



ASA FOI 021/23/24

STATEMENT OF REASONS UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982

1. I refer to the request by [REDACTED] (the applicant), dated and received on 14 February 2024 by the Australian Submarine Agency (ASA), for access to the following documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (FOI Act):

'I request a copy of the Australian Submarine Agency finalised estimates briefing pack, including an index of back pocket briefs, for the 2023–24 Additional estimates dated February 14-15 2024.'

FOI decision maker

2. I am the authorised officer pursuant to section 23 of the FOI Act to make a decision on this FOI request.

Documents identified

3. I have identified one (1) document as falling within the scope of the request.

Exclusions

4. Personal email addresses, signatures, PMKeyS numbers and mobile telephone numbers contained in the document that fall within the scope of the FOI request, duplicates of documents, and documents sent to or from the applicant are excluded from this request. ASA has only considered final versions of documents.

Decision

5. I have decided to partially release the document in accordance with section 22 [access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted] of the FOI Act on the grounds that the deleted material is considered exempt under sections 47E(d) [Public interest conditional exemptions – certain operations of agencies] of the FOI Act.

Material taken into account

6. In making my decision, I have had regard to:
 - a. the terms of the request;
 - b. the content of the identified documents in issue;
 - c. relevant provisions of the FOI Act;
 - d. the Guidelines published by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the Guidelines); and

- e. advice received from relevant ASA business areas.

REASONS FOR DECISION

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

7. Section 22 of the FOI Act permits an agency to prepare and provide an edited copy of a document where the agency has decided to refuse access to an exempt document or that to give access to a document would disclose information that would reasonably be regarded as irrelevant to the request for access.
8. The document contained exempt material and information (eg.names and telephone numbers) that does not relate to the request.
9. I am satisfied that it is reasonably practicable to remove the exempt and irrelevant material and release the document to you in an edited form.

Section 47E(d) –Public interest conditional exemptions – certain operations of agencies

10. Section 47E(d) of the FOI Act states:

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

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

11. The Guidelines, at paragraph 6.123, provide that:

The predicted effect must bear on the agency's 'proper and efficient' operations, that is, the agency is undertaking its expected activities in an expected manner.

12. In the case of 'ABK' and Commonwealth Ombudsman [2022] AICmr 44, the Information Commissioner (IC) found that where the direct email addresses and phone numbers of agency staff are not publicly known, they should be conditionally exempt under section 47E(d). The IC made this determination due to reasonable expectation that the release of direct contact details would undermine the operation of established channels of communication with the public. Further, the IC accepted that staff who were contacted directly could be subject to excessive and abusive communications, which may give rise to work health and safety concerns.
13. I am satisfied that were the contact details of ASA personnel made publicly available, it would have substantial adverse effects on the proper and efficient operation of existing public communication channels. Further, I am satisfied of a reasonable expectation that the information could be used inappropriately, in a manner which adversely affects the health, wellbeing and work of ASA personnel. Disclosure of names, email addresses and phone numbers could, therefore, reasonably be expected to prejudice the operations of ASA.
14. The Guidelines provide, at paragraph 6.120, that I should consider whether disclosure of the information 'would, or could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in the agency's processes that would enable those processes to be more efficient.' Given that

the direct contact details within the document are not publicly available and that more appropriate communication channels are already available, I am satisfied that release of the information could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in ASA's processes that would not lead to any efficiencies.

15. Accordingly, I am satisfied that all staff information contained within the documents is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.
16. The Guidelines provide, at paragraph 6.120, that I should consider whether disclosure of the information '*would, or could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in the agency's processes that would enable those processes to be more efficient.*' Given that the direct contact details within the document are not publically available and there are established communication channels available to the public I am satisfied that release of the information could reasonably be expected to lead to a change in ASA's processes that would not lead to any efficiencies.
17. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.

Public interest considerations – section 47E(d)

18. Section 11A(5) of the FOI Act states:

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.

19. I have considered the factors favouring disclosure as set out in section 11B(3) [factors favouring access] of the FOI Act. The relevant factors being whether access to the document would:

(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.

20. In my view, disclosure of this information would not increase public participation in the ASA process (section 3(2)(a) of the FOI Act), nor would it increase scrutiny or discussion of ASA activities (section 3(2)(b) of the FOI Act).

21. Paragraph 6.22 of the Guidelines specifies a non-exhaustive list of public interest factors against disclosure. The factors I find particularly relevant to this request are that release of this information could reasonably be expected to prejudice:

- the protection of an individual's right to privacy;
- the interests of an individual or a group of individuals;

- the management function of an agency; and
 - the personnel management function of an agency.
22. It is in the public interest that ASA efficiently and productively operates with regard for the health and wellbeing of its personnel. As I have established above at paragraph 13, the release of the names, email addresses and phone numbers of ASA personnel can reasonably be expected to prejudice the management and personnel management functions of ASA. Existing communication channels and processes enable efficient and appropriate liaison with the public. The direct contact details of ASA personnel should, therefore, not be disclosed, as the public interest against their disclosure outweighs the public interest in their release.
23. I have not taken any of the factors listed in section 11B(4) [irrelevant factors] of the FOI Act into account when making this decision.
24. I am satisfied, based on the above particulars, the public interest factors against disclosure outweigh the factors for disclosure, and that, on balance, it is against the public interest to release the information to you. Accordingly, I find that the information is exempt under section 47E(d) of the FOI Act.



Director of Ministerial and Parliamentary Services
Accredited Decision Maker
Australian Submarine Agency