



Australian Government
**Australian Customs and
Border Protection Service**

Customs House
5 Constitution Avenue
CANBERRA ACT 2601

10 January 2014

File No: 2013/038429



Dear 

Freedom of Information Request

I refer to your email dated 13 November 2013 in which you request access to documents held by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS) under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act).

I am authorised under section 23 of the FOI Act to make decisions to release and to refuse access to exempt documents.

Scope of Request

You have requested access to the following information:

"... documents and correspondence related to any incidents involving asylum seeker boats being turned back at sea from October 29 until November 13.

I also request any minutes or briefing documents to ministers regarding such incidents.

I also request documents and correspondence related to asylum seeker boat sea rescues by Australian authorities in Indonesia's search and rescue zone during the period September 7 until November 13.

I also request any minutes or briefing documents to ministers regarding such incidents."

Decision on access

ACBPS has identified 65 documents that fall within the scope of your request. These documents were in the possession of ACBPS on 16 October 2013 when your FOI request was received.

I make the following decision in relation to the documents in the possession of ACBPS which come within the scope of your request:

- Release 19 documents in part; and
- Exempt 46 documents in full.

A schedule of this document is at **Attachment A** for your reference.

I have provided detailed reasons for my decision below.

Reasons for Decision

The schedule of the 65 documents that fall within the scope of your request at Attachment A sets out the decision on access and, where appropriate, refers to various sections of the FOI Act. My reasoning in relation to the application of each section to particular documents is set out below.

1 Section 22 of the FOI Act – irrelevant to request

I have decided that parts of documents numbered 14, 34-55 and 64-65 would disclose information that could reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to your request. Therefore, the irrelevant information has been deleted from the documents.

The remainder of the documents has been considered for release to you as it is relevant to your request.

2 Section 33 of the FOI Act – Documents affecting International Relations

I consider that the release of parts of documents numbered 3, 11, 15, 17, 21-25, 27-28, 32-33, 49 and 61 would, or could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the Commonwealth's international relations.

I am of the view that the disclosure of this information might undermine regional relationships that are necessary to deal with the ongoing issue of people smuggling.

I have therefore decided that parts of documents numbered 3, 11, 15, 17, 21-25, 27-28, 32-33, 49 and 61 are exempt from disclosure under section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act.

3 Section 47E of the FOI Act – Operations of Agencies

I consider that the disclosure of documents 1-20, 25-32, 36-38 and 40-52 in their entirety as well as parts of documents 21-24, 33-35, 39, 53-56 and 61 would, or could reasonably be expected to, have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of ACBPS.

Managing the security and integrity of Australia's borders is integral to the operations of ACBPS. Any prejudice to the effectiveness of the methods and procedures used in

undertaking that role would result in a substantial adverse effect on the operations of ACBPS and its partner agencies.

Any disclosure of information which would result in the prejudice of the effectiveness of those methods and procedures would result in the need for those methods and/or procedures to change to avoid jeopardising their future effectiveness.

Accordingly, I have decided that documents 1-20, 25-32, 36-38 and 40-52 in their entirety as well as parts of documents 21-24, 33-35, 39, 53-56 and 61 are conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.

As I have decided that the information within the above mentioned documents are conditionally exempt, I am now required to consider whether access to those documents would be contrary to the public interest (section 11A of the FOI Act). I have discussed the relevant public interest considerations below.

4 Section 47F of the FOI Act – Personal Privacy

The disclosure of parts of documents numbered 1-65 would disclose personal information relating to third parties. Most of the paragraphs contain information which would reasonably identify a person, either through names, positions or descriptions of their role or employment circumstance. These individuals are non-Senior Executive Service officers whose personal information is not publicly available.

I have decided that the disclosure of the information within these documents would involve an unreasonable disclosure of personal information about a number of individuals. Accordingly, parts of documents numbered 1-65 are conditionally exempt under section 47F of the FOI Act.

I have discussed the relevant public interest considerations below.

5 The public interest – section 11A of the FOI Act

A part of a document which is conditionally exempt must also meet the public interest test in section 11A(5) before an exemption may be claimed in respect of that part.

In summary, the test is whether access to the conditionally exempt part of the document would be, on balance, contrary to the public interest.

In applying this test, I have noted the objects of the FOI Act and the importance of the other factors listed in section 11B(3) of the FOI Act, being 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.*

Having regard to the above:

- I am satisfied that access to the documents would promote the objects of the FOI Act.
- I consider that the subject matter of the documents does have the character of public importance and that there may be broad public interest in the documents.
- I consider that no insights into public expenditure will be provided through examination of the documents.
- Disclosure of all aspects of the documents would not provide a person with sufficient information to assess the rigour or efficiencies of internal decision making processes within ACBPS, promote scrutiny of government decision making or reveal the reasoning for a government decision. I consider these considerations as neutral.

I have also considered the factors that weigh against the release of the documents:

- I consider that the disclosure of the information within the documents that that is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act could reasonably be expected to prejudice the functions of ACBPS and its partner agencies and, as a result, the ability of the those agencies to protect Australia's borders. I consider there to be a strong public interest in ensuring that the ability of ACBPS and its partner agencies to conduct its functions in relation to on-water procedures is not compromised or prejudiced in any way. I consider that this factor weighs heavily against disclosure.
- The disclosure of the personal information of individuals contained in the documents could reasonably be expected to prejudice the protection of those individuals' right to privacy. Disclosing the names, titles, positions and direct contact details of ACBPS officers and Defence personnel who work in an operational environment may invite inappropriate approaches by third parties and may prejudice the safety of those officers when the documents are made available to the public at large. The names of these particular officers are not available through any other publicly available source and are not included in the organisational charts of the relevant agencies. It is my view that it is firmly in the public interest to uphold the rights of individuals to their own privacy. I consider that this factor weighs heavily against disclosure.

I have also had regard to section 11B(4) which sets out the factors which are irrelevant to my decision, which are:

- (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.*

I have not taken into account any of those factors in this decision.

Upon balancing all of the above relevant public interest considerations, I have concluded that the disclosure of the conditionally exempt documents is not in the public interest and therefore exempt from disclosure under the FOI Act.

Legislation

I have attached an extract of the exemption provisions of the FOI Act and the public interest test for your information at **Attachment B**.

Your Review Rights

The FOI Act grants you rights to have my decision reviewed.

Information regarding your review rights is available in the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner's FOI Fact Sheet 12 at **Attachment C** for your reference.

Making a Complaint

At **Attachment D** is FOI fact sheet 13 from the OAIC. This sets out how you may complain to the Australian Information Commissioner if you have concerns about how ACBPS has handled your request for documents under the FOI Act.

Contact

Should you wish to discuss my decision, please do not hesitate to contact Ms Emily Winch, FOI Coordinator on 02 6275 5621 or via email at foi@customs.gov.au.



Kingsley Woodford-Smith
Deputy Commander (Strategic Engagement and Governance)
Border Protection Command
Australian Customs and Border Protection Service

ATTACHMENT A

Schedule of Documents

	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
1.	4	AMSOC SITREP 1	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
2.	4	HQNORCOM SITREP 1	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
3.	5	AMSOC SITREP 2	Exempt in Full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
4.	10	HQNORCOM SITREP 2	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
5.	6	AMSOC SITREP 3	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
6.	6	HQNORCOM SITREP 3	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
7.	5	AMSOC SITREP 4	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
8.	5	HQNORCOM SITREP 4	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
9.	5	AMSOC SITREP 5	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
10.	11	HQNORCOM SITREP 5	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
11.	5	AMSOC SITREP 6	Exempt in Full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
12.	10	HQNORCOM SITREP 6	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
13.	5	AMSOC SITREP 7	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
14.	10	HQNORCOM SITREP 7	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E(d) s47F
15.	7	AMSOC SITREP 8	Exempt in Full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
16.	18	HQNORCOM SITREP 8	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
17.	5	AMSOC SITREP 9	Exempt in Full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
18.	8	HQNORCOM SITREP 9	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
19.	6	AMSOC SITREP 10	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F
20.	14	HQNORCOM SITREP 10	Exempt in Full	s47E(d) s47F

	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
21.	7	AMSOC SITREP 11	Release in part	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
22.	12	HQNORCOM SITREP 11	Release in part	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
23.	3	AMSOC SITREP 12	Release in part	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
24.	4	HQNORCOM SITREP 12	Release in part	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
25.	8	AMSOC SITREP 13	Exempt in full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
26.	4	HQNORCOM SITREP 13	Exempt in full	s47E(d) s47F
27.	7	AMSOC SITREP 14	Exempt in full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
28.	11	HQNORCOM SITREP 14	Exempt in full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
29.	5	AMSOC SITREP 15	Exempt in full	s47E(d) s47F
30.	11	HQNORCOM SITREP 15	Exempt in full	s47E(d) s47F
31.	3	AMSOC SITREP 16	Exempt in full	s47E(d) s47F
32.	1	AMSOC SITREP 17	Exempt in full	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
33.	3	AMSOC SITREP 18	Release in part	s33(a)(i) s47E(d) s47F
34.	3	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Release in part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
35.	4	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Release in part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
36.	4	Ministerial Submission	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
37.	4	Ministerial Submission	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F

	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
38.	3	Ministerial Submission	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
39.	4	Ministerial Submission	Release in part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
40.	3	Ministerial Submission	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
41.	4	Ministerial Submission	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
42.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Illegal Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
43.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Illegal Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
44.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Illegal Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
45.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Illegal Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
46.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
47.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
48.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
49.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) 33(a)(iii) s47E (d) s47F
50.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
51.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Unauthorised Maritime Arrivals – Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
52.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Situation Report	Exempt in Full	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
53.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Situation Report	Release in Part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F

	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
54.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Situation Report	Release in Part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
55.	5	Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Taskforce - Situation Report	Release in Part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47E (d) s47F
56.	2	Email and Attachment re. Media Statement	Release in Part	s47E (d) s47F
57.	1	Email: RE: release	Release in Part	s47F
58.	1	Email: RE: ETA?	Release in Part	s47F
59.	1	Email: Update on info requests	Release in Part	s47F
60.	2	Email: RE: Scott Morrison med rel Tragic boat incident in Indonesia	Release in Part	s47F
61.	5	Email: FW: FINAL Ministerial media statement AMSA SAR 2013/6452	Release in Part	s33(a)(iii) s47E(d) s47F
62.	1	Email: OSB media inquiries - additional vessels assisted/intercepted	Release in Part	s47F
63.	5	Email: FW: Scott Morrison med rel Update on status of transfer of rescued passengers off Indonesian coast	Release in Part	s47F
64.	3	Email: RE: Scott Morrison med rel Update on status of transfer of rescued passengers off Indonesian coast	Release in Part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47F
65.	5	Email: RE: DRAFT media release - as discussed	Release in Part	s22(1)(a)(ii) s47F

ATTACHMENT B

Relevant Legislation

Section 33 - Documents affecting national security, defence or international relations

A document is an exempt document if disclosure of the document under this Act:

- (a) would, or could reasonably be expected to, cause damage to:

...

- (iii) the international relations of the Commonwealth; or

...

Section 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:

...

- (d) have a substantial adverse effect on the proper and efficient conduct of the operations of an agency.

Section 47F - Public interest conditional exemptions—personal privacy

- (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.

...

11B - Public interest exemptions—factors

- (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;
 - (aa) access to the document could result in embarrassment to the Government of Norfolk Island or cause a loss of confidence in the Government of Norfolk Island;
 - (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.

Section 22 - Access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted

- (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.

...



FOI fact sheet 12

Freedom of information – Your review rights

April 2011

If you disagree with the decision of an Australian Government agency or minister under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act), you can ask for the decision to be reviewed. You may want to seek review if you sought certain documents and were not given full access, if someone is to be granted access to information that is about you, if the agency has informed you that it will impose a charge for processing your request or if your application to have your personal information amended was not accepted. There are two ways you can ask for review of a decision: internal review by the agency, and external review by the Australian Information Commissioner.

Internal review

If an agency makes an FOI decision that you disagree with, you can ask the agency to review its decision. The review will be carried out by a different agency officer, usually someone at a more senior level. There is no charge for internal review.

You must apply within 30 days of being notified of the decision, unless the agency extended the application time. You should contact the agency if you wish to seek an extension. The agency must make a review decision within 30 days. If it does not do so, its original decision is considered to be affirmed.

Internal review is not available if a minister or the chief officer of the agency made the decision personally.

Review by the Information Commissioner

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

Is a review the same as a complaint?

No. The Information Commissioner also investigates complaints about agency actions under the FOI Act. However, if you are complaining that an agency decision is wrong, it will be treated as an application for a review. Your matter will be treated as a complaint when a review would not be practical

or would not address your concerns (for example, if you were not consulted about a document that contains your personal information before it was released). For more information see FOI fact sheet 13 – *Freedom of information: How to make a complaint*.

Do I have to go through the agency's internal review process first?

No. You may apply directly to the Information Commissioner. However, going through the agency's internal review process gives the agency the opportunity to reconsider its initial decision, and your needs may be met more quickly without undergoing an external review process.

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 (if one was provided), 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 refuse access to documents, impose a charge or refuse to amend a document, you must apply to the Information Commissioner within 60 days of being given notice of the decision. If you are objecting to a decision to grant access to another person, you must apply within 30 days of being notified of that 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 or minister 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.

Will there be other parties to the review?

There may be. The Information Commissioner can join other parties who are affected by the application. For example, if you are objecting to someone else being granted access to information that concerns you, that person may be joined in the review.

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.

Will the Information Commissioner look at all documents, including ones that are claimed to be exempt?

Yes. The Information Commissioner's review is a fresh decision, so all the relevant material must be examined, including documents that the agency or minister has declined to release. Developments that have occurred since the original decision may also be considered.



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 or minister can also be ordered to undertake further searches for documents.

What decisions can the Information Commissioner make?

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. Exempt material (that is, material that is not released) will not be included. Nor will the name of the review applicant, unless that person requests otherwise or there is a special reason to publish it.

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

You can appeal to the 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.

FOI applications made before 1 November 2010

The Information Commissioner can only review an agency's or minister's FOI decision if you made your FOI request on or after 1 November 2010. If you made your FOI request before 1 November, even if the decision was made after that date, the review process is different.

You must first ask the agency for internal review of the decision. You may then appeal to the AAT if you are not satisfied with the decision.

The information provided in this fact sheet is of a general nature. It is not a substitute for legal advice.

For further information

telephone: 1300 363 992

email: enquiries@oaic.gov.au

write: GPO Box 2999, Canberra ACT 2601
or visit our website at www.oaic.gov.au



FOI fact sheet 13

Freedom of information – How to make a complaint

October 2010

You may complain to the Australian Information Commissioner if you have concerns about how an Australian Government agency handled a request for documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act) or took any other action under that Act. If you are unhappy with the agency's decision about giving or refusing access to documents, you should ask for the decision to be reviewed, which is a separate process.

Disagree with an FOI decision?

If you disagree with an agency's or minister's decision on your request under the FOI Act, you have the right to have the decision reviewed. You can ask an agency to review its decision internally. You also have the right to ask the Information Commissioner to review an agency's or minister's decision. See **FOI Fact Sheet 12 Freedom of information – Your review rights** for more information about the review process.

If you are concerned about the way an agency has handled your matter, you can complain to the Information Commissioner.

What are the powers of the Information Commissioner?

The Information Commissioner can investigate a complaint about how an agency handled an FOI request, or other actions the agency took under the FOI Act. The Information Commissioner cannot investigate a complaint about a minister.

In conducting the investigation the Information Commissioner has the power to:

- make inquiries of an agency
- obtain information from any person
- take possession of, or inspect, any relevant documents.

If the Information Commissioner decides to investigate your complaint, the agency you have complained about will be notified in writing of the complaint. The Information Commissioner conducts investigations of complaints in private.

Who can make a complaint?

Any person can make a complaint about the actions of an agency in relation to an FOI activity. You do not need to have requested documents under the FOI Act.

When should I make a complaint?

You can complain to the Information Commissioner at any time. If your complaint relates to an FOI request you can make the complaint at any stage of the process.

Before making a complaint to the Information Commissioner, you should contact the agency directly to try to resolve your concerns. The Information Commissioner may decide not to investigate your complaint if you have not raised your concerns first with the agency or you have not given the agency a reasonable opportunity to deal with your complaint.



How do I make a complaint?

Your complaint must be in writing and must specify the agency you are complaining about. You can send your complaint to us using the details at the end of this fact sheet. A complaint form is also available on our website at www.oaic.gov.au.

If you need help we can assist you. You can contact us on 1300 363 992 or by email to enquiries@oaic.gov.au.

What information do I need to put in the complaint?

To help the Information Commissioner give the best consideration to your complaint, please provide as much relevant information as possible. Be clear about the issues in your complaint and what action or outcome you would like to see as a result.

Is there a fee for making a complaint?

No. There are no costs involved in making a complaint to the Information Commissioner.

What will happen to my complaint?

An officer of the Information Commissioner will contact you to discuss your complaint and you will be kept informed of the progress of your complaint along the way.

Before deciding whether to investigate your complaint the Information Commissioner may make preliminary inquiries of the agency you have complained about.

If the Information Commissioner decides to investigate your complaint, the Commissioner will write to the agency and request information to assist with the investigation.

Can the Information Commissioner decide not to investigate my complaint?

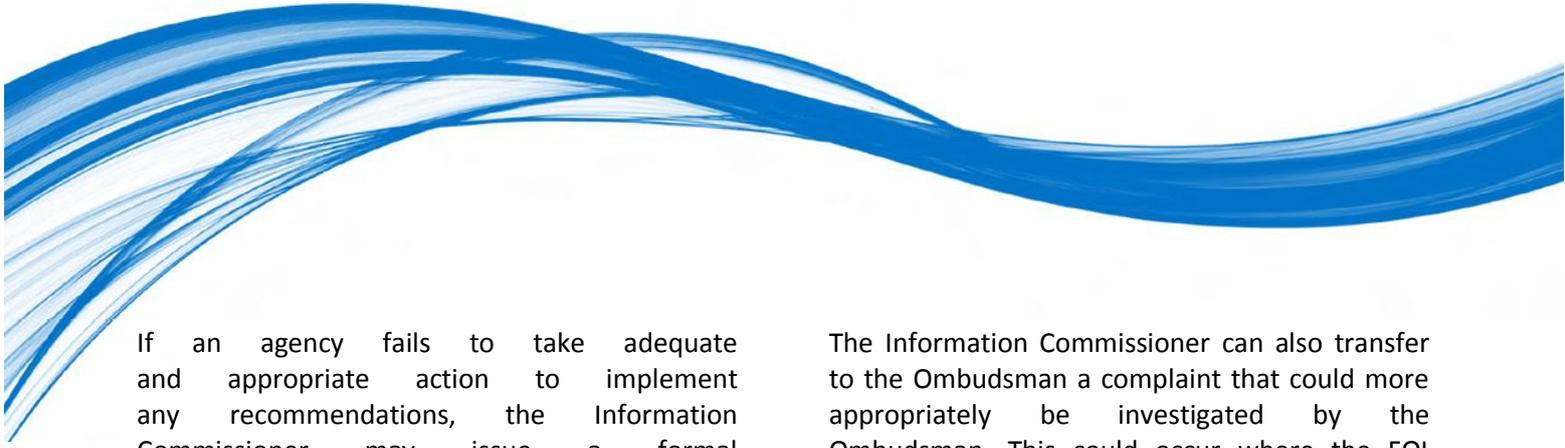
Yes. The Information Commissioner may decide not to investigate, or may discontinue an investigation, if:

- your complaint does not concern an agency's action under the FOI Act
- it is more appropriate for you to complain to another body (such as the agency or the Commonwealth Ombudsman)
- it is more appropriate for you to ask for the decision to be reviewed
- the agency you complained about has dealt with your complaint, or is in the process of dealing with it
- your complaint is frivolous, lacking in substance or not made in good faith
- you do not have sufficient interest in the matter.

If the Information Commissioner decides not to investigate or discontinues an investigation, the Commissioner will notify you and the agency of the reasons for this in writing.

How will my complaint be resolved?

In some cases the Information Commissioner's investigation and intervention may result in the agency addressing the issues that you have complained about. In other cases the Information Commissioner may make suggestions or recommendations that the agency should implement. You and the agency will be notified in writing of the outcome of the investigation.



If an agency fails to take adequate and appropriate action to implement any recommendations, the Information Commissioner may issue a formal implementation notice. This notice requires the agency to explain what action it will take to implement the recommendations. The Information Commissioner may also provide a written report to the minister responsible for the agency, and the report will be tabled in Parliament.

Your name will not be included in the report unless there is a special reason and you were first consulted.

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 not to investigate, the complaint and all relevant documents 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.

The information provided in this fact sheet is of a general nature. It is not a substitute for legal advice.

For further information

telephone: 1300 363 992

email: enquiries@oaic.gov.au

write: GPO Box 2999, Canberra ACT 2601

or visit our website at

www.oaic.gov.au