



12 October 2023

Our reference: LEX 75591

Ben Faithful

By email: [foi+request-10604-991a6670@righttoknow.org.au](mailto:foi+request-10604-991a6670@righttoknow.org.au)

Dear Ben,

### **Decision on your Freedom of Information Request**

I refer to your request, dated and received by Services Australia (the **Agency**) on 22 August 2023 for access under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the **FOI Act**) to the following documents:

'I request the following information relating to the former initiative to match Centrelink data with data from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) to detect potential overpayment and the recovery of those overpayments from citizens. This initiative has been extensively covered by the media using various names, including #robodebt and #notmydebt.

- Documents listing identified risks, categorisations (Likelihood, Impact, etc.), and treatments in the period 1 Jan 2017 to 31 Dec 2017, which may be called:

- a) Risk Plans
- b) Weekly Reports
- c) Issues and Escalated Issues Registers'.

### **My decision**

The Agency holds 13 documents (totalling 214 pages) that relate to your request.

I have decided to:

- grant you **full access** to two documents (documents 1 and 5)
- grant you **part access** to 11 documents (documents 2 to 4 and 6 to 13 inclusive) with some of the content removed, and
- **refuse access** to 'weekly reports' under section 24A of the FOI Act on the basis that all reasonable steps have been taken to locate the documents you have requested and I am satisfied that they cannot be located or do not exist.

I have decided that parts of documents, that you have requested are exempt under the FOI Act, including:

- operational material, the disclosure of which would, or could reasonably be expected to have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of the Agency (section 47E(d) conditional exemption), and
- personal information of a third party, the disclosure of which would be unreasonable and contrary to the public interest (section 47F(1) conditional exemption).

Please see the schedule at **Attachment A** to this letter for a detailed list of the documents and the reasons for my decision, including the relevant sections of the FOI Act.

### **How we will send your documents to you**

The documents are attached.

### **You can ask for a review of our decision**

If you disagree with any part of the decision you can ask for a review. There are two ways you can do this. You can ask for an internal review from within the Agency, or an external review by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner. You do not have to pay for a review of the decision. See **Attachment B** for more information about how to request a review.

### **Further assistance**

If you have any questions please email [freedomofinformation@servicesaustralia.gov.au](mailto:freedomofinformation@servicesaustralia.gov.au).

Yours sincerely

Hannah  
Authorised FOI Decision Maker  
Freedom of Information Team  
FOI and Ombudsman Branch | Legal Services Division  
Services Australia



**SCHEDULE OF DOCUMENTS FOR RELEASE**  
**FAITHFUL, Ben - LEX 75591**

Doc No.	Pages	Date	Description	Decision	Exemption	Comments
1.	1	2017	BVT Issues Backlog report	Release in full		
2.	2 - 15	2017	Consolidated Issues Register	Release in part	s 47F(1)	Personal information deleted under s 47F(1) Due to printing issue, incomplete information at rows 23, 32, 38 and 48 on pages 5, 7, 8 and 10 are provided in full at pages 12 to 15.
3.	16 - 21	2017	Consolidated Issues Register	Release in part	s 47F(1)	Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
4.	22 - 30	2017	Consolidated Issues Register	Release in part	s 47F(1)	Personal information deleted under s 47F(1) Due to printing issue, incomplete information at row 19 on page 24 is provided in full at page 30.

Doc No.	Pages	Date	Description	Decision	Exemption	Comments
5.	31	2017	OCI Issues register	Release in full		
6.	32 - 47	13 January 2017	Employment Income Matching - Risk Management Plan February 2017	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
7.	48 - 63	13 January 2017	Enhanced Welfare Payment Integrity – Income Data Matching Risk Management Plan February 2017	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
8.	64	2017	Registered Mail Issues Register	Release in part	s 47F(1)	Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
9.	65 - 127	January – June 2017	Strengthening the Integrity of Welfare Payments – Employment Income Matching (PAYG) - Monthly Project Status Reports	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)  Due to printing issue, incomplete fields at pages 70, 80, 90 and 100 are provided in full at pages 126 and 127.

Doc No.	Pages	Date	Description	Decision	Exemption	Comments
10.	128 - 187	January - June 2017	Enhanced Welfare Payment Integrity – Income Data Matching - Monthly Project Status Reports	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
11.	188 - 189	30 August 2017	Programme and Project Register status update – Employment Income Matching (PAYG)	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
12.	190 - 191	30 August 2017	Programme and Project Register status update – Enhanced Welfare Payment Integrity – Income Data Matching	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)
13.	192 - 214	11 December 2017	Project Closure Report – Employment Income Matching	Release in part	s 47E(d) s 47F(1)	Operational material deleted under s 47E(d) Personal information deleted under s 47F(1)



## REASONS FOR DECISION

### What you requested

I request the following information relating to the former initiative to match Centrelink data with data from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) to detect potential overpayment and the recovery of those overpayments from citizens. This initiative has been extensively covered by the media using various names, including #robodebt and #notmydebt.

- Documents listing identified risks, categorisations (Likelihood, Impact, etc.), and treatments in the period 1 Jan 2017 to 31 Dec 2017, which may be called:

- a) Risk Plans
- b) Weekly Reports
- c) Issues and Escalated Issues Registers'.

On 15 September 2023, we sought your agreement to an extension of time for the processing of your request. On the same day you replied agreeing to a 21 day extension of time under section 15AA of the FOI Act.

### What I took into account

In reaching my decision I took into account:

- your original request dated 22 August 2023
- the documents that fall within the scope of your request
- whether the release of material is in the public interest
- consultations with Agency officers about:
  - the nature of the documents
  - the Agency's operating environment and functions
- guidelines issued by the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the **Guidelines**), and
- the FOI Act.

### Reasons for my decisions

I am authorised to make decisions under section 23(1) of the FOI Act.

I have decided that parts of documents that you requested are exempt under the FOI Act. My findings of fact and reasons for deciding that the exemption applies to those documents are discussed below.

#### Documents unable to be located or do not exist

Section 24A of the FOI Act provides that:

- (1) An agency or Minister may refuse a request for access to a document if:
  - (a) all reasonable steps have been taken to find the document; and
  - (b) the agency or Minister is satisfied that the document:
    - (i) is in the agency's or Minister's possession but cannot be found; or
    - (ii) does not exist.

The Payment Accuracy Programme and Appeals Division (the Division) conducted searches of the Agency's electronic and paper files relevant to your request. This Division did not identify any weekly reports meeting the description of your request. The Division advised that searches of relevant repositories were completed using relevant search terms, and that no 'weekly report' documents could be located.

On the basis of these searches, I am satisfied that in accordance with section 24A of the FOI Act:

1. all reasonable steps have been taken to find the documents, and
2. the documents cannot be located or do not exist.

### Operational Material

I have applied the exemption in section 47E(d) of the FOI Act to parts of the documents as outlined in the schedule.

This section of the FOI Act allows the Agency to redact material from a document if its disclosure would have a serious and significant effect on the Agency's ability to conduct its operations efficiently and properly.

The requested documents contain internal file pathway locations and internal positional mailbox addresses. I am satisfied this information is relevant to the implementation, delivery and management of processes administered by the agency, and is therefore relevant to the conduct of the agency's operations.

Documents 9 to 13 (inclusive) contain Agency positional mailboxes and I consider that releasing the exempt material to you would negatively affect the conduct of the operations of the Agency. This is because the Agency's purpose is to provide high-quality government services and payments to Australians. It is a large, public facing, government organisation with many points of contact designed to facilitate its purpose. The Agency has established channels of communication for customers and members of the public, which have been put in place to ensure the effective management of the significant volume of communication received.

If internal positional mailbox details were to be made publicly available, correspondence directed to these mailboxes could be mishandled, lost, duplicated or double-handled on account of it not being directed to the most appropriate teams through the publicly available communication channels. Noting the Agency's interactions with the public number in the hundreds of millions, diverting people from correct channels cannot be appropriately categorised as insubstantial or nominal.

Documents 6 and 7 contain internal file pathway location information. I consider that releasing this information would negatively affect the operations of the Agency as a malicious user could utilise this information to navigate Agency systems for personal gain. I consider release of such information may increase the risk or likelihood of unauthorised access to Agency systems by malicious users. The Agency's computer systems are critical to the proper and efficient delivery of its functions. Unauthorised access would have a substantial adverse effect on the Agency's operations by compromising computer system availability and integrity, as well as the confidentiality of information held by the Agency. Release of internal pathway locations to the

world at large under the FOI process could reasonably be expected to increase the risk of unauthorised access to the Agency's computer systems.

I consider the disclosure of the material would generally promote the objects of the FOI Act, which is in the public interest. However, I also considered the relevant factors indicating access would be contrary to the public interest. In particular, I have considered the extent to which disclosure could reasonably be expected to:

- prejudice the Agency's ability to effectively and efficiently manage its communications with the public
- prejudice critical and essential operations of the Agency, and
- prejudice the ability to safely store confidential information, which will in turn prejudice the Agency's ability to effectively and efficiently provide services to the Australian public.

As such, I find the public interest factor in favour of disclosing the material is outweighed by the public interest factors against disclosure.

### Personal Information

I have applied the exemption in section 47F(1) of the FOI Act to parts of documents as outlined in the schedule.

Personal information is information or an opinion about an identified individual, or an individual who is reasonably identifiable. It can include a person's name, address, telephone number, date of birth, medical records, bank account details, taxation information and signature.

I am satisfied documents 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13 contain personal information, being the names, email addresses and phone numbers of Agency staff.

I am satisfied the disclosure of this personal information would be unreasonable as you do not have consent from these individuals for the release of their personal information. Further, I am satisfied the information is private and not available publicly, and is not well known to you. I also consider that revealing this information could reasonably be expected to expose the identified staff members to threats from members of the public.

I am of the opinion there is little public interest in the disclosure of the personal information contained in these documents, and do not consider release would necessarily promote the objects of the FOI Act. Further, I consider disclosure would prejudice the identified staff members' right to privacy, adversely affect their interests, and prejudice the agency's ability to attract and retain staff.

Based on these factors, I have decided the personal information contained in the relevant documents is conditionally exempt under section 47F(1) of the FOI Act and release of this information would be unreasonable.





**Attachment B**

**INFORMATION ON RIGHTS OF REVIEW**

***FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982***

**Asking for a full explanation of a Freedom of Information decision**

Before you ask for a formal review of a FOI decision, you can contact us to discuss your request. We will explain the decision to you. This gives you a chance to correct misunderstandings.

**Asking for a formal review of an Freedom of Information decision**

If you still believe a decision is incorrect, the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (FOI Act)* gives you the right to apply for a review of the decision. Under sections 54 and 54L of the FOI Act, you can apply for a review of an FOI decision by:

1. an Internal Review Officer in Services Australia (the **Agency**); and/or
2. the Australian Information Commissioner.

**Applying for an internal review by an Internal Review Officer**

If you apply for internal review, a different decision maker to the Agency delegate who made the original decision will carry out the review. The Internal Review Officer will consider all aspects of the original decision and decide whether it should change. An application for internal review must be:

- made in writing
- made within 30 days of receiving this letter
- sent to the address at the top of the first page of this letter, or by email to [freedomofinformation@servicesaustralia.gov.au](mailto:freedomofinformation@servicesaustralia.gov.au)

**Note:** You do not need to fill in a form. However, it is a good idea to set out any relevant submissions you would like the Internal Review Officer to further consider, and your reasons for disagreeing with the decision.

**Applying for external review by the Australian Information Commissioner**

If you do not agree with the original decision or the internal review decision, you can ask the Australian Information Commissioner to review the decision.

If you do not receive a decision from an Internal Review Officer in the Agency within 30 days of applying, you can ask the Australian Information Commissioner for a review of the original FOI decision.

You will have 60 days to apply in writing for a review by the Australian Information Commissioner.

You can **lodge your application**:

Online: [www.oaic.gov.au](http://www.oaic.gov.au)

Post: Australian Information Commissioner  
GPO Box 5218  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Email: [enquiries@oaic.gov.au](mailto:enquiries@oaic.gov.au)

**Note:** The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner generally prefers FOI applicants to seek internal review before applying for external review by the Australian Information Commissioner.

**Important:**

- If you are applying online, the application form the 'FOI Review Form' is available at [www.oaic.gov.au](http://www.oaic.gov.au).
- If you have one, you should include with your application a copy of the Agency's decision on your FOI request
- Include your contact details
- Set out your reasons for objecting to the Agency's decision.

**Complaints to the Australian Information Commissioner and Commonwealth Ombudsman**

***Australian Information Commissioner***

You may complain to the Australian Information Commissioner concerning action taken by an agency in the exercise of powers or the performance of functions under the FOI Act, There is no fee for making a complaint. A complaint to the Australian Information Commissioner must be made in writing. The Australian Information Commissioner's contact details are:

Telephone: 1300 363 992  
Website: [www.oaic.gov.au](http://www.oaic.gov.au)

***Commonwealth Ombudsman***

You may also complain to the Commonwealth Ombudsman concerning action taken by an agency in the exercise of powers or the performance of functions under the FOI Act. There is no fee for making a complaint. A complaint to the Commonwealth Ombudsman may be made in person, by telephone or in writing. The Commonwealth Ombudsman's contact details are:

Phone: 1300 362 072  
Website: [www.ombudsman.gov.au](http://www.ombudsman.gov.au)

The Commonwealth Ombudsman generally prefers applicants to seek review before complaining about a decision.