIC

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Part 13 — Information publication scheme

Overview

Part 13 of the Freedom of Information guidelines (FOI guidelines) sets out, and provides guidance in relation to, the Information Publication Scheme (IPS) requirements that apply to Australian Government agencies subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*. This includes guidance on:

- principles that should guide agencies to meet their IPS obligations [13.16 - 13.17]
- the overlapping publication requirements [13.24 - 13.25]
- the structure and contents of an agency plan [13.30 - 13.32], including a Model Agency Plan [Annexure A]
- ensuring the currency of IPS entries [13.91]
- how to meet the requirement to publish contact details of an officer under s 8(2)(i)) [13.107 - 13.109]
- examples of categories of information that would not ordinarily fall within the definition of operational information [13.123]
- the types of ‘other information’ that agencies should consider making available [13.135] and guidance as to issues to consider in deciding what information should be published [13.138]
- relevant governance and leadership arrangements, including the appointment of an Information Champion [13.143 - 13.146]
- publication of IPS entries on a website [13.147 - 13.151]
- review of agency IPS compliance [13.163 - 13.165]
- the Information Commissioner’s powers to investigate complaints about an agency’s compliance [13.166 - 13.168] and monitoring and reporting of the administration of agencies’ IPS [13.169 - 13.171].

Introduction

13.1 Part II of the FOI Act establishes an IPS for Australian Government agencies subject to the FOI Act. The IPS requires agencies to publish a broad range of information on their website and authorises agencies to proactively publish other information. Agencies must also publish a plan that explains how they intend to implement and administer the IPS (an agency plan).

13.2 The IPS underpins a pro-disclosure culture across government and is one of a number of mechanisms through which government-held information is made available to the public. Other mechanisms that reflect the pro-disclosure goals of the FOI Act include the ability of agencies to

release information administratively,¹ the publication of information released through an FOI request on agencies' disclosure logs² and self-service options which allow people to access their own personal information (for example, MyGov).

13.3 The IPS requires agencies to regularly consider and publish information that is of value to the public. The IPS requirements also reflect the object of the FOI Act: that information held by government is a national resource to be managed for public purposes (s 3(3)).

13.4 Publication of government information can stimulate innovation and economic prosperity. It can also enhance participatory democracy by assisting the public to better understand how government makes decisions and administers programs. An informed community can participate more effectively in government processes and contribute to better policy and decisions. Transparency in government can also lessen the risk that people will be disadvantaged in dealings with government through lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding of government processes.

13.5 The IPS sets minimum requirements for publication of information and supports publication of a wide range of information (s 8(4)). Agencies are encouraged to identify and publish additional information, beyond the minimum requirements of s 8(2) of the FOI Act. Further, agencies can take steps to make existing information more accessible to members of the public.

13.6 The IPS requirements are intended to facilitate and promote public access to information promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost. Strong commitment to proactive disclosure through the IPS is not only consistent with the objects of the FOI Act and supports Australia's democratic values; it may also reduce the need for applicants to seek formal release of documents through FOI requests.

Elements of the IPS

13.7 The IPS requires Australian Government agencies to which the FOI Act applies to:

- publish an agency plan (ss 8(1) and 8(2)(a))
- publish specified categories of information (s 8(2))
- consider proactively publishing other government information (s 8(4)).

13.8 Together, these 3 elements are referred to in these Guidelines as an agency's IPS entry. Individual agencies' IPS entries constitute the IPS.

13.9 Agencies must have regard to the objects of the FOI Act and these Guidelines in complying with the IPS requirements (ss 9A and 93A). These Guidelines provide information about the IPS requirements applying to agencies. They also include recommendations and guidance to encourage better practice.

¹ See s 3A(2)(b) of the FOI Act and Parts [3.2] – [3.5] of the FOI Guidelines (Access to government information – administrative release).

² Section 11C of the FOI Act and Part 14 of the FOI Guidelines.

13.10 Agencies are also required to keep their IPS entry accurate, up-to-date and complete.

13.11 The IPS does not apply to ministers' offices. However, ministers are subject to other FOI Act requirements, including the obligation to give access to documents on request under Part III of the FOI Act and the obligation to publish a disclosure log under s 11C (see Part 14 of these Guidelines). As noted above [13.6], proactive disclosure of documents is likely to reduce reliance on formal access requests under the FOI Act.

The IPS and disclosure log requirements

13.12 The FOI Act requires agencies to have both an IPS entry and a disclosure log. These are distinct and separate requirements under the FOI Act.

13.13 The purpose of the IPS is to make more information available to the public by mandating the publication of specified categories of information and authorising other information to be published. Regular and active consideration of which information is of value to the public will assist agencies to meet the legislative intent of Part II of the FOI Act in making that information publicly available on their website. As noted above [13.1]) the requirement for agencies to have an IPS entry is contained in Part II of the FOI Act.

13.14 If an agency gives access to a document in response to an FOI request, it is required to publish that information to the public on a website (the **disclosure log**) within 10 days of giving access to the information (subject to certain exceptions for personal and business information that it would be unreasonable to publish – see Part 14 of these Guidelines). The disclosure log is therefore a list of all the information in documents that the agency has released in response to FOI requests, unless an exception applies. The rationale for the disclosure log requirement is that if certain information is of interest to an individual, it may also be of interest to others. Publication of information released in response to an FOI request is therefore likely to enhance transparency and accountability and to reduce the need for agencies to respond to individual FOI requests because the information is publicly available. The requirement for agencies to have a disclosure log is contained in s 11C of the FOI Act.

Guiding principles

13.15 The FOI Act contains 6 principles that should guide agencies in meeting their IPS obligations:

- agency plans and IPS compliance should further the objects of the FOI Act
- information published by an agency under the IPS should be easily discoverable, understandable and machine-readable
- published information should be accessible — in particular, it should comply with an agency's obligation to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.0 Level AA (WCAG 2.0) see [13.157]
- agencies are encouraged to adopt the publication framework set out in these Guidelines, to enhance accessibility through a consistent look and feel to IPS entries across all agencies

- published information should, so far as it is reasonable and practicable, be made available for reuse on open licensing terms, to enhance the economic and social value of the information
- published information should be reviewed regularly for accuracy, currency and completeness.

13.16 Agencies are also encouraged to have regard to the 8 principles on open public sector information published by the Australian Information Commissioner.³ The principles are:

Principle 1: Open access to information — a default position

Principle 2: Engaging the community

Principle 3: Effective information governance

Principle 4: Robust information asset management

Principle 5: Discoverable and useable information

Principle 6: Clear reuse rights

Principle 7: Appropriate charging for access

Principle 8: Transparent enquiry and complaints processes.

Open by design

13.17 The proactive disclosure of government-held information promotes open government and advances our system of representative democracy.⁴ Australian Government agencies are strongly encouraged to commit to being ‘Open by Design’ by embedding a culture of transparency within their agency and by prioritising, promoting and resourcing proactive disclosure of information they hold which is of value to the public.

13.18 To build a culture of transparency, agencies should continually consider what documents they can make pro-actively available and adopt a pro-disclosure approach when deciding what information to publish. It is recommended that documents be published if they are of value and interest to the public.

13.19 Agencies should be attuned to what is of interest to the community and make that information available. Agencies can demonstrate transparency by proactively publishing information with current relevance. This may also reduce the number of FOI requests made for that information.

13.20 Agencies may decide not to publish a document that is otherwise required to be published under s 8(2) if ss 8C(1) or (2) apply (for example, if secrecy provisions apply). In those circumstances, agencies are strongly encouraged to record the reasons for the decision not to publish the document on an IPS information register, (see [13.40 - 13.44] for more information about maintaining an IPS

³ See: <https://www.oaic.gov.au/about-the-OAIC/information-policy/information-policy-resources/principles-on-open-public-sector-information>

⁴ See s 3(2) of the FOI Act.

information register), and regularly review the decision to ensure that ss 8C(1) or (2) continue to apply.

13.21 Information published on an agency's IPS entry must be accurate, up-to-date, complete and accessible to the public.

13.22 Agencies should consider how they can promote proactive publication arrangements across their organisation and clarify documents they already have publicly available, to reduce the need for formal access requests.

Overlapping publication requirements

13.23 The requirement to publish certain government-held information may arise from more than one source, including the IPS requirements in Part II of the FOI Act. For example, agencies are required to publish their annual reports on the Transparency Portal after the annual report has been tabled in Parliament, and also to publish the annual report as part of the agency's IPS (s 8(2)(e) of the FOI Act).

13.24 The requirement to publish information arising under a different legislative scheme or policy does not override the requirement to publish the same information on an agency's IPS entry if publication is also required under Part II of the FOI Act.

13.25 However, it may be appropriate to provide a link to a document from the IPS entry if it is already published on another website, rather than creating multiple copies of the same document. Providing multiple access points to information increases accessibility and searchability.

13.26 It is recognised that many agencies publish a wide range of corporate information and it may not always be practicable to link to individual documents from the IPS entry. In these circumstances, it may be appropriate for the IPS entry to link to other agency websites containing links to information that the agency is required or permitted to publish under the IPS – for example, to a 'Corporate Information' or 'Operational Information' webpage.

Agency plan

13.27 Section 8(1) of the FOI Act requires agencies to prepare a plan showing:

- (a) the information the agency proposes to publish under the IPS (its IPS entry)
- (b) how, and to whom, the agency proposes to publish that information
- (c) other steps the agency will take to comply with IPS requirements.

13.28 The purpose of an agency plan is to explain how an agency will comply with the IPS requirements.

13.29 Section 8B requires agencies to ensure that all information the agency publishes under the IPS, including the agency plan, is 'accurate, up-to-date and complete'. Agencies should therefore ensure that the agency plan is regularly reviewed and updated where necessary. This review could be undertaken as part of an agency's annual strategic planning.

13.30 An agency plan and IPS entry can be strengthened by inviting public comment on them. Agencies should explain in their plan how they will evaluate and act on any comments received.

Structure and contents of the agency plan

13.31 Agencies should consider adopting the following headings in their agency plan, to promote consistency across government and make it easier for the public to access agency information:

- establishing and administering the agency's IPS entry
- IPS information architecture
- information required to be published under the IPS (s 8(2))
- other information to be published (s 8(4))
- IPS compliance review (s 8F).

13.32 Each of these headings is discussed in more detail below. In addition, an agency plan template is available at **Annexure A** — Model Agency plan .

13.33 The agency plan should explain how the agency will facilitate public access to the information published in an agency's IPS entry. Matters that can be addressed include:

- whether information will be published on the agency's website, or on another website, for example, the website of the portfolio department (where applicable), legislation.gov.au or data.gov.au
- the headings under which information will be published (see [13.152] below for a suggested heading structure)
- how the IPS entry will be clearly identified on the agency website (for example, by using the IPS icon recommended by the Information Commissioner in the Guidance for agency websites: 'Access to information' webpage)⁵
- whether a sitemap and search function will be provided
- whether an alert service will be provided for changes or additions to the IPS and how a member of the public can subscribe to the alert service
- how the agency will comply with its WCAG 2.0 Level AA obligations in establishing and maintaining its IPS entry⁶
- the mechanism(s) that will be adopted by the agency for inviting community feedback on its IPS entry and compliance, and how the agency will evaluate and respond to comments received.

⁵ Available as an agency resource at www.oaic.gov.au

⁶ The Digital Transformation Agency strongly encourages agencies to meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA which provides a more accessible experience. See: <https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/digital-service-standard/digital-service-standard-criteria/9-make-it-accessible>.

Establishing and administering the agency's IPS entry

13.34 The agency plan should explain the steps the agency will take to prepare its IPS entry and to manage the entry on an ongoing basis. The following matters could be addressed:

- who (within the senior executive) is responsible for leading the agency's work on IPS compliance
- the resources allocated to establishing and administering the agency's IPS entry
- the processes and timetable for identifying information required to be published under s 8(2), for publishing additional information under s 8(4), and for adding to or revising the agency's IPS entry
- measures being taken to ensure that the agency's IPS entry is accurate, up-to-date and complete - discussed below at [13.154 – 13.155]
- measures (if any) being taken to improve an agency's information asset management framework, to support its IPS compliance, see [13.36 – 13.37]
- whether the agency has developed an internal IPS information register to assist it to efficiently identify documents for publication, record decisions made in relation to publication and systematically review IPS information for accuracy, currency and completeness, see [13.40 – 13.43]
- provide details of access charges (if any) that the agency may impose for accessing information published under the IPS, and how charges will be calculated (ss 8D(4) and(5)), see [13.158 – 13.163]

13.35 The details of the agency plan are likely to reflect the agency's size, functions and reporting obligations, and its resources and skills in information and communications technology, and information management. The agency plan could elaborate on those matters.

Information asset management framework

13.36 An information asset management framework brings together key corporate planning activities and information asset management.

13.37 An information asset is 'a body of information, defined and managed as a single unit so it can be understood, shared, protected and exploited efficiently'.⁷

13.38 Information asset management involves developing a process to manage, develop and guide the acquisition, use and disposal of information assets. This process is intended to maximise service delivery potential and manage risks and costs over an information asset's lifecycle.

⁷ For further information about information assets see 'What is an information asset' published by the National Archives of Australia at <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/information-assets-factsheet.pdf>.

13.39 An information asset management framework is a subset of an agency's wider asset management framework and deals specifically with information assets.⁸ It would ideally be linked to an agency's records management system and IPS information register.

IPS information register

13.40 It is recommended that agencies build IPS publication considerations into clearance processes when developing or reviewing all new corporate, policy and procedural documents.

13.41 The pro-disclosure objects of the FOI Act support agencies in adopting a starting position that all corporate, policy and procedural documents will be published on an agency's IPS unless there are clear and documented reasons for not doing so.⁹ Further consideration should also be given to whether other documents created by the agency (see s 8(4) and [13.131 – 13.138]), can be published if they meet the criteria identified at [13.42] below.

13.42 In deciding whether a document will be published following clearance an agency could consider:

- whether the document contains information of interest to the public or information of public value
- whether the document contains information that may assist members of the public understand the work of the agency or understand the decisions it makes
- whether the document would be released if access was requested under the FOI Act
- whether, if the document contains exempt matter, limited redactions can be made to create a version that is suitable for publication.

13.43 It is recommended that the agency make and record a decision about whether the document will be published on the IPS when finalised and the reasons for not doing so (if a decision is made not to publish the document). Where a decision is taken not to publish a document on the IPS, agencies are encouraged to regularly review that decision, to check whether the reasons for non-publication continue to apply, and to publish the document when those reasons are no longer applicable. This approach assists agencies to meet the requirements of the FOI Act at section 8B, discussed below.

13.44 Section 8B of the FOI Act requires agencies to ensure that the information published on the IPS is 'accurate, up-to-date and complete'. The OAIC encourages agencies to develop and maintain an IPS information register to assist agencies ensure compliance with this requirement. The IPS information register can be incorporated into existing information asset management frameworks.

13.45 An IPS information register could include the following information:

⁸ For further discussion about information asset management frameworks, see the OAIC issues paper, *Towards an Australian Government Information Policy* (November 2010), at www.oaic.gov.au or [Towards an Australian Government Information Policy: Issues Paper 1 \(from the NLA web archive\)](#), November 2010

⁹ Section 8C(1) of the FOI Act provides that an agency is not required to publish exempt matter. Section 8C(2) provides that publication of particular information is not required if an enactment restricts or prohibits publication.

- the business area within the agency that is responsible for a particular document
- the date the document was created, and its revision history (including dates)
- the date the document was published on the IPS
- if a decision is made not to publish the document on the agency's IPS:
 - the date that decision was made
 - the name and/or position of the person who made the decision
 - the reason(s) for the decision not to publish the document
 - the date(s) the decision not to publish the document has been reviewed, the outcome of that review(s) and the name and/or position of the person who reviewed the decision
- the formats in which the document is available
- if the document is not published online, who may be contacted within the agency to arrange public access and the number of requests received.

Information required to be published under the IPS

13.46 The agency plan should describe the information an agency will publish as required by s 8(2). Those requirements are described in more detail below. A series of headings that agencies can use to enhance public access to government information published under the IPS is suggested below at [13.153].

Other information to be published under the IPS

13.47 The agency plan should describe the information an agency will publish under s 8(4), discussed further below at [13.131 – 13.138]. The plan should specify how the agency has or will identify other information to be published. The timetable for publishing the information should also be included.

IPS compliance review

13.48 Agencies are required to complete a review of their IPS compliance at least once every 5 years, in conjunction with the Information Commissioner (ss 8F(a) and 9(1)). The OAIC's compliance review program is described at [13.163 – 13.168].

13.49 The OAIC encourages agencies to undertake more regular reviews, and to regularly review the individual elements of its IPS, noting the requirement in s 8B that an agency must ensure that information published as required or permitted by Part II is accurate, up-to-date and complete. The agency plan should indicate when and how the agency will undertake its compliance reviews. The plans should also explain whether the public will be invited to comment on the agency's IPS entry as part of the compliance review.

Information required to be published under the IPS

13.50 Agencies are required by s 8(2) of the FOI Act to publish the following information:

- the agency plan (discussed above at [13.31 – 13.36])
- details of the structure of the agency’s organisation (for example, in the form of an organisation chart) [13.53 – 13.58] below
- details of the agency’s functions, including its decision-making powers and other powers affecting members of the public (or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities) [13.62 – 13.71] below
- details of appointments of officers of the agency that are made under Acts (other than Australian Public Service employees within the meaning of the *Public Service Act 1999* — such as appointments of statutory office holders [13.74 – 13.75] below
- the agency’s annual reports [13.78 – 13.79] below
- details of arrangements for members of the public to comment on specific policy proposals for which the agency is responsible, including how (and to whom) those comments may be made [13.82 – 13.84]
- information in documents to which the agency routinely gives access in response to requests under Part III (access to documents) of the FOI Act, except information that is otherwise exempt [13.87 – 13.100]
- information that the agency routinely provides to the Parliament in response to requests and orders from the Parliament [13.103 – 13.105]
- details of an officer (or officers) who can be contacted about access to the agency’s information or documents under the FOI Act [13.108 – 13.108]
- the agency’s operational information (information held by the agency to assist it to perform or exercise its functions or powers in making decisions or recommendations affecting members of the public — or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities — for example the agency’s rules, guidelines, practices and precedents relating to those decisions and recommendations) [13.111 – 13.127].

13.51 Each of these categories of information are discussed below.

Agency plan

13.52 Agencies must publish an agency plan. This requirement was discussed above at [13.31].

Agency organisation structure

13.53 Agencies must publish details of their organisational structure (s 8(2)(b)). This requirement is designed to make the details of an agency’s organisation structure easily accessible and discoverable by the public on the agency’s website. In meeting this requirement, agencies should

consider their main audience — the general public — as well as particular classes of people or entities that are likely to visit the agency website.

13.54 Organisational information may be presented as a chart and supported by other information about the agency. It is important that any abbreviation, acronym or specialist description or term that is used in the organisation chart is explained. If this explanation is given in a separate document on the website, a clear link should be provided.

13.55 Agencies already publish organisational information in various locations, including the agency website, the agency annual report, and on [directory.gov.au](https://www.directory.gov.au). Agencies may achieve compliance with their IPS obligations by linking to another webpage where the organisational information is already published.

Level of detail required

13.56 The level of detail an agency provides about its organisational structure may depend on the agency's particular characteristics, such as its size and functions.

13.57 For smaller agencies, or those with a limited number of functions, it may be appropriate to identify each business line or unit that is managed by an officer in the Senior Executive Service responsible for carrying out one of the agency's functions or powers. The lines of accountability from the manager of the business unit through to the agency's chief executive officer could be specified. The nature of the agency function or power, and the role of the business unit, could also be explained.

13.58 For larger agencies, providing comprehensive organisational information could make the IPS entry unhelpfully long. If so, an agency should consider limiting its organisational information to the responsibilities of key Senior Executive Service officers. The nature of the agency function or power that officer supervises, and the key business units that carry out the function, could be explained. If this approach is taken, details should be given of how a person may obtain further information about the agency's organisational structure.

13.59 Where an agency is responsible for a statutory committee, the agency should provide information about the committee and committee members.

13.60 Although not expressly required by s 8(2)(b), it is good practice to provide the name and position title for each manager of a business unit.

Organisational change

13.61 Information about an agency's organisational structure must be accurate, up-to-date and complete [13.154]. An agency's IPS entry should be updated at the earliest opportunity following an internal agency reorganisation or a reallocation of responsibilities between agencies. It may assist the public to explain any key organisational changes, and to provide a link to other relevant agencies.

Functions and powers

13.62 Agencies must publish details of their functions. This includes an agency's decision-making and other powers that affect members of the public (or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities) (s 8(2)(c)). This requirement extends to functions and powers that derive from an enactment or an executive scheme (s 8(5)).

13.63 Agencies are not required to publish details of the activities they undertake that are incidental to their designated functions. See [13.71 – 13.73] below for more detail about incidental powers and functions.

13.64 Where agencies share responsibility for a function or power, the relationship between the agencies should be explained. For example, one agency may develop policy about a particular issue while another agency delivers a service based on that policy.

13.65 Agencies already provide details of their functions and powers in annual reports, and at other locations such as www.australia.gov.au. It may be appropriate to provide a link to this source, if the information provided there is comprehensive or presented in a way that will better assist the public to understand the agency's function.

Functions

13.66 An agency's functions should be described in terms that enable the public to ascertain the range and scope of those functions. Agency functions derive from many sources:

- The Administrative Arrangements Order (AAO) made by the Governor-General specifies the functions of departments of state. The AAO describes the responsibilities of each department and the legislation administered by the ministers responsible for each department.
- Decisions of the Government, often in the form of a ministerial announcement, may require an agency to administer a new policy or program. The activity may be sufficiently significant to be listed separately in an IPS entry as a function of the agency.
- The functions of a body or office holder established by legislation (a 'statutory authority') will be specified in the enabling legislation. Other legislation may also confer functions on the agency. The description of these functions in an IPS entry may need to go beyond the legislative definition of the function to convey a full picture of the agency's role.
- The functions of a body established by executive action — for example, by the Governor-General under s 65 of the *Public Service Act 1999* or by Cabinet or a minister — are likely to be described in the order or instrument establishing the body. The description of the function that is published may need to be more detailed than the description given in that order or instrument.
- Agencies sometimes develop other functions that should be described in an IPS entry. For example, a function may be developed with the assistance of funding received from a government funding or grant agency.

13.67 It may assist the public to provide a link to the legislation, instrument or government announcement that provides the source for the agency function.

Powers

13.68 Powers can be conferred on an agency either by an Act of Parliament, a legislative instrument (including subordinate legislation), or an executive instrument. An executive instrument may, for example, establish a grant program and confer power to award a grant to a member of the public, impose conditions on a grant, and revoke a grant.

13.69 An agency's powers can be described in their IPS entry separately, or as part of the description of the agency's functions. Either way, the description should be adequate to enable the public to understand the range and scope of the agency's powers that can affect them. It is not necessary to refer separately or in detail to each specific power conferred by legislation or otherwise. A general description of an agency's powers and their source will be adequate. Nor is it necessary to refer to the particular section of an Act or clause of an instrument that confers a power, unless that will better assist a person to understand the agency's functions.

13.70 There is a risk that too much detail in describing the functions or powers of an agency may unnecessarily lengthen or complicate the description and make it harder for the public to understand the agency's role.

Incidental powers and functions

13.71 Agencies have incidental powers and functions to complement those expressly conferred on the agency. These incidental powers and functions enable an agency to carry on its business and administer the affairs of government. Examples are the corporate functions of an agency, such as its human resources, public relations and property management activities. Other incidental activities of government agencies include administering FOI requests and complying with the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act).

13.72 It is not necessary for an IPS entry to include these incidental functions and related powers that are common to all agencies. An exception would apply where the function is a core or designated function of a particular agency — for example, if the agency is established to provide training to other agencies, to administer the FOI Act or to manage Australian Government property.

13.73 An agency can include additional information in its IPS entry (s 8(4)), and it is therefore open to an agency to include information about functions and powers that are incidental, implied or not enumerated. This should be considered where the function is a distinct agency activity or the agency exercises a significant power. An example is the work an agency undertakes, or the powers it exercises, to ensure compliance with its directions or program conditions.

Statutory appointments

13.74 Agencies must publish details of appointments of agency officers that are made under Acts, other than the appointment of APS employees within the meaning of the *Public Service Act 1999* (s 8(2)(d)).

13.75 This requirement applies to officers who are appointed under statute to a position or role in an agency – for example, the Commonwealth Ombudsman appointed under the *Ombudsman Act 1976* s 4, or the Chief Executive of Centrelink appointed under the *Human Services (Centrelink) Act*

1997 s 7 (and who is also an Associate Secretary in the Department of Human Services). An officer who is appointed to a statutory position in another agency should be listed under the IPS entry of both agencies — for example, an officer of a department appointed to the Administrative Review Council under the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* (s 49).

13.76 An agency is not required to list staff appointed under statute to a position with a generic designation, such as ‘investigator’. Nor are agencies that employ staff other than under the *Public Service Act 1999* required to list staff they appoint under a general statutory authority.

13.77 Each appointment required to be listed in the IPS entry should include the following details:

- the name of the person appointed
- the length or term of appointment
- the position to which the person is appointed (and particulars of the position)
- the provision of the Act under which the person is appointed.

Annual reports

13.78 Agencies are required to publish the full text of their most recent annual report as laid before the Parliament (s 8(2)(e)). Agencies may also include the annual reports for earlier years, many of which are already published on the internet.

13.79 This requirement applies to annual reports of the following kind:

- the annual report prepared by each Commonwealth entity on their activities during the preceding financial year, as required by the PGPA Act s 46
- the annual report prepared by the directors of a Commonwealth company, as required by the PGPA Act s 97
- the annual report that a statutory agency is required to prepare on its operations during the year — for example, see the Ombudsman Act s 19
- the annual report that an officer is required to prepare on the operation of a particular statute during the year — for example, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conversation Act 1999* s 516, which requires the Secretary to prepare a report on the operation of that Act; the *Bankruptcy Act 1966* s 12(1)(d) which imposes a similar obligation on the Inspector-General in Bankruptcy; and the *Superannuation (Government Co-contribution for Low Income Earners) Act 2003* which requires the Commissioner of Taxation to prepare quarterly (s 54(1)) and annual (s 54(2)) reports on the working of that Act
- a report prepared by an agency to enable a minister to satisfy an obligation to present an annual report to the Parliament — for example, the *Aged Care Act 1997* s 63.2.

13.80 Many other agency reports are laid before the Parliament, as requested by government or as the result of a specific agency inquiry. Publication of these reports is not required by s 8(2)(e), but publication is open to an agency under s 8(4).

13.81 To avoid duplicating information, if an agency is aware that its reports are published elsewhere (for example, on transparency.gov.au) a link can be provided to that website rather than publishing the reports twice.

Consultation arrangements

13.82 Agencies that undertake public consultation on specific policy proposals for which they are responsible are required to publish details of how and to whom comments may be made (s 8(2)(f)). This requirement applies whenever an agency administers or establishes a public consultation arrangement in the course of developing a specific policy proposal.

13.83 Section 8(2)(f) applies to public consultation arrangements of a broad kind, including consultation:

- undertaken by an agency when making a legislative instrument, as required by the *Legislative Instruments Act 2003* s 17
- undertaken by an agency in preparing a regulatory impact statement, in accordance with the Australian Government Guide to Regulation¹⁰
- that an agency has decided to undertake for a specific policy development purpose
- under an arrangement that an agency has established to enable members of the public to provide ongoing comment on an existing policy or program that is administered by the agency.

13.84 Because s 8(2)(f) applies to policy development activity ‘for which the agency is responsible’, it can apply even if the obligation to consult is formally imposed by statute upon a minister or statutory officer. For example, the *Gene Technology Act 2000* s 22 provides that the Ministerial Council in developing policy principles may consult with ‘such industry groups ... and such environmental, consumer and other groups as the Ministerial Council considers appropriate’. The Australian Government agency that is carrying out that consultation for the Ministerial Council may need to publish details of that consultation.

13.85 There is no requirement to publish details of consultation that does not contribute to policy development. For example, s 8(2)(f) would not ordinarily apply to consultation undertaken by the Australian Heritage Council pursuant to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* s 14, which requires the Council to consult a State before a property within that State is declared to be a World Heritage property.

13.86 If an agency has established an online consultation process for a specific policy proposal, the agency’s IPS entry should link to this process.

Information routinely given through FOI access requests

13.87 Agencies are required to publish information in documents to which the agency routinely gives access in response to FOI requests (s 8(2)(g)).

¹⁰ Available at <policyhub.gov.au/resources/Australian-government-guide-regulation>.

13.88 Section 8(2)(g) does not apply to:

- personal information about any individual, if it would be unreasonable to publish the information (s 8(2)(g)(i)); as a general rule, this does not prevent publication of the names of Australian Government agency staff in connection with their official duties,¹¹ although agencies may wish to consult relevant staff in cases where potential harm could arise from publishing their names (see also Part 14 of these Guidelines)
- information about the business, commercial, financial or professional affairs of any person, if it would be unreasonable to publish the information (s 8(2)(g)(ii))
- other information that the Information Commissioner has determined it would be unreasonable to publish under s 8(3) (s 8(g)(iii)) (see [13.99 – 13.100] below).

13.89 These exceptions indicate that agencies are generally not expected to publish information given to an individual or business in response to an FOI request that is personal to that individual or business.

13.90 In deciding what information is ‘routinely’ accessed, agencies should have regard to the similar requirement in s 11C to publish a disclosure log of information released in response to FOI requests (see Part 14 of these Guidelines). The purpose of the IPS is also relevant to deciding what is routine. It forms part of an approach to information disclosure that recognises information held by government is a national resource, and that agencies should proactively publish information that may be of public interest. The IPS is also designed to lessen the number of individual requests for documents made to agencies. Agencies should therefore take an expansive rather than a narrow view of what information is ‘routinely’ accessed. In particular, agencies should consider whether publishing the information would:

- promote the objects of the FOI Act
- be in the public interest
- reduce the likelihood of further requests for the information.

13.91 While the disclosure log will contain information an agency has released in response to individual requests, an IPS entry is to contain information that is ‘routinely’ released. That is, agencies are required to include in their IPS entry information that has been requested on multiple occasions. The information that was released may not have been identical on each occasion: it may have been revised or updated between requests, or the information may reflect a later development on the same topic. For example, an IPS entry could include statistical information about an agency’s service delivery performance that is regularly requested by the media or other members of the public. Another example would be the minutes of meetings that are regularly sought under the FOI Act.

13.92 To ensure an agency’s IPS entry contains current information of interest to the public, it is recommended as best practice, that agencies review the FOI requests the agency receives to identify

¹¹ Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009, p 7.

trends and topics of interest (for example, on a 6-monthly basis) and make this information publicly available through their IPS.

13.93 Review of FOI requests will also assist agencies to identify commonly requested categories of personal information and to consider how the agency can use digital means, for example: self-service portals, to increase the accessibility and availability of this information to members of the public. In these cases, access to information can be provided without the need for an FOI request to be made under the FOI Act.

13.94 Publication of information in a disclosure log will sometimes satisfy the requirement in s 8(2)(g) to publish that information under the IPS. To avoid dual publication, an agency's IPS entry may contain a link to the disclosure log and a reference to the information to which the agency has routinely given access. Alternatively, an agency may decide that it is preferable, in complying with s 8(2)(g), for the IPS entry to contain either an extract from the disclosure log or a separate summary of information that is routinely released by the agency in response to FOI requests.

13.95 Whichever approach is adopted, agencies must ensure that the information is accurate, up-to-date and complete (s 8B). Consequently, if information in the disclosure log has been revised or replaced, an IPS entry which links to the disclosure log will also need to be amended.

Exceptions — personal and business information

13.96 As with the disclosure log requirements, an agency is not required to publish personal or business information as part of its IPS entry if it would be unreasonable to publish that information (ss 8(2)(g)(i) and (ii)). As noted above at [13.88], agencies will generally not publish information given to an individual or business in response to an FOI request that is personal to that applicant.

13.97 The third-party consultation requirements that apply before a decision can be made under Part III of the FOI Act to release business documents or documents affecting personal privacy in response to an FOI request (ss 27 and 27A) do not apply to IPS and disclosure log publication decisions. It is nevertheless open to an agency to develop procedures to ensure that it has considered the views or interests of an FOI applicant or third party before publishing information under the IPS or disclosure log.

13.98 Where information is not published because an exception applies, agencies may record this in an IPS information register, including the title of the document to which an exception applies and the reason it was not published under the IPS (see [13.40 – 13.43]) above on information registers). Capturing this information may help an agency if it needs to respond to any complaints to the Information Commissioner about its IPS compliance.

Exceptions — Information Commissioner determinations

13.99 The Information Commissioner may make a determination that the requirement to publish routinely accessed information under s 8(2)(g) does not apply to information specified in the determination (s 8(2)(g)(iii)). A determination of this kind is a legislative instrument for the purposes of the *Legislative Instruments Act 2003* (s 8(3)). A determination may apply to information of a general kind that is held by many agencies, or to a specific kind of information held by a particular agency. A similar exemption applies to the requirement to publish information in a disclosure log (s 11C(2)) (see Part 14 of these Guidelines).

13.100 In deciding whether to make a determination, the Information Commissioner will have regard to:

- the extent to which publication of the information in question would further the objects of the FOI Act
- whether there is an established and reasonable public demand for the information
- the estimated resource requirement for an agency to publish the information and whether this would impose an unreasonable burden on the agency.

13.101 For further information about determinations under s 8(3), see the Information publication scheme and disclosure log determinations policy and procedure (available at www.oaic.gov.au).

13.102 The Information Commissioner has not yet made a determination under s 8(3) of the FOI Act.

Parliamentary information

13.103 Agencies are required to publish information they hold that is routinely provided to the Parliament in response to requests and orders from the Parliament (s 8(2)(h)). This includes:

- Senate Order No 12: Production of departmental file lists
- Senate Order No 13: List of departmental contracts (\$100,000 or more)
- Senate Order No 14: List of advertising/public information projects (\$100,000 or more)¹²
- Information of a kind that is routinely requested from an agency by Parliament through a parliamentary committee.

13.104 Section 8(2)(h) does not apply to an answer provided to a Question on Notice in the Parliament, unless the Question is of a recurring nature for information of a similar kind (including a Question requesting an update or revision of information earlier provided in response to a Question). Nor does s 8(2)(h) apply to an agency submission to a parliamentary committee. It is nevertheless open to an agency to publish that information in the IPS under s 8(4) of the FOI Act (other information). Agencies should also note that s 8(2)(h) operates alongside another guideline that requires online publication of information presented to the Parliament — see Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Guidelines for the Presentation of Documents to the Parliament (including Government Documents, Government Responses to Committee Reports, Ministerial Statements, Annual Reports and Other Instruments).¹³

13.105 In applying s 8(2)(h), agencies should adopt a similar approach to that for s 8(2)(g) (documents to which access is routinely given). In particular, an agency should consider including in its IPS entry information that was provided to the Parliament, if:

- this would promote the objects of the FOI Act

¹² [Parliament of Australia - Senate Orders for documents](#)

¹³ See [4.35] at <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/tabling-guidelines>

- the information is of public interest
- further requests or orders from the Parliament for the information are likely.

13.106 Agencies should establish internal procedures for ensuring that information routinely provided to the Parliament is identified as such and published under the IPS.

13.107 If an agency is aware that information provided to Parliament has been published elsewhere (for example, on the Parliament's website¹⁴), it may be appropriate to provide a link to that website.

Contact officers

13.108 Agencies must publish contact details of an officer (or officers) who can be contacted about access to the agency's information or documents under the FOI Act (s 8(2)(i)).

13.109 To meet this requirement, agencies should publish the name (or position title), telephone number and email address of the FOI contact officer or officers. Agencies should establish generic telephone numbers and email addresses (for example, foi@agency.gov.au) that will not change with staff movements.¹⁵

13.110 Where it is not appropriate to include the name and contact details for each FOI contact officer (for example, due to regular staff changes) the agency should provide contact details for the position.

Operational information

13.111 An agency's operational information must be published as part of an agency's IPS entry (s 8(2)(j)). 'Operational information' is defined in s 8A(1) as:

... information held by the agency to assist the agency to perform or exercise the agency's functions or powers in making decisions or recommendations affecting members of the public (or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities).

13.112 The publication of operational information ensures that members of the public are adequately informed about the rules, policies, principles and procedures that agencies apply in making decisions or recommendations that affect members of the public.

13.113 Publication of that information is important in its own right but is also necessary to ensure that members of the public are not disadvantaged by a lack of awareness of the information used by agencies to make decisions. Section 10 of the FOI Act reinforces that objective by providing that a person must not be subjected to any prejudice that could have been avoided by the person had they

¹⁴ Agencies are advised to check what information is accessible and where it can be located on the Parliament's website before providing links (for example, the majority of submissions to committees are published on the inquiry webpages of the committees).

¹⁵ See the model FOI page included in the Information Commissioner's *Guidance for agency websites: 'Access to information' webpage*, available as an agency resource at www.oaic.gov.au and [Guide to the access of information page on an agency's website](#)

been aware of operational information that should have been but was not published in the IPS. For more information about s 10 of the FOI Act, see [13.127 – 13.128].

13.114 Operational information is all information an agency holds, whether generated by the agency or not, that assists it to perform or exercise its functions or powers in making decisions or recommendations that affect members of the public (or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities). The person affected by an agency decision may be an individual, an organisation or a business entity. Examples of operational information include rules, guidelines, practices and precedents relating to decisions and recommendations affecting members of the public (s 8A).

13.115 Four terms in the definition of ‘operational information’ in s 8A(1) reflect the breadth of the concept:

- information held by an agency to ‘assist’ it
- in performing or exercising its ‘functions or powers’
- in making ‘decisions or recommendations’
- ‘affecting members of the public (or any particular person or entity, or class of persons or entities)’.

Those terms are discussed below.

Information that can assist the agency

13.116 Information that can assist the agency to make decisions and recommendations is deliberately broad. It is not confined to rules or precedents that can be applied directly to reach a decision but includes other documents that facilitate good decision making — such as policy guidance, procedures, decision templates, model letters, training packages and checklists. If an agency has multiple versions of the same document with minor variations, publication is only required of a contemporary single or representative document.

13.117 Information held by a contracted service provider that assists it to provide services to the public on the agency’s behalf may be operational information which an agency must publish in its IPS entry. This will apply if the agency holds a copy of the information (whether generated by the agency or the contracted service provider) and the information otherwise falls within the definition of operational information in s 8A(1). If the agency does not have a copy of the information held by the contracted service provider, the agency can nevertheless arrange for that information to be published under s 8(4) (optional information). This will advance the IPS objective of ensuring that the public has easy and direct access to information that is used by or on behalf of government agencies in making decisions about rights, privileges, benefits, obligations and penalties.

Functions or powers of an agency

13.118 An agency’s functions and powers must be published in the IPS under s 8(2)(c). As described above at [13.62]–[13.71], functions or power may be assigned to an agency by legislation, an executive instrument or in some other manner.

13.119 There may be overlap in the documents that are required to be published under s 8(2)(c) and s 8(2)(j). Nevertheless, s 8(2)(c) provides a reliable starting point in identifying operational information that is required to be published under s 8(2)(j).

Making decisions or recommendations

13.120 The term ‘decision’ is to be understood broadly. For example, the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977* s 4(2) defines ‘making a decision’ to include making, suspending, revoking or refusing to make an order, award or determination; giving, suspending, revoking or refusing to give a certificate, direction, approval, consent or permission; issuing, suspending, revoking or refusing to issue a licence, authority or other instrument; imposing a condition or restriction; making a declaration, demand or requirement; retaining, or refusing to deliver up, an article; and doing or refusing to do any other act or thing.

13.121 The term ‘recommendation’ in s 8(2)(j) should be construed in a similarly broad manner.

Affecting members of the public or a class of people

13.122 These are words of limitation. They confine the concept of ‘operational information’ to decision making that affects members of the public in an individual manner or as members of a particular group or class (including an organisation or business entity). Examples are decisions or recommendations that concern a right, privilege or benefit of a member of the public or a class of people, or an obligation or penalty to which a person or class of people may be subject.

What is not operational information?

13.123 The concept of operational information does not encompass all government decision making that directly or indirectly affects the public. The following categories of information are examples that would not ordinarily fall within the definition of operational information, even though the information may influence government decision making:

- policy analysis and decisions occurring within government about legislation, budgets and programs
- discussions within government about the operation of a program or legislation
- case studies and capability reports that discuss an agency response to an actual or foreshadowed event
- audit and evaluation reports on the operation of a government program or compliance with legislative requirements
- agency case management procedures for recording the handling of an individual matter or the making of a decision.

13.124 Such documents that are not operational information can nevertheless be published by an agency under s 8(4) (other information).

13.125 The reference in the definition of operational information in s 8A(1) to information that assists an agency to make decisions or recommendations ‘affecting members of the public’ means

that the definition does not extend to agency manuals and rules relating to personnel management and staff conditions of employment. Those manuals and rules relate to employees in their employment capacity and not as members of the public. Nor, for the same reason, does the definition extend to information held by the Australian Public Service Commission relating to the review of decisions about APS employees. However, as noted at [13.129] such information can nevertheless be published by an agency under s 8(4) (other information).

13.126 Section 8A(2) provides that '[a]n agency's operational information does not include information that is available to members of the public otherwise than by being published by (or on behalf of) the agency'. This exclusion applies to information such as law reports, books, guides and standards that are published by another body and that are used by agency officers in making decisions that affect members of the public.

Failure to publish operational information

13.127 Section 10 provides that a person must not be subjected to any prejudice, stemming from an agency's performance of a function or exercise of a power, that the person could have avoided if they had had access to unpublished operational information. This rule applies, for example, where the eligibility requirements for a benefit or allowance (such as a closing date) are specified only in an agency publication, and should have been, but were not, published under the IPS. The rule applies only if the person could lawfully have avoided the prejudice if they had been aware of the unpublished information.

13.128 The rule does not apply to the agency's performance of a function or the exercise of a power unless the agency had existed for more than 12 months. The agency is nevertheless expected to publish operational information under the IPS as soon as reasonably practicable after it creates that information.

Exceptions to publication under the IPS

13.129 Section 8C(1) provides that an agency is not required to publish exempt matter in their IPS entry. Exempt matter is defined as, *matter the inclusion of which in a document causes a document to be an exempt document* (s 4(1)). An exempt document is:

- a document of an agency that is exempt under an exemption provision in Part IV of the Act; if a document contains exempt and non-exempt material the agency should prepare an edited copy (see Parts 5 and 6 of these Guidelines)
- an official document of a minister that contains information not relating to the affairs of an agency or a department of state (see Part 2 of these Guidelines), or
- a document in respect of which an agency, person or body is exempt under s 7 of the Act, such as an intelligence agency document or a document relating to the commercial activities of a specified body (see Part 2 of these Guidelines).

13.130 Section 8C(2) provides that an agency is not required to publish information that is restricted or prohibited from publication by an enactment. That is, an agency is not required to publish information contrary to a legislative secrecy provision.

Other information to be published under the IPS

13.131 The FOI Act does not limit or restrict what information an agency publishes, including information that is exempt from disclosure under the FOI Act (s 3A).

13.132 Section 8(4) of the FOI Act authorises agencies to publish ‘other’ information. The power to publish other information under s 8(4) is in addition to any other power an agency has to publish information.

13.133 Agencies and staff are protected against civil and criminal liability if they publish documents in good faith, believing publication is either required or permitted under the IPS (ss 90 and 92), see [13.178 – 13.183] below. However, if a document is subject to a secrecy provision, the protections in the FOI Act may not apply.

13.134 Agencies are generally best placed to identify other information that should be published under s 8(4). In doing so, agencies should strive to implement the objects of the FOI Act, which declare that information held by government is a national resource that should be managed for public purposes, and that the Parliament intends to increase scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the Government’s activities (s 3). Agencies should also consider:

- open by design principles by prioritising, promoting and resourcing proactive disclosure of information held that is of value to the public¹⁶
- the Information Commissioner’s *Principles on open public sector information*, which encourage agencies to ensure government information is accessible without charge, based on open standards, easily discoverable, understandable, machine-readable, and freely reusable and transformable¹⁷
- the OAIC’s Information policy agency resource, *Open data quick wins — getting the most out of agency publications*, which explains how agencies can transform data they already publish in reports, websites and mobile apps into machine-readable formats that support reuse by others¹⁸
- advice about technical and other relevant matters that should be taken into account when publishing government information online.¹⁹

13.135 The term ‘other information’ can include a wide range of information, which will vary from agency to agency. The following are examples of information required to be published in other Australian jurisdictions that Australian Government agencies should consider making available:

¹⁶ See for example: <https://www.oaic.gov.au/newsroom/icic-endorses-oaic-resolution-on-proactive-publication>; <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/statement-of-principles-to-support-proactive-disclosure-of-government-held-information> and <https://www.oaic.gov.au/updates/news-and-media/information-access-commissioners-and-ombudsmen-make-recommendations-to-support-open-by-design-principles>.

¹⁷ Available at www.oaic.gov.au.

¹⁸ Available at www.oaic.gov.au.

¹⁹ Available at <https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/about-digital-service-standard>.

- A record of open access information that is not made publicly available because there is an overriding public interest against disclosure – Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales
- Register of cabinet decisions – Victoria
- A statement listing all boards, councils, committees, panels and other bodies that have been established by the agency (whether under an Act or otherwise) for the purpose of advising the agency or a Minister responsible for the agency – Australian Capital Territory
- Statement of advice, recommendations or reports held by an agency – Australian Capital Territory and Victoria
- Budget papers and Appropriation Acts – Australian Capital Territory
- Information about government grants made or administered by the agency – Australian Capital Territory
- Ministerial briefs – Australian Capital Territory
- Information an agency undertakes to make publicly available – Australian Capital Territory.

13.136 As recommended earlier in these Guidelines (see [13.34] above), agencies should explain in their agency plan the steps the agency will take to review their information holdings and identify information that may be suitable for publication. This information should be described in the agency plan. To the greatest extent possible, information that is suitable for publication should be identified as such from early in its lifecycle and published as soon as reasonably practicable. The agency plan should also provide a timetable of when information will be published or updated.

13.137 Agencies should review whether they hold any datasets that can be published for reuse.²⁰ Publication of datasets on data.gov.au should be considered.²¹ The agency website can link to that website to avoid duplication in publication. Agencies should ensure that published information is described according to the appropriate metadata standards to enable users to find it easily.

13.138 Agencies should have regard to the following in deciding what information to publish:

- What information is of interest to members of the public and external stakeholders?
- Is there a public demand for categories of information held by the agency?
- Will publication of particular information assist the public in dealing with the agency or in commenting on programs or policies for which the agency is responsible?
- Will publication of particular information promote greater agency accountability, or better public understanding of agency decisions?

²⁰ See Australian Government Public Data Policy Statement which requires Australian Government entities to make non-sensitive data open by default. The Policy Statement is available at: https://www.finance.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/aust_govt_public_data_policy_statement.pdf.

²¹ For guidance about preparing open data and publishing datasets on data.gov.au, see <https://toolkit.data.gov.au>.

- Is information considered for publication in an appropriate format to make it accessible and reusable by the public?
- Will published information require revision or updating, or is it part of the historical record of agency activity?
- Are there privacy or security concerns that require information to be de-identified or aggregated before it is published?²²

13.139 Publication of information under s 8(4) should not be a burdensome task for agencies. Agencies may consider releasing data in ‘beta’ form²³ and with appropriate caveats on its limitations. Engagement with stakeholders prior to publication may help agencies identify the data and formats for which there is the greatest demand.

Managing an agency IPS entry

13.140 This section discusses the principles agencies should observe in managing their IPS entry. Some of the principles are expressly required by the FOI Act, while some others are implicit in the objects of the FOI Act (s 3) and in Part II establishing the IPS.

Performance of agency functions

13.141 Section 10A provides that a function or power given to an agency under Part II of the Act can be performed or exercised by the principal officer of the agency or by an agency officer in accordance with arrangements approved by the principal officer. This is an equivalent provision to s 23, which provides that a decision on a request to an agency for access to a document can be made on behalf of the agency by an authorised person.

13.142 Unless the principal officer of an agency intends to exercise all functions and powers under Part II of the Act, he or she must approve arrangements under s 10A nominating the authorised persons in the agency and the scope of their authority. The functions and powers to be exercised under Part II include:

- preparation of an agency plan under s 8(1)
- publication of information required to be published by the agency under s 8(2), including deciding whether information is exempt from publication under s 8(2)(g)
- publication of other information by the agency under s 8(4)
- ensuring that information published by the agency is accurate, up-to-date and complete as required by s 8B

²² For guidance about de-identifying data before publication, see *De-identification and the Privacy Act* at [De-identification and the Privacy Act | OAIC](#)

²³ Beta testing provides an opportunity for users to use a product in a production environment to identify issues before general release. Beta testing is the final round of testing before releasing a product to a wide audience.

- ensuring that information published by the agency is published on a website in accordance with ss 8D(2),(3)
- deciding whether the agency will impose a charge for accessing information published by the agency (s 8D(4)), and publishing details of any charges the agency may impose (s 8D(5))
- arranging for regular review (at least once every 5 years) of the agency's IPS (s 9)
- if the need arises, taking appropriate action under s 10 to ensure that a person is not subjected to any prejudice as a result of not having access to operational information that was not published as required by s 8(2)(j).

Governance arrangements

13.143 Leadership at a senior level is critical in establishing a culture within an agency for full compliance with the IPS requirements in Part II of the FOI Act. Agencies should consider appointing an Information Champion, or establishing an information access governance board, to provide the leadership, oversight and accountability necessary to promote and operationalise proactive publication.

13.144 Staff in the Senior Executive Service (SES) are well placed to fulfill the important role that an Information Champion has in leading their agency to develop a culture that gives full effect to the pro-disclosure objects of the FOI Act, and the IPS in particular.²⁴

13.145 Information Champions are responsible for ensuring the agency has appropriate governance mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with IPS obligations.

13.146 Information Champions can improve IPS practices by:

- informing staff of their responsibilities under the IPS
- publishing a broad range of documents on the agency's website at the time of their creation
- establishing governance regarding the publication of new and revised operational documents
- ensuring there is a process for regular review of documents not considered suitable for publication on the agency's IPS at a particular time, to consider whether those reasons continue to apply
- making the IPS a priority when developing corporate plans
- analysing the FOI requests received by the agency to assist in identifying information of interest to members of the public, and proactively publishing those documents
- ensuring that an agency's IPS entry is accurate, up-to-date and complete
- considering compliance with the IPS as a performance indicator for agency employees.

²⁴ For agencies without SES level staff, the most appropriate senior staff member may be appointed as the Information Champion.

Publication on a website

13.147 Information published under the IPS must be published on a website (s 8D(3)). The information may be published on the agency website, on another website to which a link is provided, or by some other accessible means that are described on the website.²⁵

13.148 Many agencies maintain their own website and will publish their IPS entry on that website. As stated in the guiding principles to these Guidelines (see [13.15] above), the IPS entry should be easily discoverable by the public, consistent with the object of the FOI Act to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost (s 3(4)). Adopting the following practices will assist in facilitating public access:

- Agencies should consider using the IPS icon published by the Information Commissioner to link to their IPS entry. Options include using the IPS icon on the agency homepage or including the icon on a dedicated 'Access to information' webpage. The Information Commissioner's intention in publishing the icon is to aid the discoverability of agency IPS entries by encouraging a consistent approach across government. For more details see *Icons for agency websites — 'Access to information', Information Publication Scheme and FOI Disclosure Log*.²⁶
- An agency's IPS entry can contain links to other pages on the agency website or other websites where the required information is available. This may be particularly useful in cases where an agency has already published information falling under the IPS requirements.
- The sitemap for the agency website should list information that the agency is required to publish under s 8(2) or has decided to publish under s 8(4).
- The search function on the agency website should facilitate access to information published in the agency's IPS entry through key terms and descriptive metadata. To aid that search function, online content should be published in a format that can be searched.
- The agency should provide an alert service, such as an email notification service or RSS feed, to notify subscribers of new publications under the IPS or other developments in relation to the agency's compliance with the IPS. If the alert service provided by the agency involves the collection of personal information, the agency must also consider its obligations under the *Privacy Act 1988* and the *Australian Government Agencies Privacy Code*.²⁷

13.149 Guidance on publishing information on the web is available at the following places:

- the Digital Service Standard, which encourages agencies to consider appropriate tools and systems already used by government (Criterion 4), contains advice on using open standards and common platforms (Criterion 7), and advice about making online material accessible (Criterion 9)²⁸

²⁵ For guidance about accessible publication on the agency disclosure log see [14.62] Part 14 (Disclosure Log) of the FOI Guidelines

²⁶ Available as an agency resource at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/icons-for-agency-websites-access-to-information-information-publication-scheme-and-foi-disclosure-log>

²⁷ See <https://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/privacy-for-government-agencies/australian-government-agencies-privacy-code>

²⁸ See <https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/about-digital-service-standard>.

- the Australian Human Rights Commission, World Wide Web Access: Disability Discrimination Act Advisory Notes (Version 4.1),²⁹ discussed below at [13.157]
- technical guidance on implementing Metadata for the Web is available on the National Australian Archives (NAA) site. (The AGLS Metadata Standard (AS 5044-2010)) will be abolished from December 2023 – refer [AGLS Metadata Standard](#) for further information.³⁰

13.150 Some smaller agencies may not maintain their own website but have a homepage on the website of another agency, usually the portfolio department.

13.151 Agencies can also publish information that is part of their IPS entry on another website (s 8D(3)(b)). One such website is www.data.gov.au, which has been established to facilitate the publication of datasets for use by the commercial, research and community sectors. Other websites that publish information from across government are www.legislation.gov.au (a compilation of Australian Government legislation), www.directory.gov.au (the Government Online Directory), and <https://www.australia.gov.au/> (gateway to government information).

Structure of agency IPS entry

13.152 The FOI Act specifies the information an agency must publish under the IPS, but not the format of publication. The FOI Act does not require that agencies use the headings or language specified in s 8(2). It will however be easier for the public to locate information published by each agency under the IPS if there is a consistent presentation of information on agency websites.

13.153 Agencies may consider, where practicable, using the following headings in their publication framework. The information provided under those headings may extend beyond the categories of information described in s 8(2).

- Agency plan
 - The agency plan as required by s 8(2)(a)
- Who we are
 - The organisation and structure of the agency, the location of offices, governance arrangements, senior management team and statutory appointments referred to in s 8(2)(d)
- What we do
 - A description of the functions and powers of the agency, and the rules, guidelines, practices and precedents relating to those functions and powers (that is, operational information); including a link to operational information if published on another webpage
- Our reports and responses to Parliament
 - Annual reports laid before the Parliament, and other information routinely provided to the Parliament

²⁹ See www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/www_3/www_3.html.

³⁰ See <https://www.naa.gov.au/information-management/describing-information/metadata/metadata-web>

- Routinely requested information and disclosure log
 - Information to which the agency routinely gives access in response to FOI requests and the disclosure log of information that has been released under the FOI Act
- Consultation arrangements
 - Consultation arrangements that enable members of the public to comment on specific policy proposals for which the agency is responsible
- Our priorities
 - For example, the corporate and strategic plans of the agency, and assessments and reviews undertaken of agency programs
- Our finances
 - For example, financial information relating to pay and grading structures in the agency, procurement procedures, tendering and contracts
- Our lists
 - For example, agency contracts, grants and appointments, links to datasets published by the agency, information held in registers required by law, and other lists and registers relating to the agency's functions
- Contact us
 - The contact details of an officer (or officers) who can be contacted about access to the agency's information under the FOI Act.

Accuracy and currency of published information

13.154 Each agency IPS entry is required to be 'accurate, up-to-date and complete' (s 8B).

13.155 The action an agency should take to comply with that requirement may vary according to the nature of the information in the IPS entry. The following is given as a general guide for agencies, but does not diminish the obligation of agencies to ensure compliance with s 8B:

- Some categories of information should be updated as soon as reasonably practicable after any change to that information — for example, information about the structure of the agency, senior officers, statutory appointments, contact arrangements and reports that have been laid before the Parliament.
- Operational information should be updated in the IPS at the same time that a revised or updated version of the information is provided to agency officers.
- Other categories of information can be updated on a periodic basis, following a scheduled agency review of the accuracy, currency and completeness of the information — for example, the agency plan, and information that is routinely provided to the Parliament or in response to FOI requests. It is advisable to include a notation on the document that is published under the IPS indicating when it was last published or updated. It is also advisable when creating a document that is published to consider when it would be appropriate to review the content.

- Consultation arrangements should be updated as soon as a new or varied arrangement is established.
- Any change to an agency's functions or powers, especially a change resulting from a legislative amendment or alteration of an executive scheme, should be updated as soon as reasonably practicable.
- Agencies should bear in mind that other FOI Act provisions are relevant to the agency's publishing obligations: specifically, information must be published on a disclosure log within 10 days of release under the FOI Act (s 11C(6)), and a person cannot be subjected to any prejudice as a result of not having access to unpublished operational information (s 10).
- If an agency has multiple versions of a document that contain minor and insignificant variations (for example, training materials), it will be sufficient compliance with s 8(2) for the agency to publish one representative and current version of the document.
- Information published on a website can later be removed from the website and archived, provided that details are published of how the information can be obtained if the agency is still required to publish that information under s 8(2).

Accessibility

13.156 Information that forms part of the IPS must be published 'to members of the public generally' (s 8D(2)(a)) and, if an agency considers it appropriate to do so, 'to particular classes of persons or entities' (s 8D(2)(b)).

13.157 Accessibility of published information by all members of the community is an important principle underlying the IPS. Three requirements reinforce this principle:

- The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* s 24 provides that it is unlawful for a person (including a government agency) to provide services to a person with a disability less favourably than to a person without that disability.
- Government agencies are required to conform to WCAG 2.0 Level AA.³¹ New web content needs to conform to these standards as far as possible.
- The Australian Human Rights Commission has also published *World Wide Web Access: Disability Discrimination Act Advisory Notes* (Version 4.1) which echoes the obligation on agencies to conform to WCAG 2.0 Level AA.³²

Charges

13.158 Subject to a limited exception, information published under the IPS must be available free of charge. An agency can charge for information under the IPS only where the information cannot be

³¹ See <https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/digital-service-standard/digital-service-standard-criteria/9-make-it-accessible>. However, the Digital Transformation Agency strongly encourages agencies to meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA which will provide a more accessible experience.

³² Available at www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/www_3/www_3.html.

downloaded from a website and the agency has incurred specific reproduction or incidental costs in giving a person access to that information under the IPS (s 8D(4)). The details of the charge must be published under the IPS before any charge is imposed (s 8D(5)).

13.159 For example, information may be contained in a recording that cannot be readily converted to electronic format for publication on and downloading from a website.³³ The agency can instead publish details of how the information may be obtained, including the charge that would be imposed for making it available in a suitable format (s 8D(3)(c)).

13.160 A charge for IPS access is separate from the charges that can be imposed for processing FOI requests under the Charges Regulations.³⁴ The Charges Regulations may, however, provide useful guidance to an agency in calculating or imposing a charge for access under the IPS. The Charges Regulations are discussed in Part 4 of these Guidelines.

Information Commissioner's IPS functions and powers

13.161 The FOI Act confers 3 specific functions on the Information Commissioner for reviewing the operation of the IPS (s 8F):

- reviewing the operation of the IPS in each agency, in conjunction with the agency
- investigating an agency's compliance with IPS requirements, either upon receipt of a complaint or at the Information Commissioner's initiative
- otherwise monitoring, investigating and reporting on the operation of the IPS.

13.162 Each of those functions is described in more detail below.

Review of agency IPS compliance

13.163 Each agency must complete a review of its IPS compliance at least once every 5 years (s 9(1)). The review must be undertaken in conjunction with the Information Commissioner. The OAIC encourages agencies to undertake more regular reviews, preferably annually.

13.164 The OAIC conducted major surveys of IPS compliance in 2012 and 2018.³⁵ Agencies can use the survey results to help improve their IPS performance.

13.165 In undertaking a review, agencies should focus on the following 5 key elements of IPS compliance when undertaking the s 9 review:

³³ Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2010, p 8.

³⁴ Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2010, p 8.

³⁵ The survey reports are available at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/freedom-of-information-guidance-for-government-agencies/proactive-publication-and-administrative-access/information-publication-scheme/information-publication-scheme-survey-2012> and <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/freedom-of-information-guidance-for-government-agencies/proactive-publication-and-administrative-access/information-publication-scheme/information-publication-scheme-survey-2018>

1. *Agency plan* — has the agency published a comprehensive plan for its IPS compliance?
2. *Governance and administration* — does the agency have appropriate governance mechanisms in place to meet its IPS obligations, including an information management framework?
3. *IPS document holdings* — has the agency reviewed its document holdings to decide what information must be published under s 8(2) and further information that can be published under s 8(4)? Is the agency IPS entry accurate, up-to-date and complete?
4. *IPS information architecture* — does the agency have a publication framework in place and has it taken the necessary steps to ensure that information in its IPS entry is easily discoverable and accessible to the Australian community?
5. *Agency compliance review* — does the agency have appropriate processes, systems and resources in place to monitor and review its IPS compliance and to make necessary improvement in the agency's IPS implementation?

Investigations and complaints

13.166 The Information Commissioner can investigate complaints about an agency's IPS compliance (s 70). The Information Commissioner publishes summaries of investigation outcomes, including the outcomes of investigations into complaints about agency compliance with the IPS requirements.³⁶

13.167 The Information Commissioner can also undertake a Commissioner initiated investigation into an agency's performance of functions or exercise of powers under the FOI Act (s 69(2)). For more information see Part 11 of these Guidelines.

13.168 An agency's IPS obligations are not subject to IC review under Part VII of the FOI Act.

Monitoring and reporting

13.169 The Information Commissioner is required to prepare an annual report on the OAIC's operations (*Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* s 30). The Information Commissioner will include in the annual report information on the administration of the IPS by agencies.

13.170 Section 93 of the FOI Act requires agencies to provide the Information Commissioner with information required to prepare an annual report.³⁷ From July 2011, agencies have been required to provide information about staff resources assigned to managing the IPS.

13.171 For more information about reporting requirements see Part 15 of these Guidelines.

³⁶ See https://www.oaic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/11723/20211122-Outcomes-of-investigations-summary-table.pdf.

³⁷ See *FOIstats Guide* (June 2019), available at <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/foistats-guide/>.

Copyright

13.172 As noted in the guiding principles to these Guidelines (see [13.15] dot point 5 above), the Information Commissioner encourages agencies to make information they publish under the IPS available for reuse on open licensing terms, as far as that is reasonable and practicable to do. Agencies should have a clear statement on their websites, on their homepage or on their IPS entry page about the extent to which the public can reuse material in which they hold copyright.

13.173 In deciding on the appropriate licensing, agencies should consider the Australian Government Intellectual Property Manual³⁸ and the Guidelines on licensing public sector information for Australian Government entities.³⁹

13.174 While most of the information an agency publishes in its IPS entry will have been created by government, there may be documents in the agency's possession where a third party (such as the author or publisher of the material) owns the copyright.

13.175 No action lies against the Commonwealth, a minister, an agency or an officer of any agency for breach of copyright, among other things, if the minister or an agency officer publishes a document in good faith, in the belief that publication is required or permitted under the IPS or the disclosure log provisions (s 90(1)(a)). However, this provision does not constitute authorisation or approval for reuse of the material, including by members of the public.

13.176 Where a third party owns copyright in material an agency publishes as part of its IPS entry, the agency should include a clear statement on its website advising the public that they may need to seek permission from the copyright owner to reuse the material. A statement such as the following could be used:

- To the extent that copyright in some of this material is owned by a third party, you may need to seek their permission before you can reuse that material.

13.177 If an agency knows the details of third-party ownership of copyright in material it has published under the IPS, the agency should, with the copyright owner's consent, provide contact details on its website, to help members of the public.

Legal protection for discretionary/good faith publication

13.178 The FOI Act provides legal protection where information has been published in good faith in the belief that publication was either required or permitted under the IPS (ss 90 and 92). The protection applies to the Commonwealth, a minister, an agency or an officer of an agency. The scope

³⁸ Available at <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-centre/publications/australian-government-intellectual-property-manual>.

³⁹ Available at <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-centre/publications/guidelines-licensing-public-sector-information-australian-government-entities>

of the protection is that no action lies for defamation, breach of confidence or infringement of copyright or (as to ministers and agency officers) criminal liability.

13.179 These protections complement the policy objective of the FOI Act to provide a secure framework for publication of Australian Government information. These protections are conditional and apply only where a minister or agency officer publishes a document in good faith in the belief that publication was required or permitted under the FOI Act.

13.180 The legal protection provided by ss 90 and 92 also applies to the release of information in response to an FOI request, and to publication apart from the FOI Act where a minister or agency officer believes in good faith that publication is required or permitted. For more information about these protections see Part 3 of these Guidelines.

Annexure A — Model Agency plan

Introduction

Outline why the agency has prepared the plan.

Purpose

Describe the purpose of the plan.

Objectives

Describe the agency's objectives in relation to the plan.

Establishing and administering the agency's IPS entry

Describe how the agency will prepare its IPS entry and manage the IPS entry on a continuing basis. This may include describing:

- who (within the senior executive) is responsible for leading the agency's work on IPS compliance
- the resources allocated to establishing and administering the agency's IPS entry
- the processes and timetable for identifying information required to be published under s 8(2), for publishing additional information under s 8(4), and for adding to or revising the agency's IPS entry
- measures being taken to ensure the agency's IPS entry is accurate, up-to-date and complete
- measures (if any) being taken to improve the agency's information asset management framework to support IPS compliance
- details of the agency's internal IPS information register to assist it to efficiently identify documents for publication, record decisions made in relation to publication and systematically review IPS information for accuracy, currency and completeness
- access charges (if any) that the agency may impose for accessing information published under the IPS and how charges will be calculated. Where no charges will be imposed, that should be stated.

Structure of the IPS

Describe how the agency will facilitate public access to the information published in an agency's IPS entry. This may include describing:

- whether information will be published on the agency's website, or on another website such as the website of the portfolio department, www.legislation.gov.au or www.data.gov.au
- the headings under which information will be published
- how the IPS entry will be identified on the agency website (for example, by using the IPS icon recommended by the Information Commissioner on the agency homepage or 'Access to information' page as described in the *Guidance for agency websites: 'Access to information'* webpage available at www.oaic.gov.au)

- whether a sitemap and search function will be provided
- whether an alert service will be provided for changes or additions to the IPS entry and how a member of the public can subscribe to the alert service
- how the agency will conform with WCAG 2.0 Level AA in establishing and maintaining its IPS entry
- the mechanism that will be adopted by the agency for inviting community feedback on its IPS entry and compliance, and how the agency will evaluate and respond to comments received.

Information required to be published under the IPS

Clearly identify the types of information (including datasets) the agency will publish under ss 8(2)(a) to 8(2)(j).

Describe any timeframes the agency proposes to follow to publish these documents.

Other information to be published under the IPS

Clearly identify the types of optional information (including datasets) the agency will publish under s 8(4) and the timeframes in which new or revised information will be published.

IPS compliance review.

Identify when the agency proposes to review their agency plan.

Identify when the agency will review its IPS entry and compliance, in conjunction with the Information Commissioner.

Outline the criteria the agency will adopt to measure its performance in complying with IPS requirements.



Part 14 — Disclosure log

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Introduction

- 14.1 Agencies and ministers must publish information that has been released in response to every FOI request, subject to certain exceptions (s 11C). This publication is known as a ‘disclosure log’.
- 14.2 The requirement to publish a disclosure log complements the Information Publication Scheme (IPS) (see Part 13 of these Guidelines). Together these require agencies and, for the disclosure log, ministers, to publish a range of government information.
- 14.3 The disclosure log facilitates publication of information released to individuals in response to FOI requests, to the general public. This reinforces the objects of the FOI Act that promote proactive publication of information (s 3(1)(a)) and in recognition that information held by government is a national resource (s 3(3)).
- 14.4 In publishing information released in response to FOI requests, agencies and ministers should take account of the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ object in s 3(4):
- ... functions and powers given by this Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.
- 14.5 Agencies and ministers should interpret the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ object broadly in publishing government information under s 11C. That is, an agency or minister should have regard to the lowest reasonable cost to potential FOI applicants, the public in general, to the agency or minister, and the Australian Government as a whole.
- 14.6 The Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009, states:
- Like the proposed publication scheme in Schedule 2, proposed subsection 11C(3) provides that the information is to be published to the public generally on a website. If the information cannot readily be published on a website, the website should give details of how the information may be obtained.
- 14.7 The Information Commissioner is of the view that consistent with better practice, agencies and ministers should seek to make all documents released in response to FOI requests available for download from the disclosure log or another website (s 11C(3)(a) or (b)) subject to applicable exceptions, unless it is not possible to upload documents due to a technical impediment, such as file size, the requirement for specialist software to view the information, or for any other reason of this nature. This approach is consistent with the objects of the FOI Act.
- 14.8 The Information Commissioner has powers to investigate agency compliance with disclosure log obligations, either in response to a complaint made under s 70 of the FOI Act, or on the Information Commissioner’s own initiative (s 69(2)) (see [14.74]–[14.75] below). Following an investigation, the Information Commissioner will inform the agency of the investigation findings and any recommendations to be implemented by the agency. The Information Commissioner can take further steps if not satisfied the agency has taken adequate and appropriate steps to implement any recommendations made (ss 89, 89A and 89B).

- 14.9 Disclosure log publication benefits both the public and the Australian Government by improving access to government information while assisting agencies and ministers to respond more efficiently to FOI requests by reducing multiple requests for the same information.

Nature and content of the disclosure log

- 14.10 To assist members of the public to access information published on a disclosure log, agencies and ministers should provide an introduction to their disclosure log which plainly and clearly explains its purpose and the agency's obligations under s 11C of the FOI Act, as well as the exceptions to publication.
- 14.11 A disclosure log lists information that has been released in response to FOI requests for documents held by the agency or minister (s 11C(1)). Subsection 11C(3) sets out 3 ways information can be published on a disclosure log:
- a) making the information available for downloading from the agency or minister's website or
 - b) linking to another website where the information can be downloaded, or
 - c) giving details of how the information can be obtained.
- 14.12 As discussed above at [14.7], the Information Commissioner considers that giving details of how information can be obtained (s 11C(3)(c)) should only be used if it is not possible to upload documents to a website so they can be directly accessed by members of the public. Relying on s 11C(3)(c) when it is possible to publish the information for download does not promote the objects of the FOI Act, which require that agencies and ministers facilitate and promote public access promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.
- 14.13 Agencies and ministers must publish information on the disclosure log within 10 working days of giving the FOI applicant access to the document (s 11C(6)) (see [14.30] below). Where a person requests access to information not published on an agency's disclosure log (s 11C(3)(c)), the agency or minister should provide access to the information within a reasonable period, which should be no more than 5 working days after receiving the request.
- 14.14 The disclosure log requirement does not apply to:
- personal information about any person, if it would be unreasonable to publish the information (s 11C(1)(a))
 - information about the business, commercial, financial or professional affairs of any person, if publication of that information would be unreasonable (s 11C(1)(b))
 - other information of a kind determined by the Information Commissioner if publication of that information would be unreasonable (ss 11C(1)(c) and 11C(2))
 - any information if it is not reasonably practicable to publish the information because of the extent of modifications that would need to be made to delete information listed in one of the above dot points (s 11C(1)(d)).

Guidance on when it may be unreasonable to publish information on a disclosure log is given at [14.24]–[14.28] below.

- 14.15 The FOI Act does not require agencies and ministers to publish FOI decisions and statement of reasons, however agencies and ministers may choose to do so subject to legal requirements, such as those under the *Privacy Act 1988*.

Disclosure log decision making

- 14.16 Although granting access to documents under the FOI Act and publishing information on a disclosure log are separate decisions, these decisions should be made as part of the same decision-making process. This will support prompt release and publication of information at the lowest reasonable cost.
- 14.17 However there are 2 important differences between FOI and disclosure log decision making. First, only a person ‘authorised’ under s 23 can grant or refuse access to documents in response to an FOI request. In contrast, the FOI Act does not specify who can make a decision to publish information on the disclosure log (including whether to delete material that would be unreasonable to publish). It is nevertheless advisable that agencies and ministers adopt processes for making decisions under s 11C.
- 14.18 Secondly, there is no requirement to consult when making a decision to publish information under s 11C, in contrast with the consultation requirements that apply before a decision can be made to release documents affecting Commonwealth-State relations, business documents or documents affecting personal privacy (ss 26A, 27 and 27A). It is open to an agency or minister to consult a person about whether publication of personal, business or other information may be unreasonable. If so, the agency or minister must complete the consultation in time to comply with the obligation to publish information within 10 working days of giving access to the FOI applicant (s 11C(6)).
- 14.19 An alternative is for agencies and ministers to give advance notice to FOI applicants and third parties that information released under the FOI Act may later be published on a disclosure log (subject to certain exceptions). This advance notice can be given to FOI applicants in the acknowledgement notice under s 15(5) and to affected third parties during a consultation process under ss 26A, 27 or 27A (see Part 6 of these Guidelines).¹ The applicant or a third party may express a view on this issue and identify personal or business information that, in their opinion, would be unreasonable to publish. However, it is important that applicants and third parties are also made aware of the pro-disclosure objects of the FOI Act embodied in s 11C.

¹ The OAIC has published sample FOI notices that agencies and ministers can use for their own purposes. The sample notices are available as an agency resource at <<https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/sample-foi-notices/>>.

When access is granted to some (but not all) of the requested documents

14.20 If an FOI applicant is given access to only some of the documents requested (or to part of a requested document), the disclosure log requirement applies to the documents given to the applicant. If access is later given to additional documents following internal or IC review, the disclosure log requirement will apply at that (later) time to the additional documents released.

Disclosure log exceptions — determinations by the Information Commissioner

14.21 The Information Commissioner may make a determination that the requirement to publish information on a disclosure log under s 11C does not apply to information specified in the determination (ss 11C(1)(c) and 11C(2)). A determination of this kind is a legislative instrument for the purposes of the *Legislation Act 2003*. A determination may apply to information of a general kind that is held by many agencies or ministers, or to information of a specific kind held by a particular agency or minister.

14.22 There is currently one determination in force: Freedom of Information (Disclosure Log – Exempt Documents) Determination 2018.² This determination covers:

- a) information in a document that was an exempt document at the time that access was given by the agency or minister to the applicant and
- b) information in a document that the agency or minister would have decided was an exempt document at the time that access was given to the applicant, if the request for that document had been received from a person other than the applicant.

14.23 The determination has effect for 5 years from 1 December 2018. Further information about applying for a determination is provided in ‘Information Publication Scheme (IPS) and Disclosure Log determinations policy and procedure’, available on the OAIC website.³

Disclosure log exceptions — when publication would be ‘unreasonable’

14.24 As noted at [14.14], the requirement to publish information released to an FOI applicant on a disclosure log does not apply to 3 kinds of information if publication would be ‘unreasonable’:

- personal information
- information about a business

² Available from the Federal Register of Legislation <<https://www.legislation.gov.au/>>.

³ Available at <<https://oiaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/information-publication-scheme-ips-and-disclosure-log-determinations-policy-and-procedure/>>.

- information covered by the Information Commissioner’s Freedom of Information (Disclosure Log – Exempt Documents) Determination 2018.

There is overlap between the information in these 3 categories. The following guidance about when an agency or minister may decide that publication would be unreasonable is not exhaustive.

14.25 Agencies have separate obligations under the Privacy Act to consider when disclosing personal information in the Disclosure Log.⁴ It is open to an agency or minister to decide that it is unreasonable to include information on the disclosure log about an individual or business that was released in response to an FOI request from that individual or business. The same applies to information about a person or business that was released to another FOI applicant, where the person or business was consulted under s 27 or 27A of the FOI Act and did not object to release to that particular FOI applicant but would object if the information was to become publicly available.⁵

14.26 The Explanatory Statement accompanying to the Information Commissioner’s Determination gives the following as an example of where publication may be unreasonable under 6(1)(a) of the Determination (information that was exempt at the time that access was granted):

[A]n agency may have released an exempt document to a particular FOI applicant in connection with a research project, in connection with legal proceedings in which the FOI applicant is involved, or because the confidential nature of information in a document would not be jeopardised by selective release to a particular FOI applicant. In these circumstances, the agency or Minister may decide that it is unreasonable to publish this information more widely in a disclosure log.

14.27 Whether it would be unreasonable to publish personal information about an Australian Government officer on the disclosure log will depend on a number of factors that should be considered case by case. These factors include the nature of the information, the seniority of the officer, and whether the officer has made out a special case against disclosure. As a general guide, it is open to a decision maker to decide in a particular instance that it is unreasonable to publish on a disclosure log the direct work telephone number of an officer, or an officer’s signature. On the other hand, published documents will often contain the names of officers involved in agency decision making. An agency may wish to consult affected staff about whether potential harm could arise from publishing their names.

14.28 An agency or minister should state when material is deleted from a document published on the disclosure log because of an exception in s 11C(1). This includes personal information about agency officers. The statement could be provided within the published document or in an

⁴ See ‘ZJ’ and Chief Executive Officer for the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (Privacy) [2021] AICmr 92 (17 December 2021) where the Australian Information Commissioner and Privacy Commissioner found the agency had interfered with the complainant’s privacy by disclosing their sensitive and personal information on a disclosure log in breach of Australian Privacy Principle 6. In that determination, the agency did not satisfy the Commissioner that it turned its mind to whether publication was ‘unreasonable’ or that it was open to find that publication was not unreasonable – see [80]–[90].

⁵ Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009, p 14.

accompanying statement. It is then open to a member of the public who is interested in inspecting that information to make a request to the agency, including an FOI request.

Making information publicly available

14.29 When a decision has been made to publish information on a disclosure log, agencies and ministers need to consider a range of operational matters in making the information available and, more generally, in maintaining the disclosure log over time.

Time of publication

14.30 Agencies and ministers must publish information on the disclosure log within 10 working days of the FOI applicant being given access to a document (s 11C(6)).

14.31 The date on which an FOI applicant is given access may be later than the date of the decision to grant access (see Part 3 of these Guidelines). Before giving access, an agency or minister can require a charge to be paid (s 11A(1)(b) of the FOI Act and s 11(1) of the Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 2019 (Charges Regulations)). The agency or minister must also be satisfied that all opportunities for review by third parties have run out and that the decision to grant access stands or was affirmed (ss 26A(4), 27(7) and 27A(6)).

14.32 The date on which an FOI applicant is given access may vary according to the method by which access is given. For example, it is probable that a document sent by email will be received on the same day. If a document is sent by post it is presumed (unless the contrary is known) to have been received on the day it would be delivered in the ordinary course of post (s 29 *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*).

14.33 It is open to an agency or minister to publish information on a disclosure log earlier than the period of 10 days stipulated in s 11C(6). Independently of the FOI Act, an agency or minister may (subject to applicable secrecy provisions) publish information at any time and by any method (s 3A). The FOI Act does not erode this discretion.

14.34 It is for each agency and minister to decide, generally and in individual cases, the particular day (within the 10-day period stipulated in s 11C(6)) on which information will be published on a disclosure log. The general practice of the agency or minister (if one has been adopted) should be made known publicly on the agency website and drawn to an FOI applicant's attention.

14.35 The FOI Act does not preclude same day publication (that is, publication of information on the disclosure log within 24 hours of access being given to the FOI applicant), but nor does it require or promote it as a preferred publication practice.

14.36 When balancing competing interests regarding the time of publication, an agency or minister may consider the following issues:

- If the agency is proposing to publish documents on the disclosure log on the same day they are released to the FOI applicant, the applicant should be told this in advance of the proposed date of publication on the disclosure log. The agency or minister should ensure

the applicant receives the documents on that day by means other than publication on the disclosure log (unless the applicant agrees to that method of access).

- In a case of same day publication, the agency or minister should consider reducing or waiving any charges they may otherwise have imposed under s 29 (see Part 4 of these Guidelines). The reason for so doing is that the applicant will not have been given any different or greater access than the rest of the community.

14.37 To provide transparency in relation to the time of publication and an agency or minister's compliance with s 11C(6), it is recommended that both the date the FOI applicant was given access to the documents and the date the documents were published is listed on the disclosure log.

14.38 The Information Commissioner's function of investigating complaints about agency FOI administration (s 70) can include complaints about the timing of disclosure log publication. For more information, see [14.75] and [Part 11](#) of these Guidelines.

Design and contents of the disclosure log

14.39 The FOI Act does not prescribe the form of a disclosure log. The community may benefit if agencies and ministers adopt a common approach, so that disclosure logs have a consistent appearance across government and can be easily understood. A disclosure log template is annexed to this document (see [Annexure A — Template disclosure log](#)). Modification of the headings in the template may be appropriate, depending on the nature of FOI requests an agency handles and its IT systems and information platforms.

14.40 Essentially, a disclosure log has 3 parts:

- the log (or table) published on an agency's or minister's website, listing the information that is available for public access
- information, which may be accessible in different ways — for example, directly through the log as an attachment that can be downloaded, from another website, or on request if it is not reasonably practicable to publish on an agency or minister's website
- a search facility applying to both the disclosure log and any attached information.

14.41 Section 11C requires publication of information contained in documents to which access has been granted under the FOI Act, rather than publication of the documents themselves. However, publication of the actual documents released (subject to deletion of material under s 11C) is consistent with the objects of the FOI Act. Publication of the documents that are released can also avoid doubt about whether the disclosure log accurately records information released under the FOI Act.

14.42 Publication of documents efficiently facilitates public access and reduces an agency or minister's costs of processing requests for the same or similar information. As discussed at [14.7] above, the Information Commissioner considers that documents should be made available for download from a website (ss 11C(3)(a) or (b)). Publication of documents on the disclosure log, rather than providing a description of the documents and how they can be

obtained on request from the agency or minister, is consistent with the FOI Act object of facilitating public access to government information.⁶ Agencies should only publish a description of a document on the disclosure log and ask members of the public to contact them for access if it is not technically possible to upload documents due to file size, or the requirement for specialist software to view the information, or for any other reason of this nature.

- 14.43 If the disclosure log contains only a description of the documents released, that description should be sufficient to allow the public to understand what those documents contain, so that a person can make an informed decision about whether to request a copy. Providing only the FOI request reference number is not sufficient; the description needs to specifically identify the content of the documents.
- 14.44 If the document has not been published, it is recommended that, as well as providing a clear description of the subject matter of the documents, agencies specify the document type (for example, email, brief, text message, report etc).
- 14.45 When a person asks for a copy of documents described on a disclosure log, the documents should be provided promptly, no later than 5 working days after the request is received. It is not appropriate to treat an application for documents described on a disclosure log, but not directly available, as an FOI request under s 15 of the FOI Act. The purpose of publication on a disclosure log under s 11(3) is to ‘publish the information to members of the public generally’. Further, it is not appropriate to impose a charge under s 29 for access to the information described on a disclosure log. An agency or minister can only impose a charge in the limited circumstances outlined in s 11(4) (see [14.69]–[14.73] below).
- 14.46 In some limited circumstances, it may be more practical for an agency or minister to publish the content of a document on the disclosure log in a different form, rather than publishing the document itself. For example, if the FOI applicant inspected a document or viewed a video it may be necessary to make a different publication arrangement on the disclosure log. Similarly, if a document released to an FOI applicant would be difficult to publish online in an accessible fashion (see [14.61]–[14.66] below), publishing the information in the document in a different accessible form may be more efficient (for example, as a Word document or providing a textual description of an image).
- 14.47 It is also open to an agency or minister to supplement the information they are required to make available under s 11C, in particular by publishing the following additional information:
- the terms of the FOI request that prompted release of the information (this can be provided in a summary form, rather than as a copy of the FOI request)
 - whether the FOI applicant was given access to all documents requested, and if not, the exemption or other basis on which partial access was granted (this information can be provided in a summary form), and

⁶ See Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009, p 14.

- whether all the information provided to the FOI applicant has been made publicly available under s 11C and, if not, the nature of the information that has not been made available.

14.48 These details will assist the public understand the information made available by an agency or minister on its disclosure log. For example, the topic or theme that unites a collection of papers may not be readily apparent unless the terms of the FOI request and the scope of the FOI release are explained.

14.49 A practical design issue that arises is whether additional information of the kind described above should be listed on the disclosure log or provided as an attachment or preface to the information made available under the disclosure log. The template disclosure log at [Annexure A — Template Disclosure Log](#) contains a column for summarising the relevant FOI request, so that all relevant information is provided in a single table. However, this will increase the size of the table and agencies and ministers may prefer to include this information elsewhere on their disclosure log webpage.

14.50 It is also open to an agency or minister to supplement the disclosure log in other ways. For example, an agency may wish to highlight that information in a document published on the disclosure log has been revised and published in a different form; that the information provides only partial or superseded information about an issue; or that the information is taken from an internal working paper or other document that does not necessarily reflect the views of the agency, minister or the Australian Government. Any supplementation of this kind should be distinct from the information published on the disclosure log. The disclosure log should provide an accurate historical record of information in documents released by an agency or minister under the FOI Act. However, s 11C does not require publication of documents recording the FOI decision-making process because the work involved in doing so may pose an additional administrative burden without any corresponding public benefit.

Facilitating access

14.51 The disclosure log is intended to facilitate public access to government information where there has been a demonstrated interest in that information. To fulfil this objective it is important that the disclosure log and attached documents are easy to find on an agency's or minister's website.

14.52 Agencies and ministers are strongly encouraged to ensure that the disclosure log (including attached documents) is:

- easily discoverable and understandable
- machine-readable
- presented in a table
- accessible — in particular, it should meet agency online accessibility obligations (see [14.61]–[14.66] below)

- as far as is possible, made available for reuse on open licensing terms, so as to enhance the economic and social value of the information.⁷

- 14.53 Agencies and ministers are encouraged to release information on the disclosure log as a machine readable or searchable PDF, or in HTML format to ensure readability and accessibility of information. Agencies and ministers should avoid publishing scanned documents on their disclosure log wherever possible.
- 14.54 The Information Commissioner recommends that the following 5 features be integrated into the design and ongoing administration of the disclosure log.
- 14.55 First, the disclosure log will be more easily discoverable if agencies and ministers use the ‘FOI Disclosure Log’ icon recommended by the Information Commissioner to link to the disclosure log from a prominent webpage (for example, the homepage or an ‘Access to information’ or ‘Freedom of Information’ webpage). Information about how to use the OAIC-developed icon is available in the OAIC’s ‘Guidance for agency websites: Access to information’ webpage.⁸
- 14.56 Second, agencies and ministers should clearly but briefly explain the purpose of the disclosure log — for example, to provide access to ‘publicly available information, released in response to an FOI request’.
- 14.57 Third, agencies and ministers should enable information on the disclosure log to be searched — for example by reference to particular words, categories or subject matter.⁹ Using HTML text to describe the documents will allow them to be indexed and discovered by external search engines.
- 14.58 Fourth, to ensure greater awareness of their disclosure log, agencies and ministers should consider using appropriate online channels to publicise its existence and content. At the time of writing, Twitter and Facebook are the most popular online tools for propagating government information; whereas in the past RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds were the primary channel used by agencies.¹⁰ Use of online and social media content has the additional benefit of being highly machine-readable. If used with appropriate open licences, automated news and announcement feeds, it can be used to make disclosure log content available for reuse in other services, applications and social media platforms, such as public websites that facilitate access to documents. This practice may encourage individuals to review agency disclosure logs before making an FOI request for specific documents.

⁷ See the *Australian Government Intellectual Property Manual and Guidelines on licensing public sector information for Australian Government entities* at <<https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/australian-government-intellectual-property-manual-0>>. See also the Information Commissioner’s *Principles on open public sector information* at <<https://www.oaic.gov.au/information-policy/information-policy-resources/principles-on-open-public-sector-information/>>.

⁸ See <<https://oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/guidance-and-advice/guidance-for-agency-websites-access-to-information-web-page/>>.

⁹ See the Australian Government’s ‘Writing for search engines’ at <<https://guides.service.gov.au/content-guide/search-engines/>>.

¹⁰ For a full list of Australian Government-approved social media channels, see <<https://www.australia.gov.au/news-and-social-media/social-media>>.

- 14.59 Fifth, it is important for agencies and ministers to generate and publish appropriate metadata. This will improve the visibility and accessibility of web services and linked data applications. Agencies and ministers should have regard to the ‘AGLS Metadata Standard’¹¹ and the ‘Australian Government Recordkeeping Metadata Standard Implementation Guidelines’.¹²
- 14.60 It is important that all disclosure logs are clearly identified and contain the features discussed in these Guidelines. As noted at [14.47] above, agencies may also wish to publish other information alongside the disclosure log, such as links to historical or other relevant information. This publication can fall under an agency’s general discretion to publish information outside of the FOI Act, where no other legal restrictions apply (s 3A). It can also fall under the explicit provision in s 8(4) which permits agencies to proactively publish information through the IPS.

Accessibility

- 14.61 The disclosure log must be published to ‘members of the public generally’ (s 11C(3)) and must be done in accordance with an agency’s accessibility obligations.¹³ Accessibility of published information by all members of the community is therefore an important issue for agencies and ministers to consider when managing a disclosure log.
- 14.62 Challenges associated with publishing documents in an accessible manner do not diminish the need to comply with the publication requirements in s 11C. Publishing documents in HTML format provides optimal accessibility however this may not be possible in all cases. If a document published on the disclosure log is not available in HTML, the agency or minister should provide an alternative means to access the information that is both timely and responsive to the needs of the user. The agency or minister must respond promptly to requests for alternative access.
- 14.63 Australian Government agencies and ministers are required to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Level AA and are strongly encouraged to meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA which provides a more accessible experience.¹⁴
- 14.64 The Australian Human Rights Commission has published *World Wide Web Access: Disability Discrimination Act Advisory Notes* (Version 4.1) which supports conformance to WCAG 2.0 to a minimum level of AA.¹⁵
- 14.65 It may not be straightforward to publish some documents in an accessible manner on a disclosure log. This may be an issue, for example, if information has been redacted from the document or the agency or minister only holds the hard copy document.

¹¹ Available at <<http://www.agls.gov.au/>>.

¹² Available at <<http://www.agls.gov.au/>>.

¹³ See <<https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/digital-service-standard/digital-service-standard-criteria/9-make-it-accessible>>.

¹⁴ See <<https://www.dta.gov.au/help-and-advice/digital-service-standard/digital-service-standard-criteria/9-make-it-accessible>>.

¹⁵ Available at <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/world-wide-web-access-disability-discrimination-act-advisory-notes-ver-41-2014>>.

14.66 Other options that an agency or minister should consider to strengthen accessibility include:

- Working from original electronic documents wherever possible. Agencies and ministers should not publish scanned hard copies of electronic documents on their disclosure log. Instead, the original electronic document should be used wherever possible. Electronic redaction tools enable publication of electronic documents edited under s 22 (see [14.68]–[14.69] below).
- Applying optical character recognition (OCR) and associated accessibility optimisation to scanned hard copy documents when the original electronic document is not available. If it is necessary to publish a scanned document on the disclosure log, the agency or minister should use a multi-function printer or other device that can capture scans at a sufficiently high resolution to produce good-quality OCR. Agencies and ministers should also apply OCR to electronic documents containing images of text (such as image files, or PDF files not optimised for accessibility) where it is not reasonably practical to transcribe the content of the document in HTML.
- Including a description of the accessibility status of information on the disclosure log when the information is only available as a PDF. For example, consider stating that the information was created via OCR and is an approximation of the document provided to the FOI applicant. This description could form part of the ‘Other information’ listing in the template disclosure log at [Annexure A – Template Disclosure Log](#). Alternatively, accessibility information could be provided on an HTML document cover page that can be accessed using a link on the disclosure log.

Electronic redaction

14.67 Agencies and ministers are encouraged to use electronic rather than manual redaction. One reason agencies and ministers may prefer publishing scanned documents on the disclosure log is to preserve manual redactions made to the document given to the FOI applicant. However, effective redaction software exists that can be applied directly to electronic documents, enabling publication of more accessible information.

14.68 The Australian Signals Directorate and the Australian Cyber Security Centre tested the redaction functionality of Adobe Acrobat Pro DC 2017 in 2019 and reported that the tools were found to permanently delete the required information so that it was not present in any form in the redacted PDF file when used properly.¹⁶ This shows that correctly applied electronic redaction is as effective and reliable as manual processes.

Charges

14.69 The intention of s 11C is that information published or made available on a disclosure log should be freely accessible by the public (s 11C(4)). An agency may only impose a charge to

¹⁶ Available at < <https://www.cyber.gov.au/publications/redaction-functionality-in-adobe-acrobat-pro>>.

provide information that is not directly available for download from a website and only to reimburse the agency for a specific reproduction cost or an incidental cost (s 11C(4)(b)).

14.70 The Explanatory Memorandum to the Freedom of Information Amendment (Reform) Bill 2009 states:

... subsection 11C(4) makes it clear that an agency cannot charge a person for simply accessing information from the website. Charges may be imposed if the agency incurs a specific reproduction or incidental cost in providing access. This would include a situation where, for example, the information was contained in a recording that could not be readily converted to electronic format for uploading to the website, and the agency incurred costs in having that recording transcribed. Another example would be where a hard copy of a report is requested when the report is also available online.

14.71 If a disclosure log entry only describes the documents and how they can be obtained and a person asks for the documents published under s 11C, an agency or minister cannot:

- process as an FOI request under s 15 of the FOI Act or
- charge for access to the documents under s 29 of the FOI Act and the Charges Regulations.

14.72 In determining whether to charge members of the public for information made available in another format, agencies and ministers should take account of the ‘lowest reasonable cost’ object in the FOI Act (s 3(4)).

14.73 Details of any charges that an agency or minister will apply must be published on their website (s 11C(5)).¹⁷ This should include an explanation for the charge and the amount of the charge likely to be imposed. For ease of reference this information should be provided on the disclosure log landing page, or, if that is not appropriate, in the introduction to the disclosure log (see Annexure A for more information).

14.74 Where an agency or minister does not apply charges for information accessed directly through the disclosure log, the introductory text to the disclosure log should tell members of the public that the information is available at no charge.

Information Commissioner’s functions and powers

14.75 The Information Commissioner plays an active role in monitoring the administration of disclosure logs by agencies and ministers.

14.76 The Information Commissioner’s power to investigate complaints about agency FOI administration extends to complaints about an agency’s disclosure log (s 70). The Information Commissioner can also undertake a Commissioner-initiated investigation into an agency’s FOI actions (s 69(2)). These complaint and investigation powers do not extend to the actions of

¹⁷ This is similar to the requirement to publish information about charges to access information under the IPS, see s 8D(5).

ministers. The disclosure log actions of an agency or minister are not subject to review by the Information Commissioner under Part VII of the Act.

14.77 To facilitate Information Commissioner oversight of agency disclosure logs, agencies are encouraged to keep an internal register which lists every FOI request:

- whether documents requested by the FOI applicant were released
- whether any such documents, or the information contained in them, are listed in the agency disclosure log, in full or in part
- if there is a listing, whether the information can be downloaded from the agency's website (s 11C(3)(a)) or from another linked website (s 11C(3)(b)), or whether details are given about how the information may be obtained (s 11C(3)(c)).

14.78 The Information Commissioner is also required to prepare an annual report which includes information about freedom of information matters (see s 30 *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* and Part 15 of these Guidelines). The Commissioner's annual report includes information on the following aspects of the administration of each agency and minister's disclosure log:

- the number of FOI requests where access was granted that are listed in the agency or minister's disclosure log
- the number of listings on the agency or minister's disclosure log that have been published under ss 11C(3)(a), (b) and (c) respectively
- if the agency or minister collects the figures, the number of unique visitors and page views for webpages that are part of the disclosure log.

Agencies and ministers are required to provide this information to the Information Commissioner under s 93 of the FOI Act (see Part 15 of these Guidelines).

Additional publication considerations

Copyright

14.79 Agencies and ministers should clearly state on their website, either on a dedicated copyright page or in a statement on or attached to the disclosure log, the extent to which the public can reuse material in which the agency or minister (or the Commonwealth) holds copyright.

14.80 Agencies and ministers should consider making information published on a disclosure log available on open licensing terms wherever possible (see [14.51]). In deciding on the appropriate licensing, agencies and ministers should consider the *Australian Government*

*Intellectual Property Manual*¹⁸ and *Guidelines on licensing public sector information for Australian Government entities*.¹⁹

- 14.81 While most of the information an agency or minister publishes on its disclosure log will have been created by government, there may be documents in the agency or minister's possession to which a third party (such as the author or publisher of the material) owns the copyright.
- 14.82 No action lies against the Australian Government, a minister, an agency or an officer of any agency for breach of copyright if the minister or an agency officer publishes a document in good faith, in the belief that publication is required or permitted under the disclosure log provisions (s 90(1)(a)). However, this provision does not constitute authorisation or approval for reuse of the material, including by members of the public.
- 14.83 Where a third party owns copyright in material an agency or minister publishes as part of its disclosure log, the agency or minister should include a clear statement on their website advising the public that they may need to seek permission from the copyright owner to reuse the material. A statement such as the following could be used:
- To the extent that copyright in some of this material is owned by a third party, you may need to seek their permission before you can reuse that material.
- 14.84 If an agency or minister knows the details of third party ownership of copyright in material it has published on its disclosure log, the agency or minister should, with the copyright owner's consent, provide contact details on its website.

Retaining and archiving disclosure log information

- 14.85 The FOI Act does not specifically require information attached or referred to on a disclosure log to be made available indefinitely. However, the information listed on a disclosure log entry should be retained, even if a document or information attached to a listed item has been removed. Over time, the disclosure log will grow in length and provide a valuable current and historical record of information released by an agency or minister under the FOI Act. When an agency ceases to exist or is restructured, or a minister ceases to hold office, an adjustment may be necessary in accordance with change of government procedures applying at that time.
- 14.86 In the course of routine maintenance or updating of a website an agency or minister may decide to withdraw some disclosure log content, and make it available in another form, for example, on request. Similarly, an agency or minister may decide that it is inappropriate to publish particular information on its website following a change of government or ministerial or portfolio changes. Conversely, an agency may find that information listed in the disclosure log that is available only on request should instead be published on the agency website because of frequent requests for that information. Before agencies destroy or transfer documents or information in the course of removing content from their website, they must seek approval

¹⁸ < <https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/australian-government-intellectual-property-manual-0>>.

¹⁹ < <https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/guidelines-licensing-public-sector-information-australian-government-entities>.

from the National Archives of Australia (s 24 of the *Archives Act 1983*). Approval is granted through the issuing of general records authorities, agency-specific records authorities and normal administrative practice.

14.87 Agencies and ministers should indicate if documents or information attached to a disclosure log listing are identified for removal at a future date. For example, it may be appropriate that information or documents are removed after a certain period of time, for example 2 years, unless the information has enduring public value. Factors affecting how long an agency should retain disclosure log entries include the length of the disclosure log, and the number and file size of documents attached. After removal, details should be provided if information is made available after that date in some other way, or if it is no longer available (for example, if it has been archived)²⁰.

14.88 Routine monitoring by agencies and ministers of disclosure log activity will assist in deciding the best measures to further the FOI Act object of facilitating public access to government information.

Information Publication Scheme – routinely accessed information

14.89 Under the IPS, agencies must publish information in documents to which the agency routinely gives access in response to FOI requests (s 8(2)(g)), except:

- personal information about any individual, if it would be ‘unreasonable’ to publish the information (s 8(2)(g)(i))
- information about the business, commercial, financial or professional affairs of any person, if publication of that information would be ‘unreasonable’ (s 8(2)(g)(ii))
- other information of a kind determined by the Information Commissioner under s 8(3), if publication of that information would be ‘unreasonable’ (s 8(2)(g)(iii)).

14.90 Publication of information on a disclosure log will, in many instances, satisfy this IPS publication requirement. Nevertheless, the IPS should contain a clear link to the disclosure log and an explanation that it contains information to which the agency has routinely given access in response to FOI requests.

14.91 On the other hand, an agency may decide that it is preferable, in complying with s 8(2)(g), for the IPS to contain either an extract from the disclosure log or a separate summary of information routinely released by the agency in response to FOI requests. Whichever approach is adopted, agencies must observe the additional requirement in s 8(2)(g) that the IPS entry identify items of information that are ‘routinely’ disclosed by the agency in response to FOI requests.

²⁰ We note that agencies will generally make older disclosure log documents available to the public through Trove. Where this is the case, the disclosure log should refer to this practice and direct the public to the Trove document repository.

14.92 For more information on s 8(2)(g) and the IPS generally see Part 13 of these Guidelines.

Legal protection for disclosure log publication

14.93 The FOI Act provides legal protection where information has been published in good faith in the belief that publication was either required or permitted by an agency or minister on a disclosure log (ss 90 and 92). The protection applies to the Australian Government, a minister, an agency or an officer of an agency. The scope of the protection is that no action lies for defamation, breach of confidence or infringement of copyright and no minister or agency officers will be criminally liable.

14.94 These protections complement the policy objective of the FOI Act to provide a secure framework for publication of Australian Government information to the public. The protections are conditional, and apply only where a minister or agency officer publishes a document in good faith, in the belief that the publication was required or permitted under the FOI Act.

14.95 The legal protections provided by ss 90 and 92 also apply to the release of information in response to an FOI request, and to publication other than under the FOI Act where a minister or agency officer believes in good faith that publication is required or permitted. For more information about these protections see Part 3 of these Guidelines.

Annexure A — Template disclosure log

Freedom of Information disclosure log

The [agency/Minister] is required by the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* to publish this disclosure log on its website. The disclosure log lists information that has been released in response to an FOI request. The disclosure log requirement does not apply to:

- personal information about any person if publication of that information would be unreasonable
- information about the business, commercial, financial or professional affairs of any person if publication of that information would be unreasonable
- other information covered by a determination made by the Australian Information Commissioner if publication of that information would be unreasonable
- any information it is not reasonably practicable to publish because of the extent of modifications needed to be made to remove the information listed above.

The Information Commissioner's determination covers:

- information in a document that was an exempt document at the time access was given to the applicant.
- information in a document that the agency or minister would have decided was exempt at the time access was given to the applicant, if the request was made by someone other than the applicant.

The information described in this disclosure log has been released by [agency/Minister] under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* and is available for public access.

A link is provided if the information can be downloaded from this website or another website. Information that is not available on this website, due to technical limitations, may be obtained by writing to [address].

[If applicable] A charge may be imposed to reimburse the [agency/Minister] for the cost incurred in copying or reproducing the information or sending it to you.

[Insert information about the charges that may be imposed for providing access to documents not published on the disclosure log, or which can be provided in another format. This information should be comprehensive and include the basis upon which the charge will be imposed (for example, in accordance with the charges set out in Parts 1 and 2 Schedule 1 to the [Freedom of Information \(Charges\) Regulations 2019](#)).]

[If applicable] We do not impose a charge for providing access to information on our disclosure log. You will be notified if any charge is payable and required to pay the charge before the information is provided.

There may be documents on the disclosure log that are currently not available in HTML format. If you are unable to read the format provided, please contact [insert FOI contact details] for assistance.

[Optional] Information attached to, or referred to, in the [agency/Minister's] disclosure log will generally be removed after 2 years, unless the information has enduring public value. The archived disclosure log can be found here: [provide a link to the separate archive if not included on the disclosure log].

Sample disclosure log

FOI reference number	Date of access ⁽¹⁾	Date of publication ⁽²⁾	FOI request ⁽³⁾	Information published on the disclosure log ⁽⁴⁾	Other information ⁽⁵⁾

(1) Agencies and Ministers should note the date the FOI applicant was given access to a document under s 11A.

(2) Agencies and Ministers should note the date the documents were published on the disclosure log.

(3) Agencies and Ministers should provide a short summary of the FOI access request.

(4) Agencies and Ministers should provide a short summary of information provided under s 11A.

(5) Agencies and ministers may note here, for example, that information is no longer available or that it has been revised by the agency or Minister. They may also describe the accessibility status of a document only presented in a format other than HTML

PART 15 — REPORTING

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PART 15 — REPORTING

Information Commissioner's reporting obligations

15.1 The Information Commissioner is required under s 30 of the *Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010* (AIC Act) to report annually on the OAIC's operations, including on the freedom of information matters set out in s 31 of the AIC Act. Those matters include information about guidelines issued by the Commissioner, applications for IC review, complaints received by the OAIC, and assistance provided to agencies to enable them to comply with the FOI Act (AIC Act ss 31(1)(a), (f), (h) and (i)).

15.2 The report must also include information about FOI administration in agencies as listed in [15.3] below (AIC Act ss 31(1)(b), (c), (d) and (e) and 31(2)) and the number of applications each year for AAT review of FOI decisions (AIC Act s 31(1)(g)).

Agencies' and ministers' obligations to provide FOI information and statistics

15.3 Section 93 of the FOI Act requires agencies and ministers to provide information and statistics to the Information Commissioner to enable the Commissioner to prepare the report required under s 30 of the AIC Act. Each agency and minister must provide the following information:

- the number of FOI requests made under s 15 of the FOI Act (AIC Act s 31(1)(b))
- the number of decisions granting, partially granting or refusing access (AIC Act s 31(2))
- the number and outcome of requests to amend personal records under s 48 of the FOI Act (AIC Act s 31(1)(c))
- charges collected for processing FOI requests (AIC Act s 31(1)(d))
- the number and outcome of applications for internal review under s 54 of the FOI Act (AIC Act s 31(1)(e)).

15.4 The Information Commissioner also has monitoring and reporting functions in relation to the administration of the Information Publication Scheme (FOI Act Part II) — see Part 13 of these Guidelines for further information.

15.5 An agency or minister must also comply with any additional requirements in any regulations made under the FOI Act regarding the provision of information or the maintenance of records for the purposes of providing information and statistics to the Information Commissioner (FOI Act s 93(3)).

15.6 Section 8 of the Freedom of Information (Prescribed Authorities, Principal Offices and Annual Report) Regulations 2017 (the Regulation) provides specific deadlines for information to be given to the Information Commissioner where these Guidelines refer to information being given on a quarterly and annual basis.

15.7 In order to be able to effectively meet the requirements of s 30 of the AIC Act the Information Commissioner requires each agency and minister to provide a statistical return to the Commissioner at the end of each quarter and a separate return at the end of the financial year. The required information for each quarterly return and for the annual return is to be entered directly into the Information Commissioner's secure web portal at:

<https://foistats.oaic.gov.au/>.

15.8 The OAIC has provided detailed information on what statistics are required and how to provide the required information in an agency resource titled: 'FOIstats guide; Quarterly and annual FOI Act statistical returns to the OAIC' available at: <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/foi-resources/foi-agency-resources/foistats-guide>.

15.9 The deadlines, provided for in the above Regulation, for quarterly statistical returns about FOI requests and outcomes and other FOI Act related activity are:

- For quarter 1 (1 July to 30 September): By **21 October**
- For quarter 2 (1 October to 31 December): By **21 January**
- For quarter 3 (1 January to 31 March): By **21 April**
- For quarter 4 (1 April to 30 June): By **21 July**

15.10 The deadline for the annual return about staff resources and other costs and comparisons with previous years in relation to FOI Act activity is:

- For each financial year ending on 30 June: By **31 July**

GLOSSARY

AAO	Administrative Arrangements Order
AAT	Administrative Appeals Tribunal
AAT Act	<i>Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975</i>
Acts Interpretation Act	<i>Acts Interpretation Act 1901</i>
AGIFT	Australian Government Interactive Functions Thesaurus
AGIMO	Australian Government Information Management Office
AIC Act	<i>Australian Information Commissioner Act 2010</i>
AICmr	Australian Information Commissioner
ALRC	Australian Law Reform Commission
APS	Australian Public Service
APP	Australian Privacy Principle
Archives Act	<i>Archives Act 1983</i>
ARC	Administrative Review Council
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
Charges Regulations	<i>Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 1982</i>
Commissioner	Information Commissioner
Commonwealth Electoral Act	<i>Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918</i>
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DPMC	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
FOI	freedom of information
FOI Act	<i>Freedom of Information Act 1982</i>
GST	Goods and Services Tax
Guidelines	<i>Guidelines issued by the Australian Information Commissioner</i>

under s 93A of the Freedom of Information Act 1982

ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IC review	Information Commissioner review
IGIS	Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security
IPS	Information Publication Scheme
LPP	legal professional privilege
National Archives	National Archives of Australia
NBN Co Ltd	NBN Co Limited
OAIC	Office of the Australian Information Commissioner
Ombudsman Act	<i>Ombudsman Act 1976</i>
ONA	Office of National Assessments
OCR	Optical character recognition
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PBO	Parliamentary Budget Office
PGPA Act	<i>Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013</i>
Privacy Act	<i>Privacy Act 1988</i>
Privileges Act	<i>Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987</i>
PS Act	<i>Parliamentary Service Act 1999</i>
Public Service Act	<i>Public Service Act 1999</i>
reg	regulation
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
s	section
ss	sections
UK	United Kingdom
WCAG 2.0	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2.0