



Australian Government
Department of Defence



Freedom of Information – Your Review Rights

If you disagree with the decision made by the Department of Defence under the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (the FOI Act), you can ask for the decision to be reviewed. You can ask for external review by the Australian Information Commissioner.

External review

The Information Commissioner is an independent office holder who can review the decisions of agencies under the FOI Act.

Do I have to pay?

No. The Information Commissioner's review is free.

How do I apply?

You must apply in writing and you can lodge your application in one of the following ways:

Online: www.oaic.gov.au

Post: GPO Box 2999, Canberra ACT 2601

Fax: +61 2 9284 9666

Email: enquiries@oaic.gov.au

In person: Level 3,
175 Pitt Street,
Sydney, NSW 2000

An application form is available on the website at www.oaic.gov.au. Your application should include a copy of the notice of the decision that you are objecting to, and your contact details. You should also set out why you are objecting to the decision.

Can I get help in completing the application?

Yes. The Information Commissioner's staff are available to help you with your application if anything is unclear.

When do I have to apply?

If you are objecting to a decision to impose charges for access to documents, you must apply to the Information Commissioner within 60 days of being given notice of the decision.

You can ask the Information Commissioner for an extension of time to apply, and this may be granted if the Information Commissioner considers it is reasonable in the circumstances.

Who will conduct the review?

Staff of the Information Commissioner will conduct the review. Only the Information Commissioner, the FOI Commissioner or the Privacy Commissioner can make a decision at the end of the review.

Does the Information Commissioner have to review my matter?

No. The Information Commissioner may decide not to review an application that is frivolous, misconceived or lacking in substance, or if you fail to cooperate with the process or cannot be contacted after reasonable attempts. You cannot appeal against that decision.

Alternatively the Information Commissioner may decide that the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) would be better placed to review the matter, and if so, will advise you of the procedure for applying to the AAT. This will not be common.

Can I withdraw my application?

Yes. An application can be withdrawn at any time before the Information Commissioner makes a decision.

What happens in the review process?

The review process is designed to be as informal as possible. The Information Commissioner may contact you or any of the other parties to clarify matters and seek more information. The Information Commissioner may also ask the agency to provide reasons for their decision if the reasons given were inadequate.

Most reviews will be made on the basis of the submissions and papers provided by the parties. Sometimes the Information Commissioner may decide to hold a hearing if one of the parties applies. Parties may participate in a hearing by telephone. If confidential matters are raised, the hearing may be held partly or wholly in private.

Can someone else represent me?

Yes, including a lawyer. However, the Information Commissioner prefers the process to be as informal and cost-effective as possible and does not encourage legal representation.

What powers does the Information Commissioner have?

While the review process is designed to be informal, the Information Commissioner has formal powers to require anyone to produce information or documents, to compel anyone to attend to answer questions and to take an oath or affirmation that their answers will be true. An agency can also be ordered to undertake further searches for documents.

What decisions can the Information Commissioner make?

Making a complaint

You may make a complaint to the Information Commissioner about actions taken by Defence in relation to your application. The complaint needs to be in writing and lodged in one of the ways indicated above under the heading "How do I apply".

Investigation by the Ombudsman

The Commonwealth Ombudsman can also investigate complaints about action taken by agencies under the FOI Act. However, if the issue complained about either could be or has been investigated by the Information Commissioner, the Ombudsman will consult the Information Commissioner to avoid the same matter being investigated twice. If the Ombudsman decides to investigate, the complaint, then all relevant documents and information must be transferred to the Information Commissioner.

The Information Commissioner can also transfer to the Ombudsman a complaint that could more appropriately be investigated by the Ombudsman. This could occur where the FOI complaint is only one part of a wider grievance about an agency's actions. It is unlikely that this will be common. You will be notified in writing if your complaint is transferred.

After reviewing a decision, the Information Commissioner must do one of three things: set the decision aside and make a fresh decision; affirm the decision, or vary the decision. The Information Commissioner will give reasons for the decision.

Will the decision be made public?

Yes. The Information Commissioner will publish decisions on the website.

What can I do if I disagree with the Information Commissioner's review decision?

You can appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT). The Information Commissioner will not be a party to those proceedings. The fee for lodging an AAT application is \$777 (at November 2010), although there are exemptions for health care and pension concession card holders and the AAT can waive the fee on financial hardship grounds.