



Ref: FOI2023-043

[REDACTED]

7th December 2023

Dear [REDACTED]

Further to our previous correspondence regarding your request for the following information:

Augmented reality and virtual reality training is the digital simulation of lifelike scenarios for training purposes. Trainees enter a 360°, active learning environment, experiencing sights and sounds that dissolve the barrier between virtual and actual reality. Trainees look, speak, and move about freely in a 3D virtual setting, interacting with simulated real-world tools, machinery, and other trainees and instructors.

- 1. What training have you delivered using AR/VR technology?*
- 2. Are you currently engaging and talking with AR/VR suppliers, and if so who?*
- 3. Which suppliers have you used for AR/VR training and what was their spend in calendar year 2023 to date?*
- 4. What is the percentage split of AR/VR training spend between training delivered to own staff versus training delivered to users of government/public services in calendar year 2023 to date?*
- 5. How much budget have you allocated for AR/VR training for 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 calendar year?*
- 6. What public sector procurement route have you used to procure AR/VR technology from Jan 2021 to date?*
- 7. What public sector procurement route have you used to procure AR/VR design services of education training content from Jan 2021 to date?*

Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the Act).

We can confirm that the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) holds all of the information in scope of your request.

However, we are withholding the information under sections 24(1), 26(1), 40(1) and 43 (2) of the FOI Act.

Sections 24(1), 26(1) and 43(2) are qualified exemptions subject to a Public Interest Test which means that the information requested can only be withheld if the public interest in doing so outweighs the public interest in disclosure. We can confirm that a PIT has been carried out and has concluded that the information should be withheld in full.

We will now set out arguments for and against disclosure in terms of the public interest, along with the reasons for our conclusion.



Exemption 24(1) Safeguarding National Security:

Section 24(1) applies where withholding the information is “required for the purposes of safeguarding national security”. The Act makes a presumption towards disclosure wherever possible and includes a general obligation to promote openness and transparency, and we recognise that there is some public interest in transparency around public spending; in public authorities being held to account for their decisions.

However, there is a strong public interest in safeguarding national security and in withholding any information that might prejudice it. Providing the requested information would expose AWE’s training methods and suppliers, indirectly impinging on the national security of the United Kingdom (UK). If AWE were to disclose the requested data, it would be highly likely to result in AWE and its assets becoming vulnerable to cyber-attacks instigated by unfriendly actors, both within and external to the UK.

If AWE’s systems were to be accessed inappropriately it would provide a better understanding of the UK’s capabilities and potential vulnerabilities in relation to the nuclear deterrent. The very nature of our deterrent requires information concerning its manufacturing systems, security, scope, scale and potential vulnerability to be withheld so that it remains effective in its role as a strategic defensive weapon.

Taking these factors into consideration, the PIT finds that the benefit of promoting openness and transparency relating to public spending must be weighed against the threat to national security that such a release would pose. There is no wider public interest in making the nuclear deterrent more vulnerable. Therefore, the public interest lies strongly in this information being withheld.

Exemption 26(1) Defence:

Section 26(1) states that information is exempt if its disclosure under the Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice (a) the defence of the British Islands or of any colony, or (b) the capability, effectiveness or security of any relevant forces.

The factors for release are similar to those provided for the use of section 24 in as much as release of the information would provide greater openness and transparency in relation to public spending and public authorities being held to account for their decisions.

The very nature of the nuclear deterrent however requires information on the IT support infrastructure that underpins the programme to be withheld to enable it to remain effective in its role as a strategic defensive weapon. By extension, any undermining of the capability, credibility and effectiveness of our defence nuclear programmes undermine the UK’s nuclear deterrent which is the apex of the UK’s national security strategy. Its credibility is vital to it remaining an effective capability. There is a high likelihood that release of this information would provide the ability to an adversary to access information that underpins the nuclear deterrent programme, consequently prejudicing the capability and effectiveness of the UK’s nuclear deterrent and prejudicing the defence of the UK.

Therefore, the PIT falls in favour of withholding the requested information.



Exemption 43(2) Commercial Interests:

Section 43(2) provides that information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the public authority holding it). Under the prejudice test we have to consider if disclosure of this information would, or would be likely to, prejudice our commercial interests or the commercial interests of a third party.

Consideration is also given to the harm disclosing this information would be likely to cause, combined with other information already in the public domain or possibly released at a future date. While there is public interest in promoting openness and transparency and the possibility of stimulating more competition and lower prices.

Existing AR/VR contracts that were negotiated before 1st July 2021 (the date AWE became an NDPB) consequently there is a strong public interest in safeguarding their details as the suppliers involved had an expectation of confidentiality. Disclosure may result in suppliers withdrawing from their contracts with AWE, which, as well as prejudicing both AWE's and the third party's commercial interests, would have a direct impact of the deliverability timeline and overall costs of the Continuous at Sea Deterrent, (CASD). The fact that there are a limited number of AR/VR suppliers in this market also means disclosure of our supplier details would be likely to prejudice AWE's commercial interests.

Therefore, after due consideration, the public interest in this case lies with withholding the information in full.

Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications. If you have any queries regarding the content of this letter, please contact this office in the first instance.

If you are unhappy with the way your request has been handled you have a right to request an internal review within 40 days of receiving this letter, by writing to information.requests@awe.co.uk or our postal address: Information Requests Team, AWE Aldermaston, Reading, RG7 4PR. If you are still unhappy after an internal review has been completed, under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 you have the right to take your complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office. Please note the Commissioner will generally not consider a complaint until you have exhausted AWE's internal complaints process.

Yours sincerely,

AWE Information Requests Team