






Ysgol Uwchradd
Prestatyn
High School

Freedom of Information

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Freedom of Information

1 Introduction

Prestatyn High School is committed to transparency in its dealings with the public and fully embraces the aims of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the access provisions of the Data Protection Act. The School will make every effort to meet its obligations under the respective legislation and will regularly review procedures to ensure that it is doing so.

The underlying principle of this policy is that the public have a right to access recorded information held by the school and that the school should seek to promote an open regime regarding access to information, subject to the exemptions contained within the relevant legislation.

2 Background

The FoIA applies to all public authorities and came fully into force on 1st January, 2005. It provides the public with a statutory right of access to recorded information held by authorities, subject to certain exemptions, within twenty working days. The Act is fully retrospective and applies to all information that falls within the scope of the Act, not just information created from 1st January, 2005. Section 19 of the Act also obliges schools to make information pro-actively available in the form of an approved “publication scheme”.

In addition, individuals currently have a statutory right of access to their own “personal data” under the DPA. Individual access rights to personal data are extended by the FoIA through amendments to the access provisions of the DPA.

Each regime contains certain categories of exempt information, where information can be withheld. Any decision to withhold information under an exemption can be referred by the applicant to the Information Commissioner, who can overturn any decision to withhold information. For the purposes of this policy, the “public” is defined as any individual or organisation anywhere in the world and an “information request” refers to any request for recorded information made under the FoIA or DPA.

3 Timescales

- freedom of Information requests should be dealt with within 20 working days, excluding school holidays.
- requests for Data Protection (subject access requests) should be dealt with within 40 calendar days.
- requests for pupil education records should be dealt with within 15 school days.

4 Delegated responsibilities

Overall responsibility for ensuring that Prestatyn High School meets the statutory requirements of the FoIA and DPA lies with the Governors and the Chair of Governors has overall responsibility for information management issues. They have delegated the day-to-day responsibility of implementation to the Head

teacher.

All school staff are responsible for ensuring that they handle requests for information in compliance with the provisions of the various Acts, taking advice from the FoI officer (Andy Hall) where necessary.

5 Scope

This policy applies to all recorded information held by the school that relates to the business of the school. This includes:

information created and held by the PHS.

information created by PHS and held by another organisation on our behalf

information held by PHS provided by third parties, where this relates to a function or business of the school (such as contractual information) and

information held by the school relating to Governors where the information relates to the functions or business of the School

This policy does not cover personal written communications (such as personal emails sent by staff). The School's Data Protection Policy establishes the standards regarding the use of "personal data" (as defined in the DPA).

6 Requesting information

6.1 Procedures

The school has a duty under both the FoIA to provide advice and assistance to applicants making information requests. This includes assisting the applicant in making the application for information. Although no such duty exists under the DPA, the same level of care will be provided.

6.2 Charges

The three information regimes contain different provisions that permit charges to be made for responding to information requests. The Governing Body may charge a fee for complying with requests, as calculated in accordance with FoIA regulations. If a charge is to be made, the school will give written notice to the applicant before supplying the information requested.

The school will only charge for the cost of copying and transmitting information, not for time taken in reaching decisions regarding whether information is covered by an exemption.

Where the school estimates that the cost of locating the information will exceed the statutory threshold of £450, it will consider whether or not to comply with the request. The school is not obliged to comply with such a request but may choose to do so.

The Data Protection Act 1998 permits a charge of up to £10 to be made for responding to requests for personal data. There is a sliding scale of up to £50 for copies of educational records.

6.3 Publication

Section 19 of the FoIA obliges the school to make information pro-actively available in the form of a "publication scheme". This scheme will list categories, or "classes" of information that will routinely be made available

without the need for a specific information request. The school will indicate in the scheme where it wishes to charge for providing particular categories of information.

7 Withholding Information

The Freedom of Information Act contains 23 exemptions whereby information can be withheld. There are two categories; absolute and non-absolute. The school will only withhold information if it falls within the scope of one or more of these exemptions.

Where an absolute exemption applies, the school can automatically withhold the information. However, where the exemption is non-absolute the information can only be withheld where the school decides that the public interest is best served by withholding the information. Certain exemptions also contain a “prejudice test”, which means that the exemption can only be claimed if disclosing the information would prejudice the interest protected by the exemption.

The school will only withhold information covered by the exemption. Complete files or documents will not be withheld just because part of the information is covered by an exemption.

The school will only apply an exemption where it has reason to believe that prejudice might occur to the interest protected by the exemption. In addition, wherever a “public interest” exemption is being considered, the school will only withhold that information which it can demonstrate that the public interest will be best served by withholding. When considering withholding information under a non-absolute exemption the school will take into account whether the release of the information would:

- promote further understanding of current issues of public debate;
- promote the accountability of decisions taken by the school and the spending and allocation of public money;
- bring to light matters of public safety;
- allows the public to understand and challenge decisions made by the school;
- be otherwise in the public interest.

Where information is withheld under an exemption in most cases the reason behind the decision will be made clear to the applicant, citing the exemption under which the information is being withheld. The applicant will also be given details of the right to challenge the decision through the School’s Governing Body and the right of appeal to the Information Commissioner’s Office.

Where a staff member plans to apply an exemption, he/she will consider whether other schools hold similar information. If this is considered likely, he/she may contact the relevant school(s) to ensure that a consistent response is provided to the applicant.

The School will also refuse to supply information under the FoIA, where the request is considered “vexatious” or “repeated”.

Repeat requests

This is where a repeated request is received that is identical or substantially similar

to a previous request from the same person, The school will consider this as a repeated request. The school is not obliged to comply with repeat requests for information, under the FoIA unless a reasonable interval has elapsed between compliance with the previous request and the making of the current request. In reaching a decision about whether an application for access should be categorised, as a repeat request the school will have regard to:

- the time that has elapsed since the previous request
- whether the request is identical or substantially similar to the previous request
- whether any relevant, new information has been generated since the previous request
- a 'reasonable interval' will be deemed to be 120 working days

Where a request is refused because it is considered repeated, the school will issue a written notice within 20 working days of the request. The school will send out a standard letter stating that the request has been declined on the grounds that it is repeated. The applicant will receive information about the school's Internal Review Process. Details of the rights of appeal to the Information Commissioner will also be enclosed.

Where a notice has previously been issued to the applicant that the request is repeated, the school will not issue a further notice.

Vexatious requests

The school is not obliged to comply with vexatious requests under the FoIA.

The school will apply the term 'vexatious' fairly and consistently. In determining whether a request should be refused because it is vexatious the school will consider all the circumstances of the request, including:

- the context and history of requests submitted by an applicant
- repeat requests submitted by an applicant
- whether the request is likely to cause unjustified distress, disruption or irritation
- whether the request could fairly be seen as obsessive?
- whether complying with the request imposes a significant burden?
- whether an applicant is habitually and persistently submitting requests where there appears to be no reasonable grounds for them to do so
- whether there is a strong likelihood that such requests are being made to intentionally cause harassment, cause distress to staff, divert resources or to disrupt the proper workings of the school.

The school is aware that the term 'vexatious' should be applied to the activities of the applicant and not to their nature or attitude. The school will assess whether a request is vexatious based on the type of information requested and not on the identity of the applicant.

Where a request is refused on the grounds that it is deemed to be vexatious, a written notice from the school will be issued within 20 working days of receipt of the request.

The school will send out a standard letter stating that the request has been declined on the grounds that it is vexatious. The applicant will be notified of the internal procedures for dealing with a complaint. Details of the rights of appeal to the Information Commissioner will also be enclosed.

Where a notice has previously been issued to inform the applicant that the request has been classified as vexatious, the school will neither acknowledge nor answer subsequent requests that are made on the same or similar subject.

Where a request is received and there is a chance it is merely vague rather than vexatious due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the applicant, the school will clarify with the applicant what is actually required. This may be done by telephone or by providing a written request for clarification.

8 Releasing a third party's information

Where, in response to a request, information belonging to a third party (either an individual or other organisation) has to be considered for release, the staff member that received the request will seek input from the FoI officer prior to the release of the information.

The release of third party information will be considered carefully to prevent actions for breach of confidence or, in the case of living individuals, breaches of the DPA. FoIA permit information to be withheld when its release would breach the provisions of the DPA.

When the requested information relates to a living individual and amounts to "personal data" as defined in the DPA, its disclosure could breach the DPA. Therefore the release of third party personal information relating to living individuals will be considered in accordance with the data protection principles and, in particular, the "third party" provisions of the DPA.

Where appropriate, the school will contact the individual to ask for permission to disclose the information. If consent is not obtained, either because it was not considered appropriate to approach the third party or the third party could not be contacted or consent is refused. The school will then consider if it is reasonable to disclose the information, taking into account:

- any duty of confidentiality owed to the third party
- the steps taken to seek consent
- whether the third party is able to give consent and
- any express refusal of consent

The decision to disclose third party information will also take into account the impact of disclosure on the third party, relative to the impact on the applicant of withholding the information. Where the third party has been acting in an official, rather than private capacity, the school will be minded to disclose the information, although decisions will be made on a case by case basis.

Where the information relates to a staff member, the provisions of the DPA will still apply in many circumstances but the nature of the information will influence the school's decision whether to release the information. Where the information relates to a matter clearly private to the individual, e.g. a disciplinary hearing, the information will almost certainly be withheld. However, where the information relates to the member of staff acting in their official capacity, e.g. an expenses claim, the information will normally be released. The exemption relating to the release of a third party's personal data will not be used to withhold information about administrative decisions taken by the school.

As the DPA only relates to living individuals, the exemption relating to Data Protection under both the FoIA will not apply to information held about the deceased. Where the request might be controversial, the staff member will seek input from the FoI officer who will take advice from the Governing Body where necessary.

Where the third party is an organisation, rather than an individual, the provisions of DPA 1998 will not apply. The school will consider consulting the third party concerning the release of their information where:

the views of the third party may assist the school to decide whether an exemption under the Act applies to the information and
in the event of the public interest test being applied, where the views of the third party may assist the school to make a decision relating to where the public interest lies

Consultation will not be undertaken where:

- the school will not be disclosing the information due to some valid reason under the Act
- the school is satisfied that no exemption applies to the information and therefore cannot be withheld and
- the views of the third party will have no effect on the decision e.g. where there is other legislation preventing disclosure

Where input from a third party is required, the response time for the request remains the same. Therefore it will be made clear to the third party at the outset that they have a limited time for their views to be provided and that where responses are not immediate, the decision to disclose may have to be made without their input in order for the school to comply with the statutory time limits dictated by the legislation.

The school will endeavour to inform individuals and organisations submitting information that the information might be released following an information request and, where appropriate, will provide the supplier of the information opportunity to request confidentiality or supply reasons as to why the information should be treated confidentially.

9 Information held within contracts with Prestatyn High School

Any contractual information, or information obtained from organisations during the tendering process, held by the school are subject to the provisions of the FoIA. Whenever the school enters into contracts, it will seek to exclude contractual terms forbidding the disclosure of information beyond the restrictions contained in the legislation. A standard form of wording will be included in contracts to cover the impact of FoIA in relation to the provision of information held in contracts.

The school can withhold contractual information where its disclosure under the FoIA could be treated as actionable breach of confidence. Where the school intends to include non-disclosure provisions in a contract, it will agree with the contractor a schedule of the contract that clearly states which information should not be disclosed.

The school will only agree to enter into confidentiality clauses where the information is confidential in nature and that it is confident that the decision to restrict access to the information could be justified to the Information Commissioner.

Where information is not covered by the exemption relating to information accepted in confidence, a further exemption specifically under FoIA may be relevant, relating to commercial interests. This exemption is subject to a “public interest” test. Whenever the school has to consider the release of such information, it will contact the relevant organisation to obtain its opinions on the release of the information and any exemptions they may think relevant. However, the school will make the final decision relating to the disclosure of the information.

The school can also withhold information contained in contracts where any of the other exemptions listed in the FoIA are appropriate, although information will only be withheld in line with the School’s policy on the use of exemptions. All future contracts should contain a clause obliging contractors to co-operate fully and in a timely manner where assistance is requested in responding to an FoIA request.

10 Complaints procedure

Whenever the school withholds information under an exemption, or for any other reason, it will inform the applicant of their right to complain about the decision through the school’s complaints procedure and of the right of appeal to the Information Commissioner. Any complaint received will be dealt with in accordance with the school’s complaints procedure as detailed in its Complaints Policy. If the result of the complaints is that any decision to withhold information be overturned, this information will be supplied as soon as it is possible. If the decision to refuse disclosure is upheld during the complaint procedure and the applicant is still dissatisfied, they will be made aware of their right to apply for a review to the Information Commissioner at:

The Information Commissioner
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF
Tel No: 01625 545700

11 Requests made under the Data Protection Act

The Data Protection Act entitles an individual to his or her ‘personal data’, as defined in that Act, where the information is held on an automated system, such as a computer and also manual files, where they amount to what the DPA describes as an “accessible record” or in a structured filing system, defined in the DPA as a “relevant filing system”.

The parental right to receive information pertaining to the “educational record” of their child should continue to be administered under the Education (Pupil Information) Regulations 2000. Whenever a request for personal data is received and is not covered by these regulations, the request will be administered in

accordance with the relevant section of the school's FoIA operating procedures.

Whenever a request is made under the DPA for personal data, the school will provide the applicant with the relevant information contained within files relating to that individual that is accessible under both the DPA and FoIA, subject to any exemptions.

Where it is not possible to remove third party information without rendering the response useless to the individual, the provision of third party information will be considered in line with DPA act.

12 Illegal actions

It is a criminal offence under any of the three information regimes for members of staff to alter, deface or remove any record (including e-mails) following receipt of an information request. Both the FoIA and EIR contain specific provisions to make such action a criminal offence.