



GREENWOOD ACADEMIES TRUST

Freedom of Information Policy

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1. Introduction

The Greenwood Academies Trust is committed to meeting its obligations under 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

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.

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.

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 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.

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 must be forwarded to FOI@greenwoodacademies.org or to FOI, c/o the Data Protection Officer, Greenwood House, Private Road No 2, Colwick Quays Business Park, Colwick Nottingham, NG4 2JY and not dealt with at a local level. 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

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.

Requests for personal data are 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 in line with the relevant policy.

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).

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 Fol, but unlike Fol requests, they do not need to be written and can be verbal.

All requests should be directed to the Data Protection Officer on FOI@greenwoodacademies.org.

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

4. Obligations and Duties

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 law.

5. Publication Scheme

The Greenwood Academies 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.greenwoodacademies.org or by request to the Data Protection Officer at FOI@greenwoodacademies.org.

6. Dealing with Requests

The Greenwood Academies Trust will respond to all requests and ensure that all staff are aware of the procedures.

7. Exemptions

Certain information is subject to either absolute or qualified exemptions. The exemptions are listed in Appendix 1.

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

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.

9. Charging

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

10. Responsibilities

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

The day to day responsibility for compliance with the FOI has been delegated to the Trust's Data Protection Officer (DPO).

11. Complaints

Any comments or complaints will be dealt with through the Trust's normal Complaints Procedure which is published on its website (www.greenwoodacademies.org) 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.

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

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. We will not 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 prematurely¹. 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

¹ 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

- 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.

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 (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 King*** (Section 37)

Information is exempt if it relates to communications with the King, 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, we will 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.