



National Audit Office

The UK's independent public spending
watchdog

Switchboard +44 (0)207 798 7000
Direct Line +44 (0)207 798 7264
Email FOI@nao.org.uk

Reference FOI-1675
Date 18 December 2023

Dear

CIVIL SERVICE WORKFORCE DATA COLLECTED BY THE NAO IN 2023

Thank you for your email request of 30 November 2023 asking for the data that was collected through a survey from each of the main government departments, as part of the NAO report [Civil service workforce: Recruitment, pay and performance management](#). Your request has been considered under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

The FOIA provides a legal right of access to recorded information held by a public authority, but it is subject to certain exemptions that may apply. While we hold information in scope of your request, we consider it to be exempt from disclosure under Section 33 (public audit functions) of the FOIA.

Your original request has been reproduced in **Annex A** for your reference. **Annex B** provides a full explanation of the Section 33 exemption, how it applies to your request and our consideration of the public interest test.

I am sorry we are not able to share the information that you requested on this occasion. **Annex C** sets out the steps you may wish to take if you are not satisfied with the way we have handled your request for information under FOIA.

Yours sincerely,

NAO FOI Team



Annex A

Request for the data that was collected from each government department on 'civil service recruitment':

(Your request is in italics below)

Under the Freedom of Information Act, please could I request the following information, with regards to the report ['Civil service workforce: Recruitment, pay and performance management'](#), published on 29 November 2023:

The data that was collected from each government department on 'civil service recruitment' via the NAO's departmental survey (see page 55, subsections 8 and 9, reproduced below).

8. We surveyed the 16 main government departments in place on 1 January 2023 on their recruitment, pay and performance management processes for permanent staff who are civil servants. The survey took the form of a written questionnaire and the response rate was 100%.

*9. We asked departments to provide information on their **civil service recruitment**, pay and performance management processes, as well as related data and metrics (for example, recruitment costs and times). The information requested was based on HR service specifications contained in the government's HR functional standard and other relevant guidance. We asked for information relating to structures and processes in departments as at 1 January 2023, to avoid any issues arising from machinery of government changes announced in February 2023.*

NAO response:

We have searched our records and can confirm that we hold information falling within the scope of your request but consider this information exempt from disclosure. The following exemptions apply: Section 33 (public audit functions). Please see **Annex B** below for details of this exemption.

Annex B

This annex sets out the exemption that we have applied to your request.

Section 33 Freedom of Information Act 2000 – Public Audit

Section 33 of the FOIA provides that:

(1) This section applies to any public authority which has functions in relation to -

(a) the audit of the accounts of other public authorities, or

(b) the examination of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which other public authorities use their resources in discharging their functions.

(2) Information held by a public authority to which this section applies is exempt information if its disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the exercise of any of the authority's functions in relation to any of the matters referred to in subsection (1).

Reasons why we have applied the Section 33 exemption:

We have applied Section 33 exemption to the information we hold in the scope of your request, namely the data that was collected from the 16 individual government departments as part of the departmental survey. The survey was carried out for the NAO report published on the 29th of November 2023. This information was provided by each of the individual departments on the understanding it would not be shared beyond the NAO, to allow us to report on the scope for improved departmental efficiency in recruitment, pay and performance management. We believe that disclosing the information under FOIA would be likely to prejudice the effective performance of our public audit functions going forward and therefore we have applied the Section 33 exemption to your request.

The audit process is enhanced significantly by audited bodies or third-party entities responding promptly to information requests and/or volunteering information to support a constructive, timely and effective audit. Disclosure by the NAO of sensitive information beyond that required for audit reporting purposes would impair the provision of audit information in the future. It would reduce, if not cut off, critical information flows. It would also incentivise audited bodies to take a minimalist approach to NAO information requests or, in the case of bodies whose engagement is optional, serve to discourage such information sharing altogether.

An effective, efficient audit is supported through an open and constructive approach between the NAO and the audited body. As such it is critically important that we have a safe space to gather information and knowledge and can engage in a free and frank way with audited bodies. The release of this information would remove this safe space - precipitating a backdrop of increased challenge and procedure around requests for audit information. This would require the NAO to formally assert our statutory access rights more frequently and potentially seek to enforce them, leading to significant delay, escalation of issues and increased audit costs.

Section 17(3) of the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 places a duty on the C&AG to "aim to carry out functions effectively and cost effectively". Given the above factors, we consider that our disclosure of the information requested would be at odds with this statutory requirement – it would serve to undermine the effectiveness and increase the cost of the C&AG's public audit functions.

For the reasons set out above, we consider it appropriate to apply the public audit exemption available under Section 33(2) of the FOIA.

Reasons why the public interest in maintaining the exclusion outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information in this case:

The NAO is independent of government and scrutinises public spending on behalf of Parliament. Our work serves the public interest by providing transparency on matters of public interest and driving improvement in the use of public resources.

We recognise there is a public interest in knowing the use of public money is subject to appropriate levels of accountability and transparency. However, we consider the disclosure of the specific information we have withheld would be likely to reduce the effectiveness of the audit process for the reasons set out above.

The NAO's work puts information into the public domain and helps Parliament hold government to account. In our view, the balance of public interest rests with the NAO being able to deliver an effective and efficient public audit function and report our findings in public. Consequently, given the negative impact that would result from disclosure, we consider it appropriate to maintain the Section 33 public audit exemption.

Annex C

Statement of Policy

Our policy is to respond to requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 as helpfully and promptly as possible, having regard to the principles set out in the Act. I therefore hope you are happy with the way we have handled your request. If you are not, then you should take the following steps.

In the first instance, within 40 working days, write to the National Audit Office Freedom of Information (FOI) Team at FOI@nao.org.uk or by post to:

FOI Team, Green 2, National Audit Office, 157-197 Buckingham Palace Road, London, SW1W 9SP

The FOI and Correspondence Manager will arrange a review, which will be conducted by a senior member of staff who was not involved in decisions relating to your original request. Once the review has been completed, we will write informing you of the outcome.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The primary way of escalating your concerns to the Information Commissioner is at: www.ico.org.uk/foicomplaints

Alternatively, you can contact the ICO at <https://ico.org.uk/> or Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF.