

Tom Goldsmith
Committee Clerk
Justice Committee
7 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA

Dear Mr Goldsmith,

4 May 2012

I am writing to voice concerns about the government's proposal to introduce fees for applications for information under the Freedom of Information Act 1998 (FOI).

As you are no doubt aware Public Concern at Work is an independent charity and legal advice centre providing confidential advice for individuals with whistleblowing dilemmas, professional support to organisations and policy advice to Government and Members of Parliament.

In recent years we have used FOI to obtain vital information for our policy research and in particular two research projects of some importance. The first is our research paper 'Whistleblowing in Whitehall' which has been noted in the Public Administration Select Committee's report 'Leaks and Whistleblowing in Whitehall'. The second report is 'Whistleblowing, Risk and Regulation' looking at the way regulators respond to whistleblowing concerns raised through the Employment Tribunal referral system.

Both reports used FOI to obtain important information from private sector bodies. In the case of our report on 'Whistleblowing in Whitehall' we wanted to analyse the different Department's whistleblowing policies. We did first try to obtain copies in an informal manner by making contact with the Department and asking if the policy could be forwarded to us. This request was refused and we were told by the Departments they would only respond via FOI systems. In the end we had to make 21 individual requests under FOI to various Whitehall departments. Under the proposed fee structure this would have totaled £315. For the regulatory referral paper we needed to make 45 separate FOI requests this would total £675.

We are deeply concerned that if a fee is introduced for each of these requests, this would hamper our public policy research especially, where the prevailing attitude among public sector bodies is that they will only communicate information via FOI, even for simple requests.

Yours sincerely,

Cathy James,
Chief Executive
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