



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

Decision and reason for decision of Joshua (Position Number 62336362),  
Assistant Director, Information Access Unit,  
Client and Information Access Branch, Department of Veterans' Affairs

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**Applicant:** Mr Alan Ashmore

**Date of primary decision:** 2 April 2024

**FOI reference number (Primary):** LEX 65731

**Internal review decision date:** 10 May 2024

**Internal review reference number:** LEX 66764

**Sent by email:** [foi+request-11192-9985f233@righttoknow.org.au](mailto:foi+request-11192-9985f233@righttoknow.org.au)

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Dear Mr Ashmore,

### **Freedom of Information Internal Review Request: LEX 66764**

#### **Decision**

1. The purpose of this letter is to give you a decision about your request for internal review for the decision made in LEX 65731 under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) (**FOI Act**).
2. I have made the decision to affirm the original decision made by Zoey (Position Number 62214764), Senior Information Access Officer, Information Access Unit, Client and Information Access Branch. That decision was to refuse access to the document within the scope of your request.

## Authority to make decision

- I, Joshua (Position Number 62336362), Assistant Director, Information Access Unit, Client and Information Access Branch, am an officer authorised by the Secretary of the Department to make decisions about access to documents in the possession of the Department in accordance with section 23(1) of the FOI Act.

## Summary

### Original Decision

- On 3 March 2024, you made a request for access to documents in the possession of the Department. Your request sought access to:

*...The MATES program has had the involvement/input from a representative from a number of ESO's. They are referred to as Veterans' Reference Group.*

*I am seeking all interactions by representatives of the MATES program to members of the Veterans' Reference Group, i.e. all briefings, presentations including minutes of all meetings, for the period 1 January 2020 to 29 February 2024...*

- On 5 March 2024, the Department acknowledged your request via email.
- As no extensions of time have been applied to process your request, a decision on your request was due by 02 April 2024.
- On 2 April 2024, the Department made a decision to refuse access on the basis that the documents within the scope of your request do not exist, under the following provisions of the FOI Act:
  - Section 24A Request may be refused if documents cannot be found or do not exist

### Internal Review

- After receiving the Department's decision on 2 April 2024, you contacted the Department on 10 April 2024 requesting an internal review of the handling of this FOI request. Your internal review request was made in the following terms:

*'...I am writing to request an internal review of Department of Veterans' Affairs's handling of my FOI request 'MATES - Veterans' Reference Group'.*

*On 3 March 2024 I lodged the following FOI.*

*'I am seeking all interactions by representatives of the MATES program to members of the Veterans' Reference Group, i.e. all briefings, presentations including minutes of all meetings, for the period 1 January 2020 to 29 February 2024...'*

*This request was refused, "on the basis that the documents do not exist."*

*In a subsequent conversation with one of the Veterans' Reference Group members they advised, "we meet 3 times a year, occasionally 2," and "minutes are taken."*

*It is very concerning that DVA has responded by claiming, "no documents exist," when meetings WERE held and MINUTES TAKEN*

*Should you fail to respond in full and within the prescribed time, you will give me no alternative but to refer this to Senator Shoebridge and Senator Lambie to ask questions of Secretary Frame at the May Senate Estimates. I say this as an earlier request for an Internal Review, of another FOI, DVA never responded and is now with the Information Commissioner.*

*A full history of my FOI request and all correspondence is available on the Internet at this address:*

*[https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/mates\\_veterans\\_reference\\_group...](https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/mates_veterans_reference_group...)*

9. As your application was made within the 30 day of the original decision being made, the internal review decision is valid.
10. As no extension of time have been applied to process this internal review, a decision on your internal review application is due 10 May 2024.

### **Material taken into account**

11. In accordance with section 26(1)(a) of the FOI Act, my findings on any material question of fact, the material on which those findings were based and the reasons for my decision to grant partial access to the document follows
12. I have taken the following material into account in making my decision.
  - the terms of your original request made on 2 March 2024 and the original decision made on this request on 2 April 2024;
  - the records of the searches carried out in processing your original request;
  - the terms of your internal review request made on 10 April 2024;

- the types of information and documents that are in the Department’s possession;
- the content of the document that fall within the scope of your request;
- Sections 3, 11 and 11A of the FOI Act which give the Australian community a legally enforceable right to obtain access to information held by the Government of the Commonwealth. I have also considered the following provisions of the FOI Act relevant to my decision:
  - Section 15 Request for Access
  - Section 24A Request may be refused if documents cannot be found or do not exist
  - Section 54C Internal review – decision on internal review; and
- the Guidelines issued by the Australian Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (**FOI Guidelines**);

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

**Reasons for decision**

14. I have decided to affirm the original decision made on 2 April 2024 to refuse access to the document within the scope of your request, subject to the following provisions in the FOI Act.

***Requests may be refused if documents cannot be found, do not exist or have not been received (section 24A)***

15. Section 24A(1) of the FOI Act provides that an agency or Minister may refuse a request for access to a document if:

- (a) all reasonable steps have been taken to find the document; and
- (b) the agency or Minister is satisfied that the document:
  - (i) is in the agency's or Minister's possession but cannot be found; or
  - (ii) does not exist.

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

- the terms of your request;

- the subject matter of the documents;
- the current and past file management systems and the practice of orderly destruction or removal of documents;
- the Department's record management systems and practices; and
- the individuals and areas within the Department who may be able to assist with the location of the information you seek access to.

17. Despite the reasonable searches undertaken, the Department has been unable to identify documents relevant to your request. A description of the searches undertaken to locate the documents which you are seeking to access is at **Schedule 1**.
18. For these reasons, I am refusing your request for access to documents as described in your request in accordance with section 24A(1)(b)(ii) of the FOI Act, on the basis that the documents do not exist.

### Your rights of review

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

### OAIC review

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

**Online:** [www.oaic.gov.au](http://www.oaic.gov.au)  
**Post:** Director of FOI Dispute Resolution  
 Office of the Australian Information Commissioner  
 GPO Box 5218, Sydney NSW 2001  
**Facsimile:** (02) 9284 9666  
**Phone:** 1300 363 992  
**Email:** [FOIDR@oaic.gov.au](mailto:FOIDR@oaic.gov.au)

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

## Contact us

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

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

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

**Phone:** 1800 838 372

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

Yours sincerely,

**Joshua (Position Number 62336362)**

Assistant Director

Information Access Unit

Client and Information Access Branch

Department of Veterans' Affairs

10 May 2024



## Summary of document searches

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

### 1. Searches undertaken

The Program Delivery Division was engaged to conduct searches to identify any documents which meet your scope.

The searches resulted in zero returns for documents that meet the scope of your request.

The business area indicated that the Veterans' Reference Group is chaired and administered by UniSA, not DVA. DVA is not a member of this group, and so does not receive the meeting documentation.

As a result, I am satisfied that these documents do not exist.



## Schedule of relevant provisions in the FOI Act

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### 3 Objects—general

- (1) The objects of this Act are to give the Australian community access to information held by the Government of the Commonwealth or the Government of Norfolk Island, by:
  - (a) requiring agencies to publish the information; and
  - (b) providing for a right of access to documents.
- (2) The Parliament intends, by these objects, to promote Australia's representative democracy by contributing towards the following:
  - (a) increasing public participation in Government processes, with a view to promoting better informed decision-making;
  - (b) increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the Government's activities.
- (3) The Parliament also intends, by these objects, to increase recognition that information held by the Government is to be managed for public purposes, and is a national resource.
- (4) The Parliament also intends that functions and powers given by this Act are to be performed and exercised, as far as possible, to facilitate and promote public access to information, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost.

### 11 Right of access

- (1) Subject to this Act, every person has a legally enforceable right to obtain access in accordance with this Act to:
  - (a) a document of an agency, other than an exempt document; or
  - (b) an official document of a Minister, other than an exempt document.
- (2) Subject to this Act, a person's right of access is not affected by:
  - (a) any reasons the person gives for seeking access; or
  - (b) the agency's or Minister's belief as to what are his or her reasons for seeking access.

### 11A Access to documents on request

#### *Scope*

- (1) This section applies if:
  - (a) a request is made by a person, in accordance with subsection 15(2), to an agency or Minister for access to:
    - (i) a document of the agency; or
    - (ii) an official document of the Minister; and
  - (b) any charge that, under the regulations, is required to be paid before access is given has been paid.
- (2) This section applies subject to this Act.  
Note: Other provisions of this Act are relevant to decisions about access to documents, for example the following:
  - (a) section 12 (documents otherwise available);
  - (b) section 13 (documents in national institutions);
  - (c) section 15A (personnel records);
  - (d) section 22 (access to edited copies with exempt or irrelevant matter deleted).



*Mandatory access—general rule*

- (3) The agency or Minister must give the person access to the document in accordance with this Act, subject to this section.

*Exemptions and conditional exemptions*

- (4) The agency or Minister is not required by this Act to give the person access to the document at a particular time if, at that time, the document is an exempt document.

Note: Access may be given to an exempt document apart from under this Act, whether or not in response to a request (see section 3A (objects—information or documents otherwise accessible)).

- (5) The agency or Minister must give the person access to the document if it is conditionally exempt at a particular time unless (in the circumstances) access to the document at that time would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest.

Note 1: Division 3 of Part IV provides for when a document is conditionally exempt.

Note 2: A conditionally exempt document is an exempt document if access to the document would, on balance, be contrary to the public interest (see section 31B (exempt documents for the purposes of Part IV)).

Note 3: Section 11B deals with when it is contrary to the public interest to give a person access to the document.

- (6) Despite subsection (5), the agency or Minister is not required to give access to the document at a particular time if, at that time, the document is both:
- (a) a conditionally exempt document; and
  - (b) an exempt document:
    - (i) under Division 2 of Part IV (exemptions); or
    - (ii) within the meaning of paragraph (b) or (c) of the definition of exempt document in subsection 4(1).

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

*Persons may request access*

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

*Requirements for request*

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

**24A Requests may be refused if documents cannot be found, do not exist or have not been received**

*Document lost or non-existent*

- (1) An agency or Minister may refuse a request for access to a document if:
- (a) all reasonable steps have been taken to find the document; and

- (b) the agency or Minister is satisfied that the document:
  - (i) is in the agency's or Minister's possession but cannot be found; or
  - (ii) does not exist.

*Document not received as required by contract*

- (2) An agency may refuse a request for access to a document if:
  - (a) in order to comply with section 6C, the agency has taken contractual measures to ensure that it receives the document; and
  - (b) the agency has not received the document; and
  - (c) the agency has taken all reasonable steps to receive the document in accordance with those contractual measures.

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

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

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

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

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

*Scope*

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

*Decision*

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

*Notice of decision*

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