



DEFENCE FOI 384/23/24

STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982

1. I refer to the request by [REDACTED] (the applicant), dated and received on 29 October 2023 by the Department of Defence (Defence), for access to the following documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (FOI Act):

...all briefing (inc Ministerial briefing) and correspondence held by the Department associated with the re-appointment of Mr Greg Moriarty as Secretary of the Department of Defence. My requests covers the timeframe 1 May 2022 to end of September 2022.

FOI decision maker

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

Documents identified

3. I have identified four (4) documents as being within the scope of the request.

Exclusions

4. Irrelevant information (such as signatures) and personal information (such as names, email addresses and contact 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

5. I have decided to:
 - a. partially release four (4) 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(d) [Public interest conditional exemptions—certain operations of agencies] and 47F [Public interest conditional exemptions—personal privacy] of the FOI Act; and
 - b. remove irrelevant material in accordance with section 22 of the FOI Act.

Material taken into account

6. 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

- 7. 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.
- 8. All four documents contain irrelevant material and information (signatures and other matter) that do not relate to the request.
- 9. I am satisfied that it is reasonably practicable to remove the irrelevant material and release the documents to you in an edited form.

Section 47E – Public interest conditional exemptions—certain operations of agencies

- 10. Upon examination of the material, I identified documents containing information relating to Defence personnel direct contact details.

- 11. 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:

...

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

- 12. The Guidelines provide at paragraph 6.123 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.

- 13. The documents within the scope of this request contain the names and direct phone numbers of Defence staff. In the case of 'ABK' and Commonwealth Ombudsman [2022] AICmr 44, the Information Commissioner (IC) found that the direct contact details of agency staff which were not publicly known were conditionally exempt under section 47E(d). The IC made this determination due to a 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.
- 14. I am satisfied that if the contact details of Defence personnel were to be made publicly available, it would, or could be reasonably expected to, 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 staff names and phone numbers through this FOI request, therefore, could reasonably be expected to prejudice the operations of Defence.

15. 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 this information could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in Defence’s processes that would not lead to any efficiencies.
16. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the relevant information contained within the documents is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.

Section 47F – Public interest conditional exemptions—personal privacy

17. 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).

18. 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.*

19. I found that one document contains personal information (names, email addresses and contact telephone numbers), which would reasonably identify third parties.
20. 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 parties.

21. I found that:
- a. the specific personal information listed is not well known,
 - b. individuals whose personal information is contained in the documents are not widely known to be associated with the matters dealt with in the document, and
 - c. the information is not readily available from publicly accessible sources.
22. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47F of the FOI Act.

Public interest considerations – Sections 47E and 47F

23. 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.

24. 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;

25. 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).

26. 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:

- the protection of an individual's right to privacy; and
- the interests of an individual or a group of individuals.

27. Concerning the application of section 47F, I had regard for the public's access to information contained in the documents. Disclosure would provide access to information that is not widely known and it could reasonably identify individuals. While its release may be of some interest to the applicant, disclosure of the conditionally exempt material would not inform public debate on any matter of importance in any meaningful way.

28. In relation to section 47E, 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, the release of names, email addresses and phone numbers of Defence personnel can reasonably be expected to prejudice the 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.

29. Additionally, Defence has an obligation to keep information about third parties confidential. I have formed the view that the public have a reasonable expectation that personal information of third parties would not be released, and adversely impact the personal privacy of those individuals.
30. 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.
31. 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 and 47F of the FOI Act.

peter.

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Date: 2023.11.10 13:06:59
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Lieutenant Colonel Peter

Accredited Decision Maker

Defence People Group

Department of Defence