



Statement of reasons made under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*

Decision and reason for decision of Vicki Guthrie, Assistant Director, Information Law,
Legal Services & Assurance

Applicant: Verity Pane
Decision date: 23 October 2017
FOI reference number: FOI 17991

Dear Verity Pane

Freedom of Information Request: FOI 17991

1. I have made a decision to refuse access to the documents subject to your request, as the documents cannot be found or do not exist.

Summary

2. I, Vicki Guthrie, Assistant Director, Information Law, Legal Services & Assurance, am an officer authorised by the Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (the Department) to make decisions about access to documents in the possession of the Department in accordance with section 23(1) of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act).
3. On 10 September 2017 you sought:

"... administrative access in the first instance, but under FOI should DVA refuse to release administratively the following:

... a copy of any internal Departmental policy documents/manuals regarding administration (including processing) of information access schemes, particularly with regards to requests from clients/customers the agency has flagged as "difficult", ...

...

I also understand the Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs has a Unreasonable Complaint Conduct manual/policy that interacts with the above schemes and modifies those policies, so I seek copy of that too.

To summarise I request copy of all DVA internal policies/manual (produced by DVA or paid for by DVA, for internal DVA use) that relate to the information access schemes the agency processes requests/applications for, including any policy or manual that may intersect and modify those policies/manual, including the Unreasonable Complaint Conduct manual/policy. ..."

4. Your email dated 10 September 2017 was processed as a request for administrative access. By email dated 21 September 2017, I advised that the Department does not use an overall FOI manual. I also advised that the Department is guided by the NSW Ombudsman's Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Manual and I provided a copy of that manual to you. I further advised that the Department's adaptation of the NSW Ombudsman's model Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy is not a published document at this time as it is currently undergoing its biennial internal review. I advised that if you wished to make a formal FOI request, you should indicate that this is the case.
5. Following further consideration of your subsequent emails dated 21 September 2017, 26 September 2017 and 10 October 2017, I have decided to treat your email dated 21 September 2017 as a request under the FOI Act, seeking access to:

... a copy of any internal Departmental policy documents/manuals regarding administration (including processing) of information access schemes, particularly with regards to requests from clients/customers the agency has flagged as "difficult" ...

...

I also understand the Commonwealth Department of Veterans' Affairs has a Unreasonable Complaint Conduct manual/policy that interacts with the above schemes and modifies those policies, so I seek copy of that too.

To summarise I request copy of all DVA internal policies/manual (produced by DVA or paid for by DVA, for internal DVA use) that relate to the information access schemes the agency processes requests/applications for, including any policy or manual that may intersect and modify those policies/manual, including the Unreasonable Complaint Conduct manual/policy. ..."

6. I have treated your email dated 26 September 2017 as refining the scope of your FOI request to:

"any section of the UCC manual that deals with FOI requests".

Decision and Reasons for Decision

7. I have made a decision to refuse access to the documents subject to your request, as the documents cannot be found or do not exist. Section 24A of the FOI Act provides that 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.
8. I am satisfied that all reasonable steps have been taken to find information relevant to your request, having regard to:
- the subject matter of the documents;
 - the current and past file management systems and the practice of orderly destruction or removal of documents;
 - the Department's record management systems and practices; and
 - the individuals and areas within the Department who may be able to assist with the location of the information.

9. Despite the reasonable searches undertaken, the Department has been unable to identify any documents relevant to your request. A description of the searches undertaken to locate the documents which you are seeking to access is at Schedule 1.
10. I understand the scope of your request to be *“any section of the UCC manual that deals with FOI requests”*. The Department does not have a departmental Unreasonable Complainant Conduct manual, and is guided by the NSW Ombudsman’s Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Manual. As noted above, I provided you with a copy of this manual on 21 September 2017.
11. Although the Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy does not fall within scope of your request as revised by your email dated 26 September 2017, I advise that the Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy does not deal with the processing of FOI requests.
12. On that basis, I am refusing your request for access to the information in accordance with section 24A of the FOI Act.

Your rights of review

13. If you disagree with your FOI decision, you can ask for the decision to be reviewed. There are two ways you can ask for review of a decision: internal review by the Department, and external review by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC).

Internal Review

14. You can ask the Department to review its decision in relation to access to documents. There is no charge for internal review. You must apply within 30 days of being notified of the decision, unless the Department extends the application time. You should contact the Department if you wish to seek an extension. The Department must make a review decision within 30 days. If it does not do so, its original decision is considered to be affirmed. The review will be carried out by a different departmental officer, usually someone at a more senior level.
15. You must apply in writing and you can lodge your application in one of the following ways:

Post: Legal Services & Assurance, Department of Veterans’ Affairs
GPO Box 9998, Canberra ACT 2601
Facsimile: (02) 6289 6337
Email: foi@dva.gov.au

Information Commissioner Review

16. You can ask the OAIC to review the Department’s decision in relation to access to documents. The Information Commissioner is an independent office holder who can review the decisions of agencies and ministers under the FOI Act. The Information Commissioner also investigates complaints about agency actions under the FOI Act. However, if you are complaining that the Department’s decision is wrong, it will be treated as an application for a review. You do not need to seek an internal review from the Department before seeking review by the Information Commissioner. However, going through the Department’s internal review process gives the Department the opportunity to reconsider its initial decision, and your needs may be met more quickly without undergoing an external review process. The Information Commissioner’s review is free. 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.

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

Online: www.oaic.gov.au

Post: Office of the Australian Information Commissioner

GPO Box 5218, Sydney NSW 2001

Facsimile: (02) 9284 9666

Email: enquiries@oaic.gov.au

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

18. More information about Information Commissioner Reviews is available from [http://www.oaic.gov.au/publications/FOI fact sheet12 your review rights.html](http://www.oaic.gov.au/publications/FOI_fact_sheet12_your_review_rights.html).

Contact us

19. If you wish to discuss this decision, please contact me using the following details:

Post: Legal Services & Assurance, Department of Veterans' Affairs

GPO Box 9998, Canberra ACT 2601

Facsimile: (02) 6289 6337

Email: foi@dva.gov.au

Yours sincerely



Vicki Guthrie
Assistant Director
Information Law
Legal Services & Assurance

23 October 2017



Summary of document searches

The Department conducted the following searches to identify files and documents that fall within scope of your request ("relevant documents").

1. File search

A search of the Department's hard copy file index identified no files with potentially relevant documents.

2. Search of group drives for electronic documents

A search of the Department's electronic files did not identify any relevant documents.

3. Department notification of FOI request

The relevant areas in the Department were contacted and asked to conduct a search of their respective areas to identify whether documents relevant to the request exist. No relevant documents were identified.



Schedule of relevant provisions in the FOI Act

3 Objects—general

- (1) The objects of this Act are to give the Australian community access to information held by the Government of the Commonwealth or the Government of Norfolk Island, by:
 - (a) requiring agencies to publish the information; and
 - (b) providing for a right of access to documents.
- (2) The Parliament intends, by these objects, to promote Australia's representative democracy by contributing towards the following:
 - (a) increasing public participation in Government processes, with a view to promoting better-informed decision-making;
 - (b) increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the Government's activities.
- (3) The Parliament also intends, by these objects, to increase recognition that information held by the Government is to be managed for public purposes, and is a national resource.
- (4) The Parliament also intends that functions and powers given by this Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

11 Right of access

- (1) Subject to this Act, every person has a legally enforceable right to obtain access in accordance with this Act to:
 - (a) a document of an agency, other than an exempt document; or
 - (b) an official document of a Minister, other than an exempt document.
- (2) Subject to this Act, a person's right of access is not affected by:
 - (a) any reasons the person gives for seeking access; or
 - (b) the agency's or Minister's belief as to what are his or her reasons for seeking access.

11A Access to documents on request

Scope

- (1) This section applies if:
 - (a) a request is made by a person, in accordance with subsection 15(2), to an agency or Minister for access to:
 - (i) a document of the agency; or
 - (ii) an official document of the Minister; and
 - (b) any charge that, under the regulations, is required to be paid before access is given has been paid.

(2) This section applies subject to this Act.

Note: Other provisions of this Act are relevant to decisions about access to documents, for example the following:

- (a) section 12 (documents otherwise available);
- (b) section 13 (documents in national institutions);
- (c) section 15A (personnel records);
- (d) section 22 (access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted).

Mandatory access—general rule

(3) The agency or Minister must give the person access to the document in accordance with this Act, subject to this section.

Exemptions and conditional exemptions

(4) The agency or Minister is not required by this Act to give the person access to the document at a particular time if, at that time, the document is an exempt document.

Note: Access may be given to an exempt document apart from under this Act, whether or not in response to a request (see section 3A (objects—information or documents otherwise accessible)).

(5) 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.

Note 1: Division 3 of Part IV provides for when a document is conditionally exempt.

Note 2: A conditionally exempt document is an exempt document if access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest (see section 31B (exempt documents for the purposes of Part IV)).

Note 3: Section 11B deals with when it is contrary to the public interest to give a person access to the document.

(6) Despite subsection (5), the agency or Minister is not required to give access to the document at a particular time if, at that time, the document is both:

- (a) a conditionally exempt document; and
- (b) an exempt document:
 - (i) under Division 2 of Part IV (exemptions); or
 - (ii) within the meaning of paragraph (b) or (c) of the definition of **exempt document** in subsection 4(1).

23 Decisions to be made by authorised persons

- (1) Subject to subsection (2), a decision in respect of a request made to an agency may be made, on behalf of the agency, by the responsible Minister or the principal officer of the agency or, subject to the regulations, by an officer of the agency acting within the scope of authority exercisable by him or her in accordance with arrangements approved by the responsible Minister or the principal officer of the agency.
- (2) A decision in respect of a request made to a court, or made to a tribunal, authority or body that is specified in Schedule 1, may be made on behalf of that court, tribunal, authority or body by the principal officer of that court, tribunal, authority or body or, subject to the regulations, by an officer of that court, tribunal, authority or body acting within the scope of authority exercisable by him or her in accordance with arrangements approved by the principal officer of that court, tribunal, authority or body.

(see section 11A).

24A Requests may be refused if documents cannot be found, do not exist or have not been received

Document lost or non-existent

- (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.

Document not received as required by contract

- (2) An agency may refuse a request for access to a document if:
 - (a) in order to comply with section 6C, the agency has taken contractual measures to ensure that it receives the document; and
 - (b) the agency has not received the document; and
 - (c) the agency has taken all reasonable steps to receive the document in accordance with those contractual measures.