



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

Decision and reason for decision of Brett (Position Number 62258141),  
Assistant Director, Information Access Unit,  
Client Access and Rehabilitation Branch, Department of Veterans' Affairs

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**Applicant:** Julie A

**Date of primary decision:** 25 May 2022

**FOI reference number (Primary):** LEX 49447

**Internal review decision date:** 5 July 2022

**Internal review reference number:** LEX 50042

**Sent by email:** [foi+request-8853-3a7704d3@righttoknow.org.au](mailto:foi+request-8853-3a7704d3@righttoknow.org.au)

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Dear Julie A,

### **Freedom of Information Internal Review Request: LEX 49447**

#### **Decision**

1. The purpose of this letter is to give you a decision about your request for internal review for the decision made in LEX 49447 under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (**FOI Act**)
2. I have made the decision to affirm the original decision made by Isaac (Position Number 62329534), Information Access Officer, Information Access Unit, Client Access Rehabilitation Branch. That decision was to refuse access to the document within the scope of your request.

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

3. I, Brett (Position Number 62258141), Assistant Director, Information Access Unit, Client Access Rehabilitation Branch, 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

### Original Decision

4. On 3 May 2022 you made a request for access to a document in the possession of the Department. Your request sought access to:

*“...In a news article published by The Canberra Times on 19 July 2019 current Veterans Affairs Secretary Liz Cosson (best known for leaving a highly sensitive dossier of classified information in the Qantas Lounge, on the suicide of a veteran) 'promised to change the adversarial culture of the agency ... [known for its] ruthless way it has dealt with veterans for many years', stating 'we are changing ... [and I urge] people to get in touch ... [via] secretary @ dva.gov.au' if they had a problem with any member of Veterans Affairs.*

*I've been advised that the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs manages this secretary @ dva.gov.au inbox and maintains statistics regarding the emails this address receives as well as record of what action it chose to take or not to take.*

*As this information is kept electronically, it is not available in a discrete hardcopy document and therefore can be prepared using resources ordinarily available to Veterans Affairs.*

*I request a table listing the number of emails received by the secretary @ dva.gov.au group inbox (which is used only for this purpose) since its announcement on 1 July 2019, and the number of emails the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs who manage this group inbox decided would be classified as 'no further action' (or in plain English, ignored or decided would receive no response from the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Secretary).*

*To avoid doubt, I do not give consent for notices to be given in any other form other than in unencrypted PDF format sent directly to my address for notices, nor do I give consent for any s 22 redactions...”*

5. On 6 May 2022, the Department acknowledged your request via email.

6. As no extensions of time have been applied to process your request, a decision on your request was due by 2 June 2022.
7. On 25 May 2022 the Department made a decision to refuse your request under 24A(1)(b)(ii) of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (FOI Act)*, as the documents within the scope of your request do not exist. The decision was made considering the following provisions of the FOI Act:
  - Section 15 Request for Access;
  - Section 17 Requests involving use of computers etc. (e.g. requests for the Department to create a document)
  - Section 24A Request may be refused if documents cannot be found or do not exist

#### Internal Review

8. After receiving the Department's decision on 25 May 2022, you contacted the Department on 6 June 2022 requesting an internal review of the handling of this FOI request. Your internal review request was made in the following terms:

*"...I am writing to request an internal review of Department of Veterans' Affairs' handling of my FOI request 'Statistics on requests sent to Secretary'. LEX 49447..."*

9. As your application was made within the 30 day of the original decision being made, the internal review decision is valid.
10. As no extension of time has been applied to process this internal review, a decision on your internal review application is due 6 July 2022.

#### **Material taken into account**

11. 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 document follows
12. I have taken the following material into account in making my decision.
  - the terms of your original request made on 3 May 2022 and the original decision made on this request on 25 May 2022;

- the records of the searches carried out in processing your original request;
- the terms of your internal review request made on 6 June 2022;
- 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;
- 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 have also considered the following provisions of the FOI Act relevant to my decision:
  - Section 15 Request for Access
  - Section 17 Requests involving use of computers etc. (e.g. requests for the Department to create a document)
  - Section 24A Request may be refused if documents cannot be found or do not exist
  - Section 54C Internal review – decision on internal review; and
- the Guidelines issued by the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (**FOI Guidelines**);

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

### **Reasons for decision**

14. I have decided to affirm the original decision made on 25 May 2022 to refuse access to the document within the scope of your request, subject to the following provisions in the FOI Act.

15. Section 24A(1) 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.

16. I am satisfied that all reasonable steps have been taken to find information relevant to your request, having regard to:

- the terms of your request;
- 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 you seek access to.

17. Despite the reasonable searches undertaken, the Department has been unable to identify 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**.

18. For these reasons, I am refusing your request for access to documents as described in your request in accordance with section 24A(1)(b)(ii) of the FOI Act, on the basis that the document does not exist.

#### **Requests involving use of computers etc. (section 17)**

19. In making my decision to refuse your request I also considered the application of section 17 of the FOI Act and whether a document could be created to meet the terms of this part of your request.

20. Subject to section 17(2) I decided that the department was not in a position to create a written document, because to do so would substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the Department from its other operations.

#### **Your rights of review**

21. If you are dissatisfied with my decision you may apply for Information Commissioner Review of the decision through the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC).

#### **OAIC review**

22. 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)

23. 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

24. If you wish to discuss this decision, please do not hesitate to contact the Information Access Unit using the following details:

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

**Post:** Information Access Unit  
Department of Veterans' Affairs  
GPO Box 9998, Brisbane QLD 4001

**Phone:** 1800 838 372

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

Yours sincerely,

**Brett (Position Number 62258141)**

Assistant Director  
Information Access Unit  
Client Access and Rehabilitation Branch  
Department of Veterans' Affairs

5 July 2022



## Summary of document searches

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The Department undertook the following to identify any records that fall within the scope of your request (**relevant documents**).

### 1. Searches undertaken

The request and search minute were sent to the Secretary. The Secretary's business area advised that the request cannot be actioned given that the group inbox email address, Secretary@DVA.gov.au, doesn't only receive emails from Veterans' but from anyone. Therefore, there is no way to determine how many emails can be classified as 'no further action' without looking through every single email since 1 July 2019 in the inbox.

We then sought the advice of IT Security whom could maybe advise us if there is way to get an answer to your request. They were unable to identify a solution other than going through every email.

Therefore, to create a document with the information of how many requests/emails required 'no further action' from the Secretary, the tedious process of looking through every email would have to occur. This would be an unreasonable and an unfeasible diversion of Departmental resources given the time it will take to search for this information and result in a figure.



## Schedule of relevant provisions in the FOI Act

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### 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).

**15 Requests for access (as related to the requirements for requests)**

*Persons may request access*

- (1) Subject to section 15A, a person who wishes to obtain access to a document of an agency or an official document of a Minister may request access to the document.

*Requirements for request*

- (2) The request must:
- (a) be in writing; and
  - (aa) state that the request is an application for the purposes of this Act; and
  - (b) provide such information concerning the document as is reasonably necessary to enable a responsible officer of the agency, or the Minister, to identify it; and
  - (c) give details of how notices under this Act may be sent to the applicant (for example, by providing an electronic address to which notices may be sent by electronic communication).
- (2A) The request must be sent to the agency or Minister. The request may be sent in any of the following ways:
- (a) delivery to an officer of the agency, or a member of the staff of the Minister, at the address of any central or regional office of the agency or Minister specified in a current telephone directory;
  - (b) postage by pre-paid post to an address mentioned in paragraph (a);
  - (c) sending by electronic communication to an electronic address specified by the agency or Minister.

**17 Requests involving use of computers etc**

- (1) Where:
- (a) a request (including a request in relation to which a practical refusal reason exists) is made in accordance with the requirements of subsection 15(2) to an agency;

- (b) It appears from the request that the desire of the applicant is for information that is not available in discrete form in written documents of the agency; and
- (ba) it does not appear from the request that the applicant wishes to be provided with a computer tape or computer disk on which the information is recorded; and
- (c) the agency could produce a written document containing the information in discrete form by:
  - (i) the use of a computer or other equipment that is ordinarily available to the agency for retrieving or collating stored information; or
  - (ii) the making of a transcript from a sound recording held in the agency;

the agency shall deal with the request as if it were a request for access to a written document so produced and containing that information and, for that purpose, this Act applies as if the agency had such a document in its possession.

- (2) An agency is not required to comply with subsection (1) if compliance would substantially and unreasonably divert the resources of the agency from its other operations.

### **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.

### **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.

### **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).

#### **54C Internal Review – decision on internal review**

##### *Scope*

- (1) This section applies if an application for internal review of an access refusal decision or an access grant decision (the original decision ) is made in accordance with this Part.

##### *Decision*

- (2) The agency must, as soon as practicable, arrange for a person (other than the person who made the original decision) to review the decision.
- (3) The person must make a fresh decision on behalf of the agency within 30 days after the day on which the application was received by, or on behalf of, the agency.

##### *Notice of decision*

- (4) Section 26 extends to a decision made under this section.