



DEFENCE FOI 032/23/24

STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982

1. I refer to the request by [REDACTED] (the applicant), dated and received on 11 July 2023 by the Department of Defence (Defence), for access to the following documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (FOI Act):

“I am requesting all documents related to Leadership Challenge 3 2023 at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Timeframe: from date

01/01/2023 - 12:00am

Timeframe: to date

11/07/2023 - 12:00am”

FOI decision maker

3. I am the authorised officer pursuant to section 23 of the FOI Act to make a decision on this FOI request.

Documents identified

4. I have identified 24 documents as falling within the scope of the request.
5. The decision in relation to each document is detailed in the schedule of documents.
6. I have added an FOI reference number and document number to each of the documents, which corresponds with the schedule.

Exclusions

7. Personal email addresses, signatures, PMKeyS numbers and mobile telephone numbers contained in documents that fall within the scope of the FOI request, duplicates of documents, and documents sent to or from the applicant are excluded from this request. Defence has only considered final versions of documents.

Decision

8. I have decided to:
 - a. release 2 documents in full;

- b. partially release 17 documents in accordance with section 22 [access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted] of the FOI Act on the grounds that the deleted material is considered exempt under sections 47E(c) and 47E(d) [public interest conditional exemptions - certain operations of agencies] and section 47F [public interest conditional exemptions - personal privacy] of the FOI Act;
- c. refuse access to 5 documents on the grounds that the documents are considered exempt under section 47E(c) [public interest conditional exemptions - certain operations of agencies] of the FOI Act; and
- d. remove irrelevant material in accordance with section 22 of the FOI Act.

Material taken into account

9. In making my decision, I have had regard to:
 - a. the terms of the request;
 - b. the content of the identified documents in issue;
 - c. relevant provisions of the FOI Act; and
 - d. the Guidelines published by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the Guidelines).

REASONS FOR DECISION

Section 22 – Access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted

10. Section 22 of the FOI Act permits an agency to prepare and provide an edited copy of a document where the agency has decided to refuse access to an exempt document or that to give access to a document would disclose information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request for access.
11. Documents 1, 4-8, 10, 11, 15, 18, 21, 23 contain exempt material and information that is irrelevant such as, mobile telephone numbers and signatures that do not relate to the request.
12. I am satisfied that it is reasonably practicable to remove the exempt and irrelevant material and release the documents to you in an edited form.
13. Where a decision maker denies access to a document, section 22(1) of the FOI Act requires that they consider releasing the document with exempt matter deleted, if possible.
14. Paragraph 3.98 of the Guidelines provides that:

...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.
15. I have considered disclosing documents 3, 9, 14, 17 & 20 to you with deletions, but have decided to refuse access to the documents as they would be meaningless and of little or no value once the exempt material is removed.

Section 47E(c) – Public interest conditional exemptions – certain operations of agencies

16. Section 47E(c) of the FOI Act states:

A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

- (c) have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth or by an agency*

17. The Guidelines provide, at paragraph 6.113, that:

Where the document relates to the agency's policies and practices relating to the assessment and 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.*

18. I find that the material within the documents relates to the assessment of personnel including activities concerning competency, in-house training requirements and assessment for bonus or eligibility for progression.

19. Upon examination of the documents I identified information that was associated with the management and assessment of personnel within Defence. In consultation with the Australian Defence Force Academy I determined that the documents contained information relating to a future assessment of personnel for the purpose of examination of competency.

20. The Guidelines advise me to consider whether the information could be reasonably expected to lead to a change in the agency's processes that would enable those processes to be more efficient. When assessing whether the disclosure of this information is unreasonable, I considered the ability of the information within the documents to compromise a fair and accurate assessment of personnel were it disclosed.

21. I determined that the disclosure of the information would, or could reasonably be expected to negatively impact the integrity of the system by which Defence undertakes the management and assessment of personnel.

22. Noting the above I am satisfied that this information contained in these documents is conditionally exempt under section 47E(c). of the FOI Act.

Section 47E(d) – Public interest conditional exemptions – certain operations of agencies

23. Section 47E(d) of the FOI Act states:

A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

- (d) have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of the agency.*

24. The Guidelines, at paragraph 6.123, provide that:

The predicted effect must bear on the agency's 'proper and efficient' operations, that is, the agency is undertaking its expected activities in an expected manner.

25. In the case of 'ABK' and Commonwealth Ombudsman [2022] AICmr 44, the Information Commissioner (IC) found that where the direct email addresses and phone numbers of agency staff are not publicly known, they should be conditionally exempt under section 47E(d). The IC made this determination due to reasonable expectation that the release of direct contact details would undermine the operation of established channels of communication with the public. Further, the IC accepted that staff who were contacted directly could be subject to excessive and abusive communications, which may give rise to work health and safety concerns.
26. I am satisfied that were the contact details of Defence personnel made publicly available, it would have substantial adverse effects on the proper and efficient operation of existing public communication channels. Further, I am satisfied of a reasonable expectation that the information could be used inappropriately, in a manner which adversely affects the health, wellbeing and work of Defence personnel. Disclosure of names, email addresses and phone numbers could, therefore, reasonably be expected to prejudice the operations of Defence.
27. The Guidelines provide, at paragraph 6.120, that I should consider whether disclosure of the information '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.' Given that the direct contact details within the documents are not publicly available and that more appropriate communication channels are already available, I am satisfied that release of the information could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in Defence's processes that would not lead to any efficiencies.
28. Accordingly, I am satisfied that all staff information contained within the documents is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.

Section 47F – Public interest conditional exemptions - personal privacy

29. Section 47F(1) of the FOI Act states:

A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act would involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information about any person (including a deceased person).

30. The FOI Act shares the same definition of 'personal information' as the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth). The Guidelines provide that:

6.128 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.*

31. I found that the documents contain personal information of persons. This includes names, training information, medical information and personal details which would reasonably identify third parties.

32. In my assessment of whether the disclosure of personal information is unreasonable, I considered the following factors in accordance with section 47F(2):
- 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 sources; and
 - d. the effect the release of the personal information could reasonably have on the third party.
33. Against the above criteria I found that the:
- a. specific personal information is not well known;
 - b. disclosure of information could cause unreasonable distress; and
 - c. the information is not readily available from publicly accessible sources.
34. Taking into account the above factors, I consider that the release of the material would be an unreasonable disclosure of personal information of individuals and could reasonably be expected to cause harm to their privacy. I therefore have decided that this information is conditionally exempt under section 47F of the FOI Act.
35. While I consider that release of the material removed under section 47F may be of interest to the applicant, disclosure of the conditionally exempt material would not inform public debate on any matter of public importance in any meaningful way. Furthermore, the public interest is better served in protecting the privacy of the individuals whose personal details are contained within these documents from release to the public at large.

Public interest considerations - sections 47E(c), 47E(d) and 47F

36. Section 11A(5) of the FOI Act states:

The agency or Minister must give the person access to the 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.

37. I have considered the factors favouring disclosure as set out in section 11B(3) [factors favouring access] of the FOI Act. The relevant factors being whether access to the document would:

- (a) promote the objects of this Act (including all the matters set out in sections 3 and 3A);*
- (b) inform debate on a matter of public importance;*
- (c) promote effective oversight of public expenditure;*
- (d) allow a person to access his or her own personal information.*

38. In my view, disclosure of this information would not increase public participation in the Defence process (section 3(2)(a) of the FOI Act), nor would it increase scrutiny or discussion of Defence activities (section 3(2)(b) of the FOI Act).
39. Paragraph 6.22 of the Guidelines specifies a non-exhaustive list of public interest factors against disclosure. The factors I find particularly relevant to this request are that release of this information could reasonably be expected to prejudice:
- (a) the protection of an individual's right to privacy;
 - (b) the interests of an individual or a group of individuals;
 - (c) an agency's ability to obtain confidential information;
 - (d) the management function of an agency; and
 - (e) the personnel management function of an agency.
40. I note that disclosure of the requested information may promote some of the objects of the FOI Act. However, disclosure of the specific conditionally exempt material would not increase public participation in the Defence process, nor would it increase scrutiny, transparency or discussion of Defence activities.
41. It is in the public interest that Defence efficiently and productively operates with regard for the health and wellbeing of its personnel. As I have established above that the release of the names, email addresses and phone numbers of Defence personnel can reasonably be expected to prejudice the management and personnel management functions of Defence. Existing communication channels and processes enable efficient and appropriate liaison with the public. The direct contact details of Defence personnel should, therefore, not be disclosed, as the public interest against their disclosure outweighs the public interest in their release.
42. I have not taken any of the factors listed in section 11B(4) [irrelevant factors] of the FOI Act into account when making this decision.
43. I am satisfied, based on the above particulars, the public interest factors against disclosure outweigh the factors for disclosure, and that, on balance, it is against the public interest to release the information to you. Accordingly, I find that the information is exempt under sections 47E(c), 47E(d) and 47F of the FOI Act.

FURTHER INFORMATION

44. Some of the documents matching the scope of this request contained a dissemination limiting marker (DLM). Where documents have been approved for public release, the DLM has been struck through.

Shevahn

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Date: 2023.08.25 14:43:51
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Shevahn

Accredited Decision Maker

Joint Capabilities Group (JCG)

Department of Defence