



## Decision and Statement of reasons issued under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*

Decision and reason for decision of Sara (Position Number 62250510), Information Law Section, Legal Services and Audit Branch, Department of Veterans' Affairs

---

**Applicant:** Verity Pane

**Decision date:** 7 February 2022

**FOI reference number:** FOI 47368

**Sent by email:** foi+request-8248-65ec4c46@righttoknow.org.au

---

Dear Verity Pane,

### **Freedom of Information Request: FOI 47368**

#### **Decision**

1. The Department of Veterans' Affairs (**Department**) has undertaken a reasonable search of its records and has identified four (4) documents relevant to your request.
2. I have made a decision to grant access in part to 2 documents and access in full to 2 documents.
3. The documents that I have chosen to grant access in part are set out in **Schedule 1**, together with applicable exemption provision[s]. Where I have decided to grant access in part, I have provided access to an edited copy of the documents, modified by deletions in accordance with section 22(2) of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth)* (**FOI Act**).

#### **Authority to make decision**

4. I, Sara (Position Number 62250510), Information Access Officer, Information Law Section, am an officer authorised by the Secretary of the Department to make decisions about access to documents in the possession of the Department in accordance with section 23(1) of the FOI Act.

## Summary

5. On 6 January 2021 you made a request for access to documents in the possession of the Department. Your request was made in the following terms:

*"..follow-up to that FOI, which did contain a table showing the proposed age, gender, state/territory location, and recent contact or not with CCF distribution for that telephone only survey (page 2 of that released document), I apply for copy of the document/s that records the demographics of the sample data obtained by that survey (what the sample population demographics were, not what it was proposed to be).*

*If it is easier to access, the document may be from the most recently carried out client satisfaction survey report.*

*I also seek copy of any document that records why Veterans' Affairs persists in using only a telephone survey, which results in an over-representation of much older veterans and war widows, given people under 50 typically do not respond to CATI calls (which come from an unlisted number), especially since CATI is far more expensive than CASI..."*

6. As no extensions of time have been applied to process your request, a decision on your request is due by 7 February 2022.
7. I have decided not to impose a charge in relation to this request, in accordance with Regulation 8 of the *Freedom of Information (Charges) Regulations 2019*.

## Material taken into account

8. In accordance with section 26(1)(a) of the FOI Act, my findings on any material question of fact, the material on which those findings were based and the reasons for my decision to grant partial access to the documents follow.
9. I have taken the following material into account in making my decision:
- the terms of your request;
  - the types of information and documents that are in the Department's possession;
  - the content of the document that fall within the scope of your request;

- the availability of information relevant to your request, insofar as it determines the practicality and ease in which the Department can create a document under section 17 of the FOI Act;

10. Sections 3, 11 and 11A of the FOI Act which give the Australian community a legally enforceable right to obtain access to information held by the Government of the Commonwealth. I also considered the following provisions of the FOI Act relevant to my decision:

- Section 47E Public interest conditional exemptions--certain operations of agencies
- Section 47F Public interest conditional exemptions--personal privacy

- the Guidelines issued by the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (**FOI Guidelines**);

11. A full extract of all FOI Act provisions used to make my decision are provided in **Schedule 2**.

### **Reasons for decision**

12. I have decided to **grant access** to the documents within the scope of your request, subject to the following exemptions in accordance with the FOI Act:

#### ***Public interest conditional exemptions--certain operations of agencies (section 47E)***

13. Section 47E of the FOI Act provides that a document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

- (a) prejudice the effectiveness of procedures or methods for the conduct of tests, examinations or audits by an agency;
- (b) prejudice the attainment of the objects of particular tests, examinations or audits conducted or to be conducted by an agency;
- (c) have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth, or by an agency;
- (d) have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.

14. I have redacted the surnames and contact details of non-Senior Executive staff members within the documents to give effect to this conditional exemption, other than the names of those non-Senior Executive staff members whose contacts details you already have or where they are already known to you.
15. The Department's role is to provide support and information to Veterans and their dependants and other categories of people. It is important that the Department is able to continue to provide these services to carry out the other legislative functions and administrative and operational processes required of them. Certain processes and specific channels of communication have been implemented which enable clients and other relevant stakeholders to contact the Department in a way that ensures all Departmental resources are managed as efficiently as possible.
16. I consider that the release of the exempt information in these circumstances would adversely affect the Department as the established lines of communication could then be bypassed. It is reasonable to expect that this would disrupt and adversely affect the operations of the Department.
17. Further, the release of this information could have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel as well as an adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of the agency including the inability of the Department to retain staff or effectively manage the wellbeing and safety of staff. Relevantly, some staff have been targeted, insulted or harassed based on disclosure of their details. This presents challenges in managing the welfare of staff and can affect the ongoing management and retention of personnel by the Department. Consequently, in these circumstances, it would not be in the public interest to release this information.
18. Accordingly, I have decided that parts of the documents listed as exempt in accordance with this provision in **Schedule 1**, meet the criteria for this conditional exemption. Where a document is assessed as conditionally exempt, access must be given subject to the public interest test in accordance with section 11A(5) of the FOI Act.
19. Where the document contains information exempt under section 47E of the FOI Act, an edited copy has been prepared (pursuant to section 22 of the FOI Act) with these details redacted.

*Application of the public interest test:*

20. Section 11A(5) provides that an agency 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 would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest.
21. In order to assess whether release of the exempt material would be contrary to the public interest, I considered the following factors which favour disclosure:
  - (a) disclosure would promote the objects of the FOI Act.
22. I also considered the following factors which do not favour disclosure:
  - (a) disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by an agency; and
  - (b) disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.
23. I am satisfied that no irrelevant factor has been considered, as set out in section 11B(4) of the FOI Act.
24. On balance, I consider the public interest factors against disclosure to be more persuasive than the public interest factors favouring disclosure. I am satisfied that the public interest is to withhold the exempt material.

***Public interest conditional exemptions--personal privacy (section 47F)***

25. Section 47F of the FOI Act provides that a document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure would involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information about any person (including a deceased person).
26. Section 4 of the FOI Act provides that personal information has the same meaning as in the *Privacy Act 1988* (Privacy Act). Personal information is defined in section 6 of the Privacy Act as:
  - ..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;
- (b) whether the information or opinion is recorded in a material form or not.

27. The elements of 'personal information' are:

- (a) it relates only to a natural person (not, for example, a company);
- (b) it says something about the individual;
- (c) it may be in the form of an opinion, it may be true or untrue, and it may form part of a database;
- (d) the individual's identity is known or is reasonably ascertainable using the information in the document.

28. If information is personal information, it will be conditionally exempt if disclosure would be 'unreasonable'. In considering whether disclosure would be unreasonable, section 47F(2) of the FOI Act requires me to take into account:

- (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) any other matter I consider relevant.

29. The documents contain the surnames, contact details and signature of non-Senior Executive staff members. Release of this information would identify these individual staff members. Further as noted above, some staff have been targeted, insulted or harassed based on disclosure of their details. I therefore consider that this information meets the definition of personal information and that it would be unreasonable to release this material.

30. Accordingly, I have decided that the parts of documents which are listed as exempt in accordance with this provision in **Schedule 1**, meet the criteria for conditional exemption. Where a document is assessed as conditionally exempt, access must be given subject to the public interest test in accordance with section 11A(5).

*Application of the public interest test:*

31. Section 11A(5) provides that an agency 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 would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest.
32. In order to assess whether release of the exempt material would be contrary to the public interest, I considered the following factors which favour disclosure:
  - (a) disclosure would promote the objects of the FOI Act.
33. I also considered the following factors which do not favour disclosure:
  - (a) disclosure could reasonably be expected to prejudice the protection of an individual's right to privacy.
  - (b) disclosure could reasonably be expected to prejudice the management function of an agency.
34. I am satisfied that no irrelevant factor has been considered, as set out in section 11B(4) of the FOI Act.
35. On balance, I consider the public interest factors against disclosure to be more persuasive than the public interest factors favouring disclosure. I am satisfied that the public interest is to withhold the exempt material.

**Access to documents**

36. The documents released to you in accordance with the FOI Act are enclosed.

**Information Publication Scheme**

37. The Information Publication Scheme requires the Department to publish information released in response to individual requests made under the FOI Act, except in specified circumstances.
38. I am of the view that details of your request should be made available on the Department's FOI Disclosure Log. As such, details of your request will be published on the Department's FOI Disclosure Log which can be accessed at <http://www.dva.gov.au/about-dva/freedom->

[information/foi-disclosure-log](#). Please note that the Department does not publish details of FOI applicants, it only publishes details of the FOI request and the documents released in response to the request.

## Your rights of review

39. If you are dissatisfied with my decision, you may apply for internal review or request the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (**OAIC**) review my decision. We encourage you to seek internal review as a first step as it may provide a more rapid resolution of your concerns.

### Internal review

40. Under section 54 of the FOI Act, you may apply in writing to the Department for an Internal Review of my decision. The Internal Review application must be made within 30 days of the date of this letter. Where possible please attach reasons why you believe review of the decision is necessary. The internal review will be carried out by another officer within 30 days.

41. You can make your application for Internal Review in one of the following ways:

**Post:** Legal Services and Audit Branch, Department of Veterans' Affairs  
GPO Box 9998, Canberra ACT 2601

**Facsimile:** (02) 6289 6337

**Email:** [Information.Law@dva.gov.au](mailto:Information.Law@dva.gov.au)

### OAIC review

42. Under section 54L of the FOI Act, you may apply to the OAIC to review my decision. An application for review by OAIC must be made in writing within 60 days of the date of this letter, and be lodged in one of the following ways:

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

**Post:** Director of FOI Dispute Resolution  
Office of the Australian Information Commissioner  
GPO Box 5218, Sydney NSW 2001

**Facsimile:** (02) 9284 9666

**Phone:** 1300 363 992

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



43. More information about your review rights under the FOI Act is available in Fact Sheet 12 published by the OAIC: <https://www.oaic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/reviews-and-complaints/information-commissioner-review/>

## Contact us

44. If you wish to discuss this decision, please do not hesitate to contact the Information Law Section using the following details:

**Online:** <https://www.dva.gov.au/about-us/overview/reporting/freedom-information/access-information>

**Post:** Information Law, Legal Services and Audit Branch  
Department of Veterans' Affairs  
GPO Box 9998, Canberra ACT 2601

**Facsimile:** (02) 6289 6337

**Phone:** 1800 838 372

**Email:** [Information.Law@dva.gov.au](mailto:Information.Law@dva.gov.au)

Yours sincerely,

**Sara (Position Number 62250510)**

Information Access Officer

Information Law Section

Legal Services and Audit Branch

7 February 2022



## Schedule of documents

---

**Applicant:** Verity Pane

**Decision date:** 7 February 2022

**FOI reference number:** FOI 47368

Document reference	Date of document	Document description	Page number	Decision	Exemption provision
1.	30/09/2021	Information Brief for First Assistant Secretary	1	Partial Access	47E 47F
2.	Undated	Action Submission for Secretary	8	Partial Access	47E 47F
3.	28/10/2021	'We asked, you said, we did' – Client Satisfaction Survey 2021	14	Full Access	N/A
4.	Undated	Excel spreadsheet provided by a research partner to capture the demographics for the Client Satisfaction Survey	15	Full Access	N/A



## 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).

**11B Public interest exemptions — factors**

*Scope*

- (1) This section applies for the purposes of working out whether access to a conditionally exempt document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest under subsection 11A(5).
- (2) This section does not limit subsection 11A(5).

*Factors favouring access*

- (3) Factors favouring access to the document in the public interest include whether access to the document would do any of the following:
- (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.

*Irrelevant factors*

- (4) The following factors must not be taken into account in deciding whether access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest:
- (a) access to the document could result in embarrassment to the Commonwealth Government, or cause a loss of confidence in the Commonwealth Government;
  - (b) access to the document could result in any person misinterpreting or misunderstanding the document;
  - (c) the author of the document was (or is) of high seniority in the agency to which the request for access to the document was made;
  - (d) access to the document could result in confusion or unnecessary debate.

*Guidelines*

- (5) In working out whether access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest, an agency or Minister must have regard to any guidelines issued by the Information Commissioner for the purposes of this subsection under section 93A.

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

### *Scope*

- (1) This section applies if:
- (a) an agency or Minister decides:
    - (i) to refuse to give access to an exempt document; or
    - (ii) that to give access to a document would disclose information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request for access; and
  - (b) it is possible for the agency or Minister to prepare a copy (an edited copy) of the document, modified by deletions, ensuring that:
    - (i) access to the edited copy would be required to be given under section 11A (access to documents on request); and
    - (ii) the edited copy would not disclose any information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request; and
  - (c) it is reasonably practicable for the agency or Minister to prepare the edited copy, having regard to:
    - (i) the nature and extent of the modification; and
    - (ii) the resources available to modify the document; and
  - (d) it is not apparent (from the request or from consultation with the applicant) that the applicant would decline access to the edited copy.

### *Access to edited copy*

- (2) The agency or Minister must:
- (a) prepare the edited copy as mentioned in paragraph (1)(b); and
  - (b) give the applicant access to the edited copy.

### *Notice to applicant*

- (3) The agency or Minister must give the applicant notice in writing:
- (a) that the edited copy has been prepared; and
  - (b) of the grounds for the deletions; and
  - (c) if any matter deleted is exempt matter—that the matter deleted is exempt matter because of a specified provision of this Act.
- (4) Section 26 (reasons for decision) does not apply to the decision to refuse access to the whole document unless the applicant requests the agency or Minister to give the applicant a notice in writing in accordance with that section.

## **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.

## **26 Reasons and other particulars of decisions to be given**

- (1) Where, in relation to a request, a decision is made relating to a refusal to grant access to a document in accordance with the request or deferring provision of access to a document, the decision-maker shall cause the applicant to be given notice in writing of the decision, and the notice shall:
  - (a) state the findings on any material questions of fact, referring to the material on which those findings were based, and state the reasons for the decision; and
  - (aa) in the case of a decision to refuse to give access to a conditionally exempt document—include in those reasons the public interest factors taken into account in making the decision; and

Note: Access must generally be given to a conditionally exempt document unless it would be contrary to the public interest (see section 11A).

- (b) where the decision relates to a document of an agency, state the name and designation of the person giving the decision; and
  - (c) give to the applicant appropriate information concerning:
    - (i) his or her rights with respect to review of the decision;
    - (ii) his or her rights to make a complaint to the Information Commissioner in relation to the decision; and
    - (iii) the procedure for the exercise of the rights referred to in subparagraphs (i) and (ii); including (where applicable) particulars of the manner in which an application for internal review (Part VI) and IC review (Part VII) may be made.
- (1A) Section 13 of the Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1977 does not apply to a decision referred to in subsection (1).
- (2) A notice under this section is not required to contain any matter that is of such a nature that its inclusion in a document of an agency would cause that document to be an exempt document.  
(see section 11A).

## **47E Public interest conditional exemptions—certain operations of agencies**

A document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure under this Act would, or could reasonably be expected to, do any of the following:

- (a) prejudice the effectiveness of procedures or methods for the conduct of tests, examinations or audits by an agency;
- (b) prejudice the attainment of the objects of particular tests, examinations or audits conducted or to be conducted by an agency;
- (c) have a substantial adverse effect on the management or assessment of personnel by the Commonwealth, or by an agency;
- (d) have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.

Note: Access must generally be given to a conditionally exempt document unless it would be contrary to the public interest (see section 11A).

## **47F Public interest conditional exemptions—personal privacy**

### *General rule*

- (1) 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).
- (2) In determining whether the disclosure of the document would involve the unreasonable disclosure of personal information, an agency or Minister must have regard to the following matters:
  - (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;
  - (d) any other matters that the agency or Minister considers relevant.
- (3) Subject to subsection (5), subsection (1) does not have effect in relation to a request by a person for access to a document by reason only of the inclusion in the document of matter relating to that person.

*Access given to qualified person instead*

- (4) Subsection (5) applies if:
- (a) a request is made to an agency or Minister for access to a document of the agency, or an official document of the Minister, that contains information concerning the applicant, being information that was provided by a qualified person acting in his or her capacity as a qualified person; and
  - (b) it appears to the principal officer of the agency or to the Minister (as the case may be) that the disclosure of the information to the applicant might be detrimental to the applicant's physical or mental health, or well-being.
- (5) The principal officer or Minister may, if access to the document would otherwise be given to the applicant, direct that access to the document, so far as it contains that information, is not to be given to the applicant but is to be given instead to a qualified person who:
- (a) carries on the same occupation, of a kind mentioned in the definition of qualified person in subsection (7), as the first-mentioned qualified person; and
  - (b) is to be nominated by the applicant.
- (6) The powers and functions of the principal officer of an agency under this section may be exercised by an officer of the agency acting within his or her scope of authority in accordance with arrangements referred to in section 23.
- (7) In this section:
- qualified person means a person who carries on, and is entitled to carry on, an occupation that involves the provision of care for the physical or mental health of people or for their well-being, and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes any of the following:
- (a) a medical practitioner;
  - (b) a psychiatrist;
  - (c) a psychologist;
  - (d) a counsellor;
  - (e) a social worker.

Note: Access must generally be given to a conditionally exempt document unless it would be contrary to the public interest (see section 11A).