



**Inspiring**  
**Learners**

MULTI ACADEMY TRUST

# Freedom of Information Policy

*Date published: May 2022*

*Date of next review: May 2025*

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Inspiring Learners Trust is committed to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and to the principles of accountability and the general right of access to information, subject to legal exemptions. This policy outlines our response to the Act and a framework for managing requests.

## 2. Background

2.1 The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (Fol) came fully into force on January 1 2005. Under the Act, any person has a legal right to ask for access to information held by the Trust and its Academies. They are entitled to be told whether the Trust holds the information and to receive a copy, subject to certain exemptions.

2.2 The information which the Trust routinely makes available to the public is included in the FOI Publication Scheme. Requests for other information should be dealt with in accordance with the statutory guidance. While the Act assumes openness, it recognises that certain information is sensitive. There are exemptions to protect this information.

2.3 The Act is fully retrospective so that any past records which the Trust holds are covered by the Act. The DfE has issued a Retention Schedule produced by the Records Management Society of Great Britain, to guide Academies on how long they should keep Academy records. It is an offence to wilfully conceal damage or destroy information in order to avoid responding to an enquiry, so it is important that no records that are the subject of an enquiry are amended or destroyed.

2.4 Requests under Fol can be addressed to anyone in the Trust; all staff need to be aware of the process for dealing with requests. All requests need to be forwarded to:

[admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk](mailto:admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk),

Tyntesfield Primary School, Alma Road, Sale, Cheshire, M33 4HE

2.5 Requests must be made in writing (including email), and should include the enquirer's name and correspondence address and state what information they require. They do not have to mention the Act, nor do they have to say why they want the information. There is a duty to respond to all requests, telling the enquirer whether or not the information is held, and supplying any information that is held, except where exemptions apply. There is no need to collect data in specific response to a Fol enquiry. There is a time limit of twenty (20) days, excluding school holidays, for responding to the request.

## 3. Scope

3.1 The Fol Act joins the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Environmental Information Regulations as legislation under which anyone is entitled to request information from the Trust.

3.2 Requests for personal data are still covered by the GDPR. Individuals can request to see what information the Trust holds about them. This is known as a Subject Access Request, and must be dealt with accordingly.

3.3 Requests for information about anything relating to the environment - such as air, water, land, the natural world or the built environment and any factor or measure affecting these - are covered by the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR).

3.4 They also cover issues relating to Health and Safety. For example, queries about chemicals used in the Trust, its Academies or on Academy land, phone masts, car parks etc. would all be covered by the EIR. Requests under EIR are dealt with in the same way as those under FoIA, but unlike FoIA requests, they do not need to be written and can be verbal. All requests should be directed to [admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk](mailto:admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk) or 0161 973 4877.

3.5 If any element of a request to the Trust includes personal or environmental information, these elements must be dealt with under GDPR or EIR. Any other information is a request under FoIA, and must be dealt with accordingly.

## 4. Obligations and Duties

4.1 The Trust recognises its duty to:

- provide advice and assistance to anyone requesting information. *We will respond to straightforward verbal requests for information, and will help enquirers to put more complex verbal requests into writing so that they can be handled under the Act.*
- tell enquirers whether or not we hold the information they are requesting (the duty to confirm or deny), and provide access to the information we hold in accordance with the procedures laid down in Appendix 1.

## 5. Publication Scheme

5.1 Inspiring Learners Trust has adopted the Model Publication Scheme for Schools approved by the Information Commissioner. The Publication Scheme and the materials it covers are readily available on our website at [www.inspiringlearners.co.uk](http://www.inspiringlearners.co.uk) by request to [admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk](mailto:admin@inspiringlearners.co.uk)

## 6. Dealing with Requests

6.1 Inspiring Learners Trust will respond to all requests in accordance with the procedures laid down in Appendix 1. The Trust will ensure that all staff are aware of the procedures.

## 7. Exemptions

7.1 Certain information is subject to either absolute or qualified exemptions. The exemptions are listed in Appendix 2. When we wish to apply a qualified exemption to a request, we will invoke the public interest test procedures to determine if public interest in applying the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. We will maintain a register of requests where we have refused to supply information, and the reasons for the refusal. The register will be retained for five (5) years.

## **8. Public Interest Test**

8.1 Unless it is in the public interest to withhold information, it has to be released. We will apply the Public Interest Test before any qualified exemptions are applied. For information on applying the Public Interest Test see Appendix 3.

## **9. Charging**

9.1 We reserve the right to refuse to supply information where the cost of doing so exceeds the statutory maximum, currently £450.

## **10. Responsibilities**

10.1 The Chief Executive of the Trust is responsible for ensuring compliance with the FOI.

## **11. Complaints**

11.1 Any comments or complaints will be dealt with through the Trust's normal Complaints Procedure which is published on its website ([www.inspiringlearners.co.uk](http://www.inspiringlearners.co.uk)) and on the websites of all its Academies. This sets out the complaints procedure to be followed and the timelines for dealing with and replying to complaints.

11.2 The Trust will maintain records of all complaints and their outcome. If, on investigation, the Trust's original decision is upheld, then the Trust has a duty to inform the complainant of their right to appeal to the Information Commissioner's office.

Appeals should be made in writing to the Information Commissioner's office.

They can be contacted at:

<http://ico.org.uk/complaints>

Helpline: 0303 123 1113

## Procedure for Dealing with Requests

1. To handle a request for information the Trust will need to ask themselves a series of questions. These are set out below and shown on pages 12 -13 as Process maps.

### Is it a FOI request for information?

2. 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 Trust holds about the enquirer. If the enquiry is a data protection request, follow your existing Trust GDPR guidance.
  - **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 ICO website here or the DEFRA website here.
  - **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?

3. 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 (1); and
  - not be covered by one of the other pieces of legislation.
4. Verbal enquiries are not covered by the FOI Act. Such enquiries 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 FOI.

### Does the Trust hold the information?

5. 'Holding' information means information relating to the business of the Trust and its Academies:
  - the Trust/Academy has created, or
  - the Trust/Academy has received from another body or person, or
  - held by another body on the Trust's/Academy's behalf
6. Information means both hard copy and digital information, including email.

(1) *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.*

7. If the Trust/Academy 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 Trust/Academy might be expected to hold.

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

8. 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?

9. 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 Trust/Academy (2). This however does not provide an excuse for bad records management.

*(2) 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 Trust transfer a request to another body?**

10. If the information is held by another public authority, such as your Local Authority, first check with them 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 the Trust/Academy does hold.

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

11. 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.

12. 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.

## **Does an exemption apply?**

13. The presumption of the legislation is that you will disclose information unless the Act provides a specific reason to withhold it. There are more than twenty exemptions. They are set out in Appendix 2 and are mainly intended to protect sensitive or confidential information.

14. 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. Appendix 3 contains guidance on conducting a public interest test.

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

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

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

16. Personal information requested by third parties is also exempt under the FOI Act where release of that information would breach the GDPR. If a request is made for a document (e.g. Advisory Council minutes) which contains personal information whose release to a third party would breach the GDPR, the document may be issued by blanking out the relevant personal information as set out in the redaction procedure. The procedure for redaction is below (3).

## **How much can we charge?**

17. The Act allows the Trust to charge for providing information. For further information, see Appendix 4.

18. The first step is to determine if the threshold (currently £450) would be exceeded. Staff costs should be calculated at £25 per hour. You can take account of the costs of determining if the information is held, locating and retrieving the information and extracting the information from other documents. You cannot take into account the costs involved in determining whether information is exempt.

19. If a request would cost less than the appropriate limit (currently £450) the Trust can only charge for the cost of informing the applicant whether the information is held and communicating the information to the applicant (e.g. photocopying, printing and postage costs). If a request would cost more than the appropriate limit (£450) the Trust can turn the request down, answer and charge a fee, or answer and waive the fee. If it decides to charge a fee and does not have other powers to do so, it can charge on the basis of the costs outlined in Appendix 4.

20. The Trust will however wish to consider whether calculating the cost of the fee outweighs the cost of providing the information. In summary, we will respond to straightforward enquiries free of charge and charge where the costs are significant.

21. 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. Appendix 4 gives more information on charging.

*(3) 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; iii) 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.*

*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.*

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

22. Compliance with a request must be prompt and certainly within the legally prescribed limit of twenty (20) working days, excluding school holidays. (4) 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 twenty days start time begins when this further information has been received.

23. If a qualified exemption applies and you need more time to consider the public interest test, you should reply within the twenty 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 that normally this should be within ten (10) working days.

24. 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?**

25. If the information is not to be provided, the Trust CEO must ensure that the case has been properly considered and the reasons for refusal are sound. If it is decided to refuse a request, a refusals notice will be sent, which must contain:

- i) the fact that 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 Appendix 4);



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 Appendix 3);

vi) reasons for refusal on vexatious or repeated grounds; and

vii) the internal complaints procedure.

26. 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. Records should be retained for five (5) years.

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

27. Any written expression of dissatisfaction (including email) - even if it does not specifically seek a review – should be handled through the Trust's existing Complaints Procedure.

26. 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 Trust have not been properly followed, the Trust should review procedures to prevent any recurrence. When the outcome upholds the Trust's

*(4) An order to this effect is to be made under section 10(4) of the Act and should take effect from 1 January 2005 original decision or action, the applicant should be informed of their right to appeal to the Information Commissioner. ICO Helpline: 0303 123 111*

### Exemptions

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 Appendix 4)

#### **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 Trust and, if that is the case, to have the information sent (subject to any of the exemptions). This obligation is known as the Trust's 'duty to confirm or deny' that it holds the information. However, the Trust 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 very specialised in their application (such as national security) and would not usually be relevant to schools. There are more than twenty exemptions but the Trust/Academies 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 eight 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 the Trust/Academies are marked with an \***

#### 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 the 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 Ministers.

**7.6 Personal information\*** (Section 40) - see also the qualified exemption part of Section 40. Where enquirers ask to see information about themselves, this is exempt under the Act because it is covered by the GDPR. Consult your existing Trust/Academy Data Protection Policy.

#### 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 EC obligation.

## 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 the Trust/Academies are marked with an \*:**

### 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. 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 or 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, ie the Government, Scottish Administration, Northern Ireland Assembly or the National Assembly of Wales.

### 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.

## 8.7 Investigations and proceedings conducted by public authorities\* (Section 30)

Information is exempt if it has at any time been held by the Trust/Academies 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 Trust which arise out of an investigation carried out for any of the purposes mentioned above.

*(5) Note the following:-*

*• the intended publication does not have to be by the Trust/Academy, it can be by another person or body on behalf of the Trust/Academy*

*• 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*

## 8.9 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 (eg the 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, GDPR powers apply. Where the information concerns a third party, it is exempt if its disclosure would contravene the GDPR, or its 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 GDPR. 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 [Academy] 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 Academy). 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, whilst taking into account any previous exemption applications, each case should be considered separately.

### **Next steps**

11. In all cases, before writing to the enquirer, the person given responsibility for FOI by the Trust (the Trust DPO) will need to ensure that the case has been properly considered and that the reasons for refusal, or public interest test refusal, are sound