



Freedom of Information Policy

Context

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 ('the Act') seeks to ensure a culture of openness and accountability in the running of public bodies. The Act establishes a general right of access for everyone to all types of recorded information held by public authorities, sets out exemptions for certain categories of information, and places a number of obligations on public authorities relating to the provision of information.

The Act also amends, and operates in conjunction with, the Data Protection Act 1998 ('the DPA'), which deals with personal information. Within the Act, specific arrangements are made for the disclosure of information about environmental matters, covered by the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 ('the EIR').

The Act requires that public bodies:

- provide and maintain a Publication Scheme which lists the information which will routinely be made available, identifying how the information can be obtained, and any charges to be paid;
- make any recorded information, subject to some exemptions, available on request to anyone; and
- advise and assist any enquirers, as necessary, to make an effective request.

Once someone has asked for information, the Act makes it a criminal offence for a public authority to alter, damage, erase, destroy or conceal any record containing the requested information, where the intention is to prevent all or part of the information from being released.

The AHRC context

The Act came into full effect for public bodies, including the UK Research Councils, on 1 January 2005, and for the AHRC, when it was established, on 1 April 2005. The Arts and Humanities Research Board was not a public authority within the terms of the Act, but the Arts and Humanities Research Council is, and as such is required to comply with the Act.

The AHRC holds information of many kinds, including that of its predecessor the AHRB, covering:

- information about awards for research or postgraduate study or support for museums and galleries, covering applications, current and completed awards;
- the activities of Council, Boards, Committees, and peer review bodies; and
- the internal operations of the AHRB/AHRC, including policies and procedures, management arrangements, work with other individuals or bodies.

Information is the foundation of the operations of the AHRC and it is essential that information is handled effectively and reliably. The AHRC is committed to operating in accordance with relevant legislation and to ensuring staff are appropriately trained and

supported to achieve this. We regard the lawful and effective handling of information as very important to successful operations, and to ensuring the AHRC's reputation of integrity, openness and accountability.

To this end we fully endorse and adhere to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The AHRC's responsibilities

The AHRC implements the Act in accordance with relevant government standards. In particular it:

- provides, maintains and periodically reviews a publication scheme, to include the maximum information which can reasonably be provided on a routine basis;
- provides information in accordance with the requirements and exemptions of the Act, and within the specified timescales; and
- advises enquirers on requests for information.

In addition the AHRC ensures that:

- there is someone with specific responsibility for compliance with the Act in the organisation;
- members of staff are aware of their responsibilities under the Act;
- members of staff are trained and supported to deal effectively with the requirements of the Act, including the need to deal with information requests, in whole or in part, in accordance with the Act, the DPA and/or EIR as relevant;
- the requirements of the Act are considered in key decision-making processes, such as in the development of policy and procedures and the design and the implementation of information systems; and
- the operations of the organisation are developed to meet the highest standards of openness and accountability consistent with the effective operation of the peer review process on which it is founded.

Rights of access to information

In addition to information available through the Publication Scheme, anyone has the right to access any information held by the AHRC, other than as specified in various exemptions. The information must be requested in writing, which includes via email, and must generally be supplied within 20 working days and in the format requested by the enquirer.

The enquirer is entitled:

- to be told whether information is held; and
- to receive the information.

Some information is exempt from disclosure, including the need to disclose whether or not it exists. There are two categories of exemption:

- Absolute – information does not need to be disclosed nor does its existence need to be disclosed.

- Qualified – disclosure of information has to be decided based on a judgement of the public interest.

The AHRC may charge disbursement costs (e.g. photocopying, printing) but may not charge a fee unless the cost of supplying the information (including finding, analysing, editing, but not including making a public interest judgement) exceeds a reasonable limit. The limit is currently £450, or 2.5 days of one members of staff's time.

The AHRC's Information Services Manager can provide advice for individuals on how to request information from the AHRC. Requests for information should be sent electronically to FOI@AHRC.ac.uk or by post to:

Information Services Manager
Arts and Humanities Research Council
Polaris House
North Star Avenue
SWINDON
SN2 1FL

Feedback and complaints

Individuals who want to comment on the AHRC's Publication Scheme should also contact the Information Services Manager.

Anyone who is not satisfied with the way in which the AHRC deals with a request for information should contact the Information Services Manager or use the AHRC's complaints procedure:

Associate Director of Resources
Arts and Humanities Research Council
Polaris House
North Star Avenue
SWINDON
SN2 1FL

Tel: 01793 41 6000

Email: enquiries@ahrc.ac.uk

If they are still unsatisfied after following this procedure, they are entitled to contact the Information Commissioner:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF.

Helpline: 0303 123 1113

Website: www.ico.gov.uk