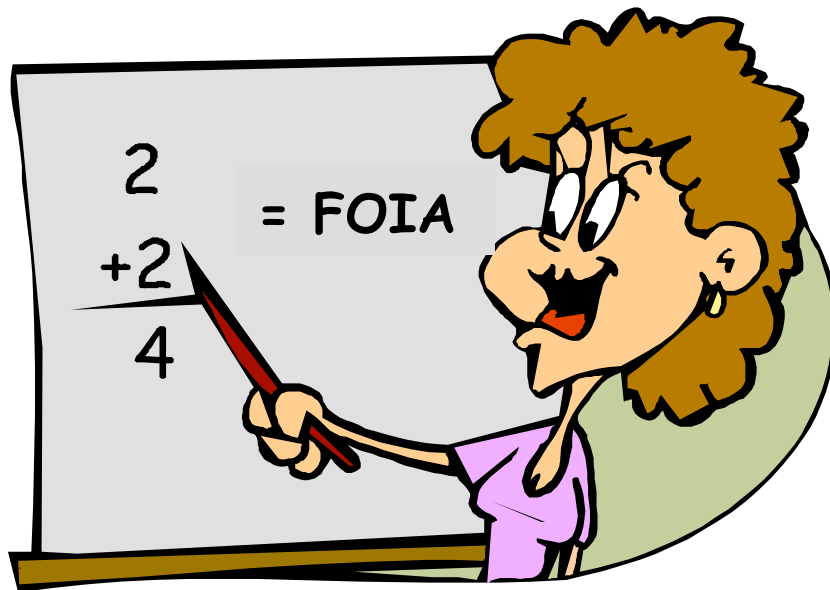


# Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

## Guidance for Schools



**Please note:** This document is intended to act as a general guide for school staff to follow when dealing with requests for information. The topic is very complicated so it should not be taken as an absolute statement of the law and obligations covered by the Freedom of Information Act 2000. You should always follow your schools procedures on handling and releasing information.

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## Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000

### **This Guidance.**

From 1 January 2005 when the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) came fully into force, there is a legal right for any person to ask a school for access to information held by that school. This guidance is to help schools i.e. governing bodies, head teachers and school staff to understand the requirements of FOIA and to handle requests for information under the Act, which is fully retrospective.

This practical guidance is offered to Head Teachers, Governors and all school staff who may come into contact with requests for information during the course of their duties.

In legal terms, schools are classed as separate entities for handling information requests, rather than as a collective part of the board. However, the board feels it appropriate to offer advice where requested, in order to maintain a uniformity of practice across schools in the boards administrative area.

The guidance recognises that schools already deal with a great variety and number of requests for information and offers a straightforward approach to compliance. It recognises also that some aspects of the legislation regarding information held by public bodies are complex and that their full meaning is yet to be tested by the courts.

An Annex provides links to more in-depth guidance and to additional sources of information, including two codes of practice, one on guidance to public authorities and the other on records management, for those who need or want a greater level of detail.

### **Summary**

- On 1 January 2005 the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) became law. The governing body of each school needs to ensure that employees at the school are able to comply with requests for information under FOIA.
- The FOIA will add to the framework of legislation on disclosure of information held by schools. Any request for information in writing is either a request under FOIA, Environmental legislation, the Data Protection Act, or a combination of any of them.

- From 1 January 2005 schools have a duty to provide advice and assistance to anyone requesting information.
- The FOIA presumes openness. But it recognises the need to protect sensitive information in certain circumstances and provides for exemptions. However, even where certain exemptions apply, information must still be released if it is recognised it is in the public interest to do so.
- Governing bodies may choose to charge a fee for complying with a request for information. The fee must be calculated according to FOIA regulations and the person notified of the charge before supplying the information. The Act's code of practice recommends that schools respond to straightforward enquiries free of charge and charge where the costs are significant.
- There are prescribed time limits for responding to requests for information and a well managed record and information system will enable the school to reply promptly to requests.

## Background

1. FOIA was introduced to promote greater openness and accountability across the public sector, and establishes a general right of access to information held by public authorities, including schools. Along with Human Rights and Data Protection legislation, FOIA aims to " build a culture of rights and responsibilities for citizens".

2. FOIA is overseen by the Information Commissioner (IC)<sup>1</sup>, the independent body with responsibility for regulation of both the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998. Both the IC and the Department for Constitutional Affairs have produced guidance on FOIA, including two Codes of Practice<sup>2</sup> providing guidance to public authorities generally on the

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<sup>1</sup> The Information Commissioner's Office FOI duties are to: promote good practice; give advice and guidance; enforce compliance and investigate complaints; report to Parliament on compliance; approve publication schemes; and publicise the Act.

<sup>2</sup> The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the Discharge of Functions of Public Authorities under Part 1 of the FOI Act (section 45) provides guidance to public authorities on good practice when handling requests for information [here](http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codepafunc.htm). [http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codepafunc.htm]

The Code of Practice on the Management of Records under the FOI Act (section 46) sets out the practices which public authorities should follow in relation to creating, keeping, managing and disposing of their records [here](http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codemanrec.htm). [http://www.dca.gov.uk/foi/codemanrec.htm]

implementation of the Act and on records management. This guidance is a summary of the Act and these codes, but does not in anyway replace them. [Annex D](#) provides further sources of information.

### **Right to request information**

3. From 1 January 2005 there is a legal right for any person to make a request to a school for access to information held by that school. Schools are under a duty to provide advice and assistance to anyone requesting information. Enquirers do not have to say why they want the information and the request does not have to mention FOIA. The request must be in writing, which includes fax or email. All requests for information that are not covered by the Data Protection Act 1998 (i.e. from individuals to see their own personal information) or Environmental Information Regulations 1992- are covered by FOIA.

4. The enquirer is entitled to be told whether the school holds the information (this is known as the duty to confirm or deny) and, if so, to have access to it. Access can include providing extracts of a document or a summary of the information sought, or access to the original document. However, the Act recognises the need to preserve confidentiality of sensitive information in some circumstances and sets out a number of exemptions.

5. There will only be four reasons for not complying with a valid request for information under FOI:-

- the information is not held
- the cost threshold is reached (£450)
- the request is considered vexatious or repeated (as defined in the Act!)
- one or more of the exemptions apply

6. FOIA provides a series of exemptions. [These are explained further in Annex A](#). Some of the exemptions are absolute and some are qualified, in that they can be overridden by the public interest test. There is more information about these later in this guidance.

7. Many of the "exemptions" are intended to protect sensitive or confidential information. However, some of the "exemptions" are there simply to avoid the legal position where two pieces of law cover the same information requested, or where the information is already available by some other means.

These include:

- a. **information accessible by other means**  
For example, information available from your publication scheme, or information that other legislation requires you to give.
- b. **personal information**  
A request for personal information is covered by the Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998. Individuals may continue to make a "subject access request" under the DPA - these are where the enquirer asks to see what personal information the school holds about themselves. (A booklet "Data Protection Guidance for Schools" is available from the teachers section of the board's web site <http://www.belb.org.uk> )
- c. **environmental information** <sup>3</sup>  
Where information is covered by the Environmental Information Regulations 1992<sup>4</sup>

### **What action does the governing body need to take?**

8. School governing bodies are responsible for ensuring a school complies with FOIA. This new legal presumption of openness means it is more important than ever that a school decides its policies and conducts its day to day operations on a basis that stands up to public scrutiny.

9. It should be noted that wilfully concealing, damaging or destroying information in order to avoid answering an enquiry is an offence and so a governing body, or any person who is employed by, or is an officer of, or is subject to the direction of the governing body (as the public authority) may be at risk of criminal proceedings where such unlawful concealment, damage or destruction occurs. Therefore it is important that no action is taken to delete or amend records that are subject to a request for information.

10. Since requests for information can be directed to the school through anyone who works there, the governing body will need to ask itself whether all staff are aware of FOIA and how the school handles requests for information.

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<sup>3</sup> Environmental Information Regulations enquiries are ones which relate to air, water, land, natural sites, built environment, flora and fauna, and health, and any decisions and activities affecting any of these. These could therefore include enquiries about recycling, phone masts, school playing fields, car parking etc

<sup>4</sup> More guidance on the information commissioner's website <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk>

11. Suggestions- The governing body will need to:

- Agree the FOIA publication scheme and access policy if it has not already done so. The policy will need to set out how the school proposes to deal with requests and state that all staff should be aware of the process.
- Delegate to the head teacher day-to-day responsibility for FOIA policy and the provision of advice, guidance, publicity and interpretation of the school's policy.
- Consider designating an individual with responsibility for FOIA, to provide a single point of reference, coordinate FOIA and related policies and procedures, take a view on possibly sensitive areas and consider what information and training staff may need. A PowerPoint presentation on school responsibilities is available on the teachers section of the board's web site. <http://www.belb.org.uk>
- Consider arrangements for overseeing access to information and delegation to the appropriate governing body committee.
- Ensure that a well managed records management and information system exists in order to comply with requests.
- Ensure a record of refusals and reasons for refusals is kept, allowing the governing body to review its access policy on an annual basis.



### Charging

12. Governing bodies may charge a fee for complying with requests, as calculated in accordance with FOIA regulations. Further guidance is available on [Annex B](#). If you do charge, you must give written notice to the person, before supplying the information requested.

## DEALING WITH A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

13. To handle a request for information the governing body or delegated person will need to ask themselves a series of questions. These are set out below and shown on pages 15-16 as process maps.

### Is it a FOI request for information?

14. A request for information may be covered by one, or all, of three information rights:

- **Data Protection enquiries** (or subject access requests) are ones where the enquirer asks to see what personal information the school holds about the enquirer. If the enquiry is a Data Protection request, follow your existing school DPA procedures.
- **Environmental Information Regulations enquiries** are ones which relate to air, water, land, natural sites, built environment, flora and fauna, and health, and any decisions and activities affecting any of these. These could therefore include enquiries about recycling, phone masts, school playing fields, car parking etc. If the enquiry is about environmental information, follow the guidance on the IC's website [here](#) or the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs ( DEFRA ) website <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/opengov/eir/guidance/index.htm>
- **FOI enquiries** are concerned with all other information and the reasoning behind decisions and policies. The request does not have to mention the FOI Act. All requests for information that are not data protection or environmental information requests are covered by the FOI Act.

### Is this a valid FOI request for information?

15. An FOI request should:

- be **in writing**, including email or FAX;
- **state the enquirer's name and correspondence address** (email addresses are allowed) ;
- **describe the information requested** - there must be enough information to be able to identify and locate the information<sup>5</sup>; and

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<sup>5</sup> In cases where the enquiry is ambiguous assist the enquirer to describe more clearly the information requested. Where possible, establish direct contact. The aim is to clarify the nature of the information requested and not to determine the aims or motivation of the enquirer. If you notify the enquirer that you need further information to enable you to answer, you do not have to deal with the request until the further information is received. The response time limit starts from the date this is received.

- not be covered by one of the other pieces of legislation.

16. Verbal enquiries are not covered by the FOI Act. Such enquiries can be dealt with where the enquiry is relatively straightforward and can be dealt with satisfactorily. However, for more complex enquiries, and to avoid disputes over what was asked for, you should ask the enquirer to put the request in writing or email, when the request will become subject to FOIA.

### **Does the school hold the information?**

17. "Holding" information means information relating to the business of the school:

- the school has **created**, or
- the school has **received from another** body or person, or
- **held by another** body on the **school's behalf**.

18. Information means both hard copy and digital information, including email.

19. If the school does not hold the information, you do not have to create or acquire it just to answer the enquiry, although a reasonable search should be made before denying that you have got information the school might be expected to hold.

### **Has the information requested already been made public?**

20. If the information requested is already in the public domain, for instance through your Publication Scheme or on your website, direct the enquirer to the information and explain how to access it.

### **Is the request vexatious or manifestly unreasonable or repeated?**

21. The Act states that there is no obligation to comply with vexatious requests. This is taken to mean a request which is designed to cause inconvenience, harassment or expense rather than to obtain information, and would require a substantial diversion of resources or would otherwise undermine the work of the school<sup>6</sup>. This however does not provide an excuse for poor records management. Guidance is available on the information commissioner's website under FOI/ exemptions. <http://www.ico.gov.uk/eventual.aspx?id=9183>

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<sup>6</sup> It is not intended to include otherwise valid requests in which the applicant may make complaints or vent frustrations. In addition, you do not have to comply with repeated identical or substantially similar requests from the same applicant unless a "reasonable" interval has elapsed between requests.

### **Can the school transfer a request to another body?**

22. If the information is held by another public authority, such as ELB or DE , first check if they hold it, then transfer the request to them. You must notify the enquirer that you do not hold the information and to whom you have transferred the request. You should answer any parts of the enquiry in respect of information your school does hold.

### **Could a third party's interests be affected by disclosure?**

23. Consultation of third parties may be required if their interests could be affected by release of the information requested, and any such consultation may influence the decision. You do not need to consult where you are not going to disclose the information because you will be applying an exemption.

24. Consultation will be necessary where:

- disclosure of information may affect the legal rights of a third party, such as the right to have certain information treated in confidence or rights under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- the views of the third party may assist you to determine if information is exempt from disclosure, or
- the views of the third party may assist you to determine the public interest.

NOTES:

### **Does an exemption apply?**

25. The presumption of the legislation is that you will disclose information unless the Act provides a specific reason to withhold it. There are 23 exemptions in the Act. They are set out in [Annex A](#) and are mainly intended to protect sensitive or confidential information.

26. Only where you have real concerns about disclosing the information should you look to see whether an exemption might apply. Even then, where the potential exemption is a qualified exemption, you need to consider the public interest test to identify if the public interest in applying the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it. Therefore, unless it is in the public interest to withhold the information, it has to be released. [Annex C](#) contains guidance on conducting a public interest test.

### **What if the request is for personal information?**

27. Personal information requested by the subject of that information is exempt under the FOI Act as such information is covered by the Data Protection Act. Individuals must, therefore, continue to make a 'subject access request' under the Data Protection Act if they wish to access such information.

### **What if the details contain personal information?**

28. Personal information requested by third parties is also exempt under the FOI Act where release of that information would breach the Data Protection Act. If a request is made for a document (e.g. Governing Body minutes) which contains personal information whose release to a third party would breach the Data Protection Act, the document may be issued by blanking out the relevant personal information as set out in the redaction procedure. The procedure for redaction is here<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The procedure for redaction is:

i) mask the passages which are not to be disclosed and photocopy; (ii) annotate in the margin against each blank passage, the exemption and section of the Act under which this passage is exempt; iv) explain in the covering letter that the relevant exemptions are marked in the attachments and in the case of non-absolute exemptions, how the public interest test has been considered.

ii. On no account must you use the computer to rewrite the document or email and simply delete the exempted passages so that the resulting document appears as though they did not exist. The one circumstance where this would be permissible would be where the only redacted parts are personal information such as people's names and the covering letter explains this.



## How much can we charge?

29. The Act allows governing bodies to charge for providing information. Consider charging to recover the costs to school resources that would otherwise support teaching and learning!

30. Schools will however wish to consider whether calculating the cost of the fee outweighs the cost of providing the information. It is recommended that schools respond to straightforward enquiries free of charge and charge where the costs are significant.

31. If you are going to charge you must send the enquirer a fees notice and do not have to comply with the request until the fee has been paid. [Annex B](#) gives more information on charging.

## Does the estimated cost of complying exceed the appropriate limit?

32. If the cost of complying with the request will exceed the appropriate limit, the school is not obliged to comply. Further guidance is at [Annex B](#).

## Is there a time limit for replying to the enquirer?

33. Compliance with a request must be prompt and certainly within the legally prescribed limit of 20 **working** days, excluding school holidays.<sup>8</sup> Failure to comply could result in a complaint to the Information Commissioner. The response time starts from the time the request is received. Where you have asked the enquirer for more information to enable you to answer, the 20 days start time begins when this further information has been received.

34. If a qualified exemption applies and you need more time to consider the public interest test, you should reply within the 20 days stating that an exemption applies but include an estimate of the date by which a decision on the public interest test will be made. This should be within a "reasonable" time - in practice, it is recommended by the Department that normally this should be within 10 working days.

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<sup>8</sup> An order to this effect is made under section 10(4) of the FOI Act.

35. Where you have notified the enquirer that a charge is to be made, the time period stops until payment is received and then continues again once payment has been received.

### **What action is required to refuse a request?**

36. If the information is not to be provided, the person dealing with the request must immediately contact the person in the school with delegated responsibility for FOI to ensure that the case has been properly considered and the reasons for refusal are sound. If it is decided to refuse a request, you need to send a refusals notice, which must contain

- i) Reason the responsible person cannot provide the information asked for;
- ii) WHICH- exemption(s) you are claiming apply;
- iii) WHY- the exemption(s) apply to this enquiry (if it is not self-evident);
- iv) REASONS- for refusal if based on cost of compliance ([see Annex B](#));
- v) in the case of non-absolute exemptions, how you have applied the public interest test, specifying the public interest factors taken into account before reaching the decision ([see Annex C](#));
- vi) REASONS- for refusal on vexatious or repeated grounds
- vii) Details of the schools internal complaints procedure.

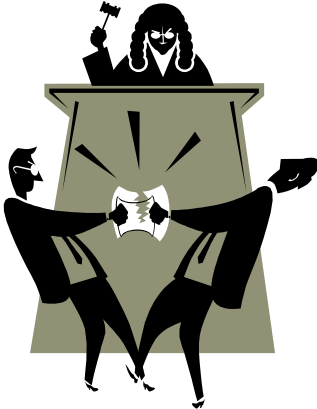
37. For monitoring purposes and in case of an appeal against a decision not to release the information or an investigation by the Information Commissioner, the responsible person must keep a record of all enquiries where all or part of the requested information is withheld and exemptions are claimed. The record must include the reasons for the decision to withhold the information. This record should be retained for 5 years. There are no requirements to keep records where you have supplied the information requested.

### **What do I do if someone complains?**

38. Any written (including email) expression of dissatisfaction - even if it does not specifically seek a review - should be handled through the school's existing complaints procedure which should be fair and impartial. The procedure should be clear and non bureaucratic. Wherever practicable the review should be handled by someone not involved in the original decision. The Governing Body should set and publish a target time for determining complaints and information on the success rate in meeting the target. The school should maintain records of all complaints and their outcome.

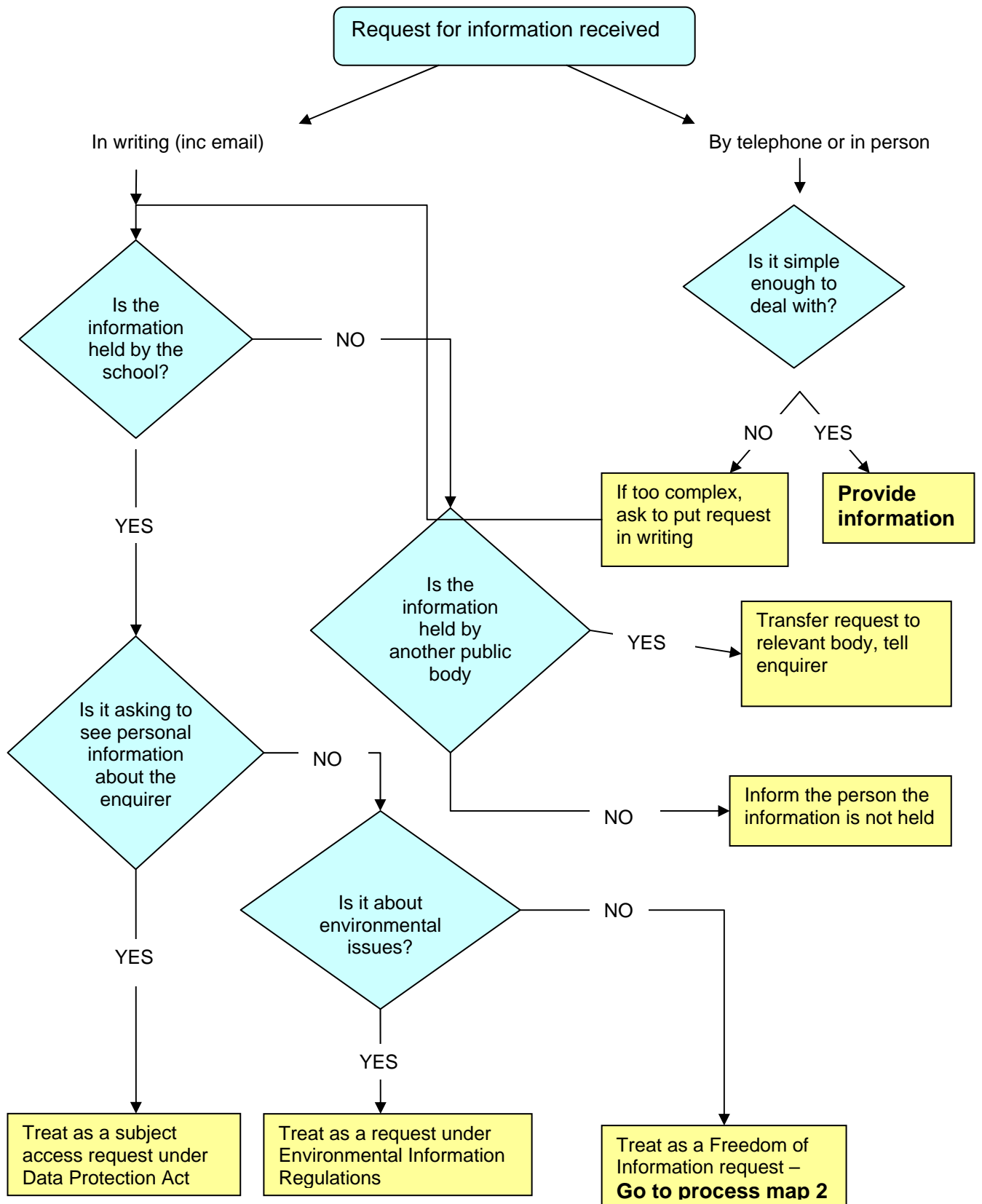
39. When the original request has been reviewed and the outcome is that the information should be disclosed this should be done as soon as practicable. When the outcome is that procedures within the school have not been properly followed, the school should review procedures to prevent any recurrence. When the outcome upholds the school's original decision or action, the applicant should be informed of their right to appeal to the Information Commissioner. The appeal should be made in writing to:

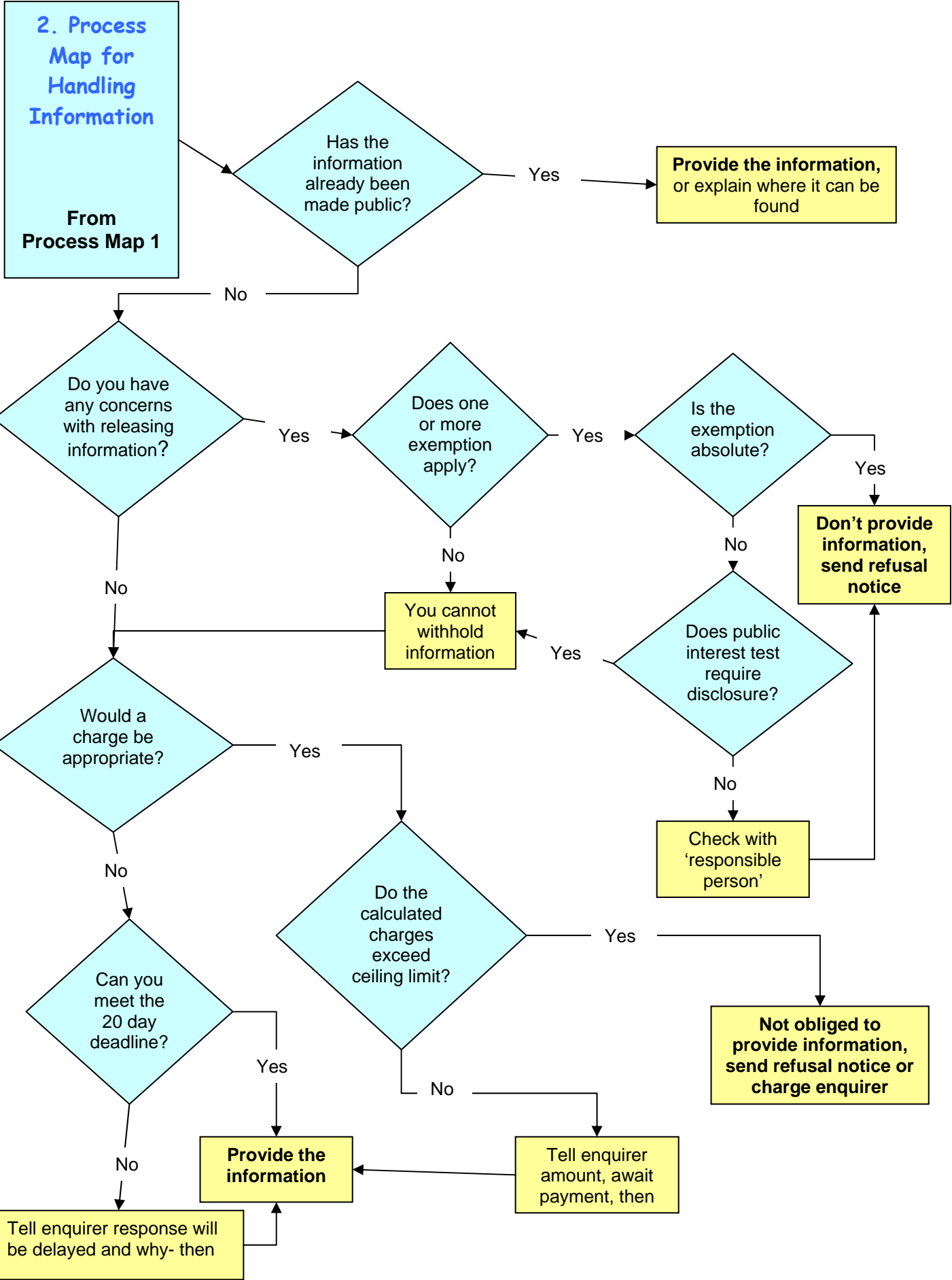
FOI Compliance Team (Complaints)  
Wycliffe House,  
Water Lane, Wilmslow,  
Cheshire. SK9 5AF



NOTES:

# 1 PROCESS MAP FOR RECEIVING REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION





## Annex

### Annex A -Exemptions to Release of Information

1. Although decisions on disclosure should be made on a presumption of openness, the FOI Act recognises the need to preserve confidentiality and protect sensitive material in some circumstances.

2. You cannot withhold information in response to a valid request UNLESS one of the following applies:-

- an exemption to disclosure, or
- the information sought is not held, or
- the request is considered vexatious or repeated or
- the cost of compliance exceeds the threshold (see Annex B)

#### The duty to confirm or deny

3. A person applying for information has the right to be told if the information requested is held by the school, and if that is the case to have the information sent (subject to any of the exemptions). This obligation is known as the school's "duty to confirm or deny" that it holds the information. However, the school does not have to confirm or deny if:-

- the exemption is an absolute exemption (see paragraph 6), or
- in the case of qualified exemptions (see paragraph 8), confirming or denying would itself disclose exempted information

#### Exemptions

4. A series of exemptions are set out in the Act which allow the withholding of information in relation to an enquiry. Some are much specialised in their application (such as national security) and would not usually be relevant to schools. There are around 23 exemptions but schools are likely to use only a few of them.

5. There are two general categories of exemptions:-

**Absolute:** where there is no requirement to confirm or deny that the information is held, disclose the information or consider the public interest; and

**Qualified:** where, even if an exemption applies, there is a duty to consider the public interest in disclosing information

## What are the Absolute Exemptions?

6. There are 8 absolute exemptions listed in the Act. Even where an absolute exemption applies:-

- it does not mean that you can't disclose in all cases; it means that disclosure is not required by the Act. A decision could be taken to ignore the exemption and release the information taking into account all the facts of the case.
- there is still a legal obligation to provide reasonable advice and assistance to the enquirer.

7. The absolute exemptions in the Act are set out below. **Those which might be relevant to schools are High-lighted:**

### 7.1 Information accessible to the enquirer by other means (Section 21)

If information is reasonably accessible to the applicant by another route than the Act, it is exempt information. This is the case even if the enquirer would have to pay for the information under that alternative route. This exemption includes cases where you are required to give information under other legislation, or where the information is available via your Publication Scheme.

### 7.2 Information dealing with security matters (Section 23) (see also qualified exemption under Section 24 on national security)

This applies to information directly or indirectly supplied by, or relating to, bodies dealing with security matters such as GCHQ, MI5, MI6, Special Forces and the National Criminal Intelligence Service.

### 7.3 Court records (Section 32) - (see also the qualified exemption under Section 30 concerning investigations and proceedings conducted by public authorities)

This applies to information related to proceedings in a court or tribunal or served on a public authority for the purposes of proceedings.

### 7.4 Parliamentary Privilege (Section 34)

This exempts information if it is required for the purpose of avoiding an

infringement of the Parliamentary privilege. Parliamentary privilege is an immunity whereby MPs cannot be prosecuted for sedition or sued for libel or slander over anything said during proceedings in the House.

**7.5 Prejudice to the effective conduct of public affairs (Section 36) - see also the qualified exemption part of Section 36**

This relates to the maintenance of the collective responsibility of government ministers.

**7.6 Personal information (Section 40) - see also the qualified exemption part of Section 40. Where enquirers ask to see information about them-selves, this is exempt under the Act because it is covered by the Data Protection Act. Consult your existing school Data Protection procedures.**

**7.7 Information provided in confidence (Section 41)**

This relates to information obtained from a person if its disclosure would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by that, or another, person.

**7.8 Prohibitions on disclosure (Section 44)**

Information is exempt where its disclosure is prohibited under any other legislation by order of a court or where it would constitute a contempt of court or where it is incompatible with any EU obligation.

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## What are the Qualified Exemptions?

8. With qualified exemptions, even if it is decided that an exemption applies, there is a duty to consider the public interest in confirming or denying that the information exists and in disclosing information. Guidance on carrying out the public interest test is at Annex C. The qualified exemptions in the Act are set out below. **Those which might be relevant to schools are High-lighted:**

### 8.1 Information intended for future publication (Section 22)

If at the time the request was made, information is held with a view to publication, then it is exempt from disclosure if it is reasonable that it should not be disclosed until the intended date of publication. This could apply for instance to statistics published at set intervals, for example annually or where information is incomplete and it would be inappropriate to publish prematurely<sup>9</sup>. Remember, you still have a legal duty to provide reasonable advice and assistance.

### 8.2 National security (Section 24) (see also absolute exemption 23)

Information is exempt for the purposes of safeguarding national security.

### 8.3 Defence (Section 26)

Information is exempt if its disclosure would prejudice the defence of the UK.

### 8.4 International relations (Section 27)

Information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to, prejudice relations between the UK and any other state, international organisation.

### 8.5 Relations within UK (Section 28)

Information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to, prejudice relations between any administrations in the UK i.e. the Government, NI Assembly etc.

### 8.6 The economy (Section 29)

Information is exempt if its disclosure would, or would be likely to prejudice the economic or financial interests of the UK

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<sup>9</sup> Note the following:-

- the intended publication does not have to be by the school, it can be by another person or body on behalf of the school
- the date of publication does not have to be known, it could be at some future date (although it is recommended that some idea of a likely date is given)
- the duty to confirm or deny does not apply if to do so would involve the disclosure of any of the relevant information

**8.7 Investigations and proceedings conducted by public authorities (Section 30)** Information is exempt if it has at any time been held by the school for the purposes of criminal investigations or proceedings, such as determining whether a person should be charged with an offence or whether a charged person is guilty, or investigations which may lead to a decision to institute criminal proceedings. The duty to confirm or deny does not apply to such information.

#### **8.8 Law enforcement (Section 31)**

Information which is not exempt under Section 30 Investigations and Proceedings, may be exempt under this exemption in the event that disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the following among others:-

- the prevention or detection of crime
- the apprehension or prosecution of offenders
- the administration of justice
- the exercise of functions such as ascertaining if a person has broken the law, is responsible for improper conduct, whether circumstances justify regulatory action, ascertaining a person's fitness or competence in relation to their profession, ascertaining the cause of an accident or protecting or recovering charities or its properties
- any civil proceedings brought by or on behalf of the school which arise out of an investigation carried out for any of the purposes mentioned above.

The duty to confirm or deny does not arise where prejudice would result to any of these matters.

#### **8.9 Audit Functions (Section 33)**

Information is exempt if its disclosure would, or would be likely to prejudice the exercise of an authority's functions in relation to the audit of the accounts of other public authorities. It does not apply to internal audit reports.

#### **8.10 Formulation of government policy (Section 35)**

Information held is exempt information if it relates to the formulation or development of government policy, ministerial communications, advice by Law Officers (e.g. Attorney General) and the operation of any Ministerial private office

**8.11 Prejudice to the conduct of public affairs (Section 36)** (excluding matters covered by the absolute exemption part of Section 36) Information likely to prejudice the maintenance of the convention of the collective responsibility of Ministers or likely to inhibit the free and frank provision of advice or exchange of views

**8.12 Communications with the Queen (Section 37)**

Information is exempt if it relates to communications with the Queen, the Royal Family or Royal Household or if it relates to the award of honours. The duty to confirm or deny does not arise where this exemption applies.

**8.13 Health and Safety (Section 38)**

Information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to endanger the safety or physical or mental health of any individual. The duty to confirm or deny does not arise where prejudice would result.

**8.14 Environmental information (Section 39)**

Information is exempt under FOI where it is covered by the Environmental Information Regulations. Environmental information can cover information relating to: air, water, land, natural sites, built environment, flora and fauna, and health. It also covers all information relating to decisions or activities affecting any of these.

**8.15 Personal information (Section 40)** - see also the absolute exemption part of Section 40 Where an individual seeks information about themselves Data Protection Act powers apply.

Where the information concerns a third party, it is exempt if its disclosure would contravene the Data Protection Act, or the data protection principles; or if the person to whom the information relates would not have a right of access to it because it falls under one of the exemptions to the Data Protection Act. The duty to confirm or deny does not arise in relation to this information if doing so would be incompatible with any of the above.

**8.16 Legal professional privilege (Section 42)**

Legal professional privilege covers any advice given by legal advisers, solicitors and barristers. Generally such information will be privileged. A school wishing to disclose the information will need to seek consent from the provider of the advice. This exemption covers all such information where a claim to legal professional privilege can be maintained in legal proceedings. The duty to confirm or deny does not arise where to do so would involve the

disclosure of such information.

### 8.17 Commercial interests (Section 43)

Information is exempt if it constitutes a trade secret or would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of any person or body (including the school). The duty to confirm or deny does not arise where prejudice would result to commercial interests but not where the information constitutes a trade secret.

## Protective Markings and Applying Exemptions

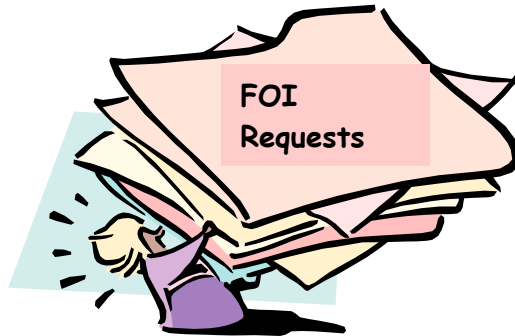
9. When considering if an exemption to disclosure should apply, bear in mind that the presence of a protective marking (Restricted, Confidential or Secret, with or without descriptors such as Staff, Management, Commercial etc) **does not constitute an exemption** and is not in itself sufficient grounds on which to prevent disclosure. Each case must be considered on its merits.

### Timing

10. Where information has previously been withheld, it must not be assumed that any subsequent requests for the same information will also be refused. Sensitivity of information decreases with age and the impact of any disclosure will be different depending on when the request is received. Therefore, for each request, it will be necessary to consider the harm that could result at the time of the request and, while taking into account any previous exemption applications, each case should be considered separately.

## The Key to FOIA

- Effective communication within the school.
- Commitment to openness - lead from the top.
- Good practice in record keeping-Ask ourselves:
  - What information do we hold?
  - Can we access the information easily? Timeframe for dealing with requests is tight- good records management is essential.
  - Do we record information legibly?
  - Do we have record retention policies? ( a generic disposal schedule has been developed for NI schools and it is intended to be published on the DE web site. Contact Liz Johnston - BELB for advice - 02890 564316. ) <mailto:lizjo@belb.co.uk>



**Remember:** this is a complex Act which will impose demands on our time. Prior to the introduction of FOIA, we could decide whether or not to release information. (Where we had no statutory duty to do so) Now we must provide the information, unless one of the exemptions in the Act applies. We must provide up to 18 hours of time to deal with requests before we can make a charge for prescribed costs. See charging in [Annex B](#)

NOTES:

## **Annex B - Charging**

### **May I charge a fee?**

1. FOI does not require charges to be made but schools have discretion to charge applicants a fee in accordance with the "Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004". In general, information which will cost less than £450 to supply must be supplied free of charge.

### **What are the costs that may be taken into account?**

2. You need to take the following into account when calculating the estimated cost of complying with a request for information:

- The prescribed costs: these are any costs reasonably incurred by the school in:
  - determining whether you hold information of the description specified in the request
  - locating and retrieving the information and in meeting the applicant's preference for communicating the information
  - the cost of associated staff time. But it does not include the cost of staff time incurred in determining whether the school is obliged to comply with the request for information
- The disbursements:  
these are any costs directly and reasonably incurred by the school in:
  - informing the applicant whether you hold information of the description specified in the request
  - communicating the information to the applicant

### **Are there limits to the fee I can charge?**

3. Yes. If you choose to charge a fee for complying with a request for information, it must not be more than the sum of the prescribed costs and the disbursements.

### **What if the estimated costs exceed the threshold of £450?**

4. If the estimated cost of complying exceeds the threshold you are not required to comply with the request but may choose to do so. If you choose to

comply with a request where the estimated cost exceeds the threshold you should calculate the charge as follows:

Upon receiving a request, if the cost of complying with the request will be:

a) Below the Appropriate Limit\* - you cannot charge anything other than Disbursements:

b) Over the Appropriate\* Limit - you don't have to comply but if choose to you can only charge Prescribed costs plus Disbursements.

\*Appropriate Limit is £450

#### **Disbursements:**

- Complying with the applicants request for the information in a particular format (e.g. summary, inspection, copy)
- Reproducing any document.
- Postage and other forms of transmission e.g. fax.

#### **Working out if you're under the Appropriate Limit- Prescribed Costs.**

Upon receiving the request, estimate how long it's going to take you to do any or all of the following and cost the time at £25 per person per hour:

- Determining whether you hold the information.
- Locating the information or a document which may contain the information.
- Retrieving the information, or a document, which may contain the information.
- Extracting the information from a document containing it.

**You CANNOT charge** for time taken by staff to inform applicant that information is or is not held or for them to communicate it to them.

#### **May I aggregate the costs where there are multiple requests?**

5. Where two or more requests are made to the school by different people who appear to acting together or as part of a campaign the estimated cost of complying with any of the requests is to be taken to be the estimated total cost of complying with them all, provided that:

(a) the two or more requests referred to in that section are for information which is on the same subject matter or is otherwise related;  
(b) the last of the requests is received by the school before the twentieth working day following the date of receipt of the first of the requests; and

(c) it appears to the school that the requests have been made in an attempt to ensure that the prescribed costs of complying separately with each request would not exceed the appropriate limit.

**Consultative or Campaign Requests:**

These are : Two or more requests made by one person or different persons in concert or in pursuance of a campaign.

When calculating whether the Appropriate Limit has may be reached in complying with any one request, you aggregate the cost of complying with all of them. However must be two or more requests that relate to same or similar information and be received within any sixty consecutive working day period.

**How do I inform the applicant of the fee?**

6. Where you intend to charge a fee for complying with a request for information then the school must give the person requesting the information notice in writing (called the "fees notice") stating that a fee of the amount specified in the notice is to be charged for complying.

7. Where a fees notice has been given to the person making the request, you do not need to comply with the request unless the fee is paid within three months of the notice being received.

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## Annex C - Applying the Public Interest Test

### Background

1. Having established that a qualified exemption(s) definitely applies to a particular case, you must then carry out a public interest test to identify if the public interest in applying the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.

Therefore, unless it is in the public interest to withhold the information, it has to be released. Although precedent and a developed case law will play a part, individual circumstances will vary and each case will need to be considered on its own merits.

**There is no definition of 'public interest' in the FOIA. The dictionary says ' anything which is in the interest of the public'**

2. Note also that:

- potential or actual embarrassment to, or loss of confidence in, the school, staff or governors is NOT a valid factor
- the fact that the information is technical, complex to understand and may be misunderstood may not of itself be a reason to withhold information
- the potential harm of releasing information will reduce over time and should be considered at the time the request is made rather than by reference to when the relevant decision was originally taken
- the balance of the public interest in disclosure cannot always be decided on the basis of whether the disclosure of particular information would cause harm, but on certain higher order considerations such as the need to preserve confidentiality of internal discussions
- a decision not to release information may be perverse i.e. would a decision to withhold information because it is not in the public interest to release it, itself result in harm to public safety, the environment or a third party?

You will need to record the answers to these questions and the reasons for those answers. Deciding on the public interest is not simply a matter of adding up the number of relevant factors on each side. You need to decide how important each factor is in the circumstances and go on to make an overall assessment

### Carrying out the test

3. It is worth noting that what is in the public interest is not necessarily the same as that which may be of interest to the public. It may be irrelevant that a matter may be the subject of public curiosity. In most cases it will be relatively straightforward to decide where the balance of the public interest in disclosure lies. However, there will inevitably be cases where the decision is a difficult one.

Applying such a test depends to a high degree on objective judgement and a basic knowledge of the subject matter and its wider impact in the school and possibly wider. Factors that might be taken into account when weighing the public interest include:-

For Disclosure	Against Disclosure
Is disclosure likely to increase access to information held by the school?	Is disclosure likely to distort public reporting or be misleading because it is incomplete?
Is disclosure likely to give the reasons for a decision or allow individuals to understand decisions affecting their lives or assist them in challenging those decisions?	Is premature disclosure likely to prejudice fair scrutiny, or release sensitive issues still on the internal agenda or evolving?
Is disclosure likely to improve the accountability and transparency of the school in the use of public funds and help to show that it obtains value for money?	Is disclosure likely to cause unnecessary public alarm or confusion?
Is disclosure likely to contribute to public debate and assist the understanding of existing or proposed policy?	Is disclosure likely to seriously jeopardise the school's legal or contractual position?
Is disclosure likely to increase public participation in decision-making?	Is disclosure likely to infringe other legislation e.g. Data Protection Act?

Is disclosure likely to increase public participation in political processes in general?	Is disclosure likely to create a controversial precedent on the release of information or impair your ability to obtain information in the future?
Is disclosure likely to bring to light information affecting public safety?	Is disclosure likely to adversely affect the school's proper functioning and discourage openness in expressing opinions?
Is disclosure likely to reduce further enquiries on the topic?	If a large amount of information on the topic has already been made available, would further disclosure shed any more light or serve any useful purpose?

### For Disclosure

4. Where the balance of the public interest lies in disclosure, the enquiry should be dealt with and the information required should be made available. Where the factors are equally-balanced, the decision should **usually** favour disclosure.

### Against Disclosure

5. After carrying out the public interest test if it is decided that the exemption should still apply, proceed to reply to the request.

There will be occasions when it has been decided that a qualified exemption applies but consideration of the public interest test may take longer. In such a case, you must contact the enquirer within 20 working days stating that a particular exemption applies, but including an estimate of the date by which a decision on the public interest test will be made.

This should be within a "reasonable" time - in practice, it is recommended this decision is made and communicated within the 20 days but where not possible it is suggested that no more than 10 working days beyond the 20 days should be allowed.

## Annex D - Sources of further help

### Key Organisations within Freedom of Information

- [The Department for Constitutional Affairs](#)  
The DCA is the lead department responsible for Freedom of Information policy. Their site includes The Lord Chancellor's [Code of Practice on the Discharge of Functions of Public Authorities under Part 1 of the FOI Act](#) (section 45) which provides guidance to public authorities on good practice when handling requests for information.
- [The Information Commissioner](#)  
The Information Commissioner is the independent authority responsible for administering and enforcing the Act, including approval of publication schemes.
- [The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)  
DEFRA have responsibility for the which make specific provision for access to environmental information.

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/opengov/eir/guidance/index.htm>

### Information and Records Management

Good records and information management will underpin Freedom of Information. Parliament recognised this by providing for a [Code of Practice on the Management of Records](#) under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act which sets out the practices public authorities should follow in relation to creating, keeping, managing and disposing of their records.

The National Archives has produced [Model Action Plans](#) for developing records management that conforms to the Code of Practice under section 46. They also provide a range of [standards and guidance](#) on all aspects of records management.

Retention guidelines for schools are available on the Records Management Society of Great Britain website at [www.rms-gb.org.uk](http://www.rms-gb.org.uk)

To help you comply with the the code of practice under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which requires public bodies to have a policy

statement in place on how they manage their records, a sample generic records management policy have been appended at the end of this document.

This booklet has been produced by the Records Management Unit of the Belfast Education and Library board for the information of all schools in its administrative area. For further help and guidance relating to general areas of the FOIA, please contact Liz Johnston at board head quarters.

Telephone 028 9056 4316 or mail to <mailto:lizjo@belb.co.uk>



Records/ Freedom of Information Manager BELB

NOTES:

XXXXXXXXX SCHOOL  
Records Management Policy

The School recognises that the efficient management of its records is necessary to comply with its legal and regulatory obligations and to contribute to the effective overall management of the institution. This document provides the policy framework through which this effective management can be achieved and audited. It covers:

- Scope
- Responsibilities
- Relationships with existing policies

1. Scope of the policy

This policy applies to all records created, received or maintained by staff of the school in the course of carrying out its functions.

1.2 Records are defined as all those documents which facilitate the business carried out by the school and which are subsequently retained (for a set period) to provide evidence of its transactions or activities. These records may be created, received or maintained in hard copy or electronically.

1.3 A small percentage of the school's records will be selected for permanent preservation as part of the school's archives and for historical research.

2 Responsibilities

2.1 The school has a corporate responsibility to maintain its records and record keeping systems in accordance with the regulatory environment. The person with overall responsibility for this policy is the Head of the School.

2.2 The person responsible for records management in the school will give guidance for good records management practice and will promote compliance with this policy so that information will be retrieved easily, appropriately and timely.

2.3 Individual staff and employees must ensure that records for which they are responsible are accurate, and are maintained and disposed of in accordance with the school's records management guidelines.

Relationship with existing policies

This policy has been drawn up within the context of:

- Freedom of Information policy
- Data Protection policy

and with other legislation or regulations (including audit, equal opportunities and ethics) affecting the school.