What are the principles behind the Freedom of Information Act?

The main principle behind freedom of information legislation is that people have a right to know about the activities of public authorities, unless there is a good reason for them not to. This is sometimes described as a presumption or assumption in favour of disclosure. The Act is also sometimes described as purpose and applicant blind.

This means that:

* everybody has a right to access official information. Disclosure of information should be the default – in other words, information should be kept private only when there is a good reason and it is permitted by the Act;
* an applicant (requester) does not need to give you a reason for wanting the information. On the contrary, you must justify refusing them information;
* you must treat all requests for information equally, except under some circumstances relating to vexatious requests and personal data (see [When can we refuse a request?](https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-freedom-of-information/refusing-a-request/) for details on these). The information someone can get under the Act should not be affected by who they are. You should treat all requesters equally, whether they are journalists, local residents, public authority employees, or foreign researchers; and
* because you should treat all requesters equally, you should only disclose information under the Act if you would disclose it to anyone else who asked. In other words, you should consider any information you release under the Act as if it were being released to the world at large.

What is ‘personal information’?

Personal information is information that identifies you or could identify you. Your name and address are obvious examples. In some cases, your date of birth and post code may be enough to identify you. Personal information can also include medical records, bank account details, photographs, videos, and even information about your opinions and where you work – basically, any information where you are reasonably identifiable.

The Privacy Act and the FOI Act define 'personal information' in the same way:

Personal information means information or an opinion about an identified individual, or an individual who is reasonably identifiable:

1. whether the information is true or not and
2. whether the information or opinion is recorded in a material form or not.