



DEFENCE FOI 464/23/24

STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982

1. I refer to the request by [REDACTED] (the applicant), dated and received on 17 November 2023 by the Department of Defence (Defence), for access to the following documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (FOI Act):

“All records, including without limitation documents, emails, records of telephone conversations, and notes from or in preparation for the initial call for Expressions of Interest from Museums for the allocation of surplus F/A-18 Classic Hornet airframes, details of

- expressions of interest received,*
- assessment criteria applied and*
- the assessment process conducted for the allocation of the airframes including any analysis of the bids made, and*
- reasons for the final decisions.*

Any information including documentation, emails, notes, and records from any meetings outlining the reasons that the Queensland Air Museum was not allocated a F/A-18 Classic Hornet for display.

Timeframe: from date

01/01/2019 - 12:00am

Timeframe: to date

15/11/2023 - 12:00am.”

Background

2. [REDACTED]

3. [REDACTED]

Scope of external review

4. [REDACTED]

5.

FOI decision maker

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

Documents identified

7. Thirty-seven (37) documents were identified as matching the scope of the request.
8. The decision in relation to each document is detailed in the schedule of documents.

Exclusions

9. 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

10. I have decided to vary the original decision by:
- a. releasing one document in full;
 - b. partially releasing 19 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 33(a)(iii) [documents affecting national security, defence or international relations], 47E(d) [public interest conditional exemptions – certain operations of agencies], 47F [public interest conditional exemptions – personal privacy] and 47G [public interest conditional exemptions – business affairs] of the FOI Act;
 - c. refusing access to 17 documents on the grounds that the documents are considered exempt under section 47G public interest conditional exemptions – business affairs] of the FOI Act; and
 - d. removing irrelevant material in accordance with section 22 of the FOI Act.

Material taken into account

11. 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;
 - d. the Guidelines published by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the Guidelines); and
 - e. advice received from History and Heritage Branch, Air Force.

REASONS FOR DECISION

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

12. 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.
13. The documents contain exempt and irrelevant material and information (mobile telephone numbers, signatures) that does not relate to the request.
14. 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.

Section 33(a)(iii) – Documents affecting national security, defence or international relations

15. Section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act states:

A document is an exempt document if disclosure of the document under this Act:

- (a) would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to:*
 - (iii) the international relations of the Commonwealth*

16. In regard to the terms ‘would, or could reasonably be expected to’ and ‘damage’, the Guidelines provide:

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.

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.

...

5.31 The meaning of ‘damage’ has three aspects:

- i. that of safety, protection or defence from something that is regarded as a danger. The 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.*

17. In regard to ‘international relations’, the Guidelines provide at paragraph 5.36:

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. 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.

18. Section 33(a)(iii) provides that a document is exempt if its disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to the international relations of the Commonwealth.
19. The Guidelines describe international relations as the ability of the Australian Government to maintain good working relations with other governments and international organisations and protect the flow of confidential information between them.
20. I have identified documents containing information that, if released, would, or could reasonably be expected to, in my view, cause damage to the international relations of the Commonwealth.
21. These documents within the scope of the applicant's request which contain information relating to Australia's relationships with foreign governments and their officials. Release of this information could, in my view, reasonably be expected to cause damage to those relationships. Disclosure would, in my view, cause a loss of trust and confidence in the Australian government resulting in foreign officials being less willing to engage with Australian Government officials and Australian businesses in the future.
22. Disclosure would, therefore, in my view, clearly damage Australia's international relations. I have therefore decided that the material is exempt under section 33(a)(iii) 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:

- (c) *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 other persons. This includes their email address and contact information 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. I found that the specific personal information listed is not well known, 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 the information is not readily available from publicly accessible sources.

34. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47F of the FOI Act.

Section 47G – Public interest conditional exemptions – business

35. Section 47G(1)(a) of the FOI Act states:

(1) A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act 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, in a case in which the disclosure of the information:

(a) would, or could reasonably be expected to, unreasonably affect that 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.

36. I note that the use of the word ‘could’ in this provision requires only reasonable consideration of the possibility that disclosure may cause the consequences specified.

37. The Guidelines explain, at paragraph 6.188:

The test of reasonableness applies not to the claim of harm but to the objective assessment of the expected adverse effect....These considerations require a weighing of a public interest against a private interest, preserving the profitability of a business, but at this stage it bears only on the threshold question of whether the disclosure would be unreasonable.

38. The Guidelines also state, at paragraph 6.184:

The operation of the business information 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)).

39. The Guidelines go on to provide, at paragraph 6.192, ‘[t]he 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’.

40. I found that the documents reveal information concerning the commercial affairs of third parties. I consider that release of that information could unreasonably affect those third parties business affairs in the following adverse ways:

i. it would adversely impact the organisations commercial affairs and information about commercial business agreements with a client; which in turn will directly impact the organisation’s ‘money making affairs’;

41. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47G(1)(a) of the FOI Act.

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

42. 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.

43. 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.*
44. 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).
45. 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;
 - the interests of an individual or a group of individuals;
 - an agency's ability to obtain confidential information;
 - an agency's ability to obtain similar information in the future; and
 - the management function of an agency.
46. 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 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.
47. I find that it would be contrary to the public interest to disclose commercially sensitive information of a business. Release of such information could reasonably be expected to adversely impact the money-making affairs of that business. The public interest is better served by protecting commercially sensitive information.
48. 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.

49. 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(d), 47F and 47G of the FOI Act.

FURTHER INFORMATION


50. 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.



Accredited Decision Maker

CASG

Department of Defence

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