



## DEFENCE FOI 603/24/25

### STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982

1. I refer to the request by [REDACTED] (the applicant) dated and received on 5 February 2025 by the Department of Defence (Defence), for access to the following documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (FOI Act):

*"Minister Keogh's office told me recently that "more than 64,000 Australians applied to join the ADF in 2024". We seek documents showing the numbers of those applicants accepted, and the numbers by categories of rejections applied by Defence recruiters (It may be failure to meet physical health standards, mental health standards etc). We also seek data on those who voluntarily opt against proceeding for an application. We are happy to receive a summary document."*

#### 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 three documents as falling within the scope of the request.

#### Exclusions

5. 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

6. I have decided to:
  - a. partially release three 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 section 47E [public interest conditional exemptions – certain operation of agencies] of the FOI Act; and
  - b. remove irrelevant material in accordance with section 22 of the FOI Act.

#### Material taken into account

7. 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. the response received from consultation with a third party.

## **REASONS FOR DECISION**

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

- 8. Section 22 of the FOI Act permits an agency to prepare and provide an edited copy of a document where the agency has decided that to give access to the entire document would disclose information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request for access.
- 9. The documents identified for release in part contain exempt and irrelevant material such as mobile telephone numbers that do not relate to the request.
- 10. Where whole pages are considered to be exempt in full or irrelevant to the scope of the request, these pages have been removed from the released document pack.
- 11. 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**

- 12. 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.*

- 13. Paragraph 6.115 of the Guidelines provide that:

*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.*

- 14. 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 the reasonable expectation that releasing 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.
- 15. I am satisfied that publicly releasing the contact details of Defence personnel would have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient operation of existing

public communication channels. There is 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.

16. Paragraph 6.112 of the Guidelines provide that I 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.*' The direct contact details within the documents are not publicly available and more appropriate communication channels already available. Release of the information could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in Defence's processes which would not lead to any efficiencies.
17. I am satisfied that all staff information contained within the documents is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.

**Public interest considerations - sections 47E**

18. 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.*

19. 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.*


20. 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).
21. Paragraph 6.233 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; and
  - an agency's ability to obtain similar information in the future.
22. 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 direct contact details 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.

23. 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.
24. 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 section 47E of the FOI Act.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

25. The request seeks access to “*documents showing the numbers of those applicants accepted*”. All applications submitted to Defence for recruitment into the Australian Defence Force (ADF) are accepted for processing. As they are processed, at various points candidates may voluntarily withdraw or do not meet the standards required and do not progress further for enlistment.
26. Some of the documents matching the scope of this request originally contained a dissemination limiting marker. Where documents have been approved for public release, the marker has been struck through.



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