

Ref: FOI2026-057

02 September 2025

Dear Mr [REDACTED],

We refer to your request for the following information:

"I am writing to submit a new request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not the individual who submitted FOI reference FOI2025-074, nor am I associated with that requester. I recently came across AWE's published response to that request and, having read it with interest, I noted that AWE advised that it had been unable to locate the requested briefing concerning reports of a "black mist" seen in South Australia following Operation Totem I on 14 October 1953.

My request does not seek reconsideration of that response, nor am I simply repeating the earlier request. Rather, the published response raises a number of questions concerning the searches undertaken, the management of historical records, and the existence of administrative records relating to the requested briefing. I therefore wish to make the following new request.

Where possible, I would ask that each item be considered separately and independently. If any part of the request is considered exempt, I respectfully request that any reasonably severable information be disclosed and that partial disclosure be considered where appropriate.

1. Searches Undertaken

Please provide the recorded information describing the searches undertaken to locate the briefing referred to in FOI2025-074.

This includes, where held:

- the electronic systems searched;*
- document management systems searched;*
- archive catalogues searched;*
- physical archives searched;*
- off-site storage searched;*
- paper file collections searched;*
- databases searched;*
- repositories searched;*
- the dates on which searches were conducted;*
- the search terms used;*
- the business areas consulted;*
- the departments consulted;*
- the individuals or roles asked to conduct searches; and*

- any documented search strategy, search notes or search reports.

2. Search Scope

Please provide any recorded information identifying:

- whether searches were limited to documents bearing the exact date of 9 May 1980;*
- whether searches included documents created shortly before or after that date;*
- whether searches included alternative titles;*
- whether searches included draft documents;*
- whether searches included briefing notes, memoranda, reports, file notes, correspondence or other document types;*
- whether searches included archived or superseded records; and*
- whether searches included metadata or archive indexes where the document itself was not located.*

3. Search Terminology

Please provide any recorded information identifying the search terms or keywords used.

In particular, please identify whether searches included terms such as:

- Black Mist;*
- Black Cloud;*
- Operation Totem;*
- Totem I;*
- Totem One;*
- Emu Field;*
- South Australia;*
- radioactive cloud;*
- fallout;*
- briefing;*
- memorandum;*
- report;*
- note; or*
- any similar terminology.*

4. Records Management

Please provide any recorded information concerning the management of records relating to this subject, including:

- records retention schedules;*
- disposal schedules;*
- archive policies;*
- records management guidance;*
- transfer policies;*
- policies governing historical technical reports;*

- policies governing briefing papers prepared during 1980; and
- policies relating to the preservation or disposal of historical scientific records.

5. Archive and Catalogue Records

If the requested briefing itself has not been located, please provide any recorded information identifying its existence, including:

- archive catalogue entries;
- register entries;
- accession records;
- archive indexes;
- file inventories;
- document registers;
- registry cards;
- transfer records;
- archive reference numbers;
- metadata records; or
- any other catalogue or inventory entries describing the document.

6. Metadata

If metadata exists for the requested briefing, or for records believed to correspond to it, please provide the recorded metadata, including where held:

- document title;
- file name;
- document reference number;
- document identifier;
- creation date;
- modification date;
- author;
- originating department;
- document status;
- archive location;
- records management identifier;
- retention classification;
- disposal status;
- archive transfer details; and
- any other recorded metadata ordinarily maintained for historical documents.

7. Related Records

Irrespective of whether the specific briefing requested in FOI2025-074 has been located, please identify any recorded information held by AWE relating to reports of a "black mist" or similar atmospheric phenomenon associated with Operation Totem I.

Without limiting the scope of this request, this includes:

- briefing papers;
- memoranda;
- reports;
- technical notes;
- scientific assessments;
- investigation reports;
- correspondence;
- meeting minutes;
- file notes;
- laboratory records;
- environmental monitoring reports;
- health physics records;
- radiological assessments; and
- records discussing alleged observations of black mist, black clouds, unusual atmospheric conditions or suspected fallout associated with Operation Totem I.

At this stage I am requesting identification of such records rather than necessarily copies of every document.

8. Similar Records

Please provide a schedule identifying any records held concerning:

- reports of fallout following Operation Totem I;
- environmental effects of Operation Totem I;
- observations of unusual atmospheric phenomena following Operation Totem I;
- investigations into alleged black mist reports;
- radiological monitoring following Operation Totem I; and
- any reviews or reassessments undertaken after the original events.

For each record identified, where reasonably practicable, please provide:

- the title;
- date;
- document type;
- current status (active, archived, superseded etc.); and
- whether it remains held by AWE.

9. Advice and Assistance

The published response stated that AWE was unable to provide meaningful advice and assistance under section 16 of the Freedom of Information Act.

Please provide any recorded information explaining why AWE considered that meaningful advice and assistance could not be provided in relation to that request."

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

We can advise that your request is being treated as burdensome to the organisation, by virtue of **S14(1)** of the Act, which is designed to protect public authorities by allowing them to refuse any requests which have the potential to cause a disproportionate or unjustified level of disruption, irritation, or distress.

The ICO guidance can be found here:

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi/freedom-of-information-and-environmental-information-regulations/section-14-dealing-with-vexatious-requests/how-do-we-deal-with-a-single-burdensome-request/>.

We acknowledge that the threshold for engaging section 14 is high. In this case, the request in question meets the criteria for the following reasons:

Whilst framed as a request concerning FOI2025-074, the request extends significantly beyond the scope of that case and seeks a broad range of information relating to:

- The searches undertaken during the handling of a previous FOI request;
- Records management and archival processes spanning multiple decades;
- Metadata and catalogue information relating to records that may or may not exist;
- Identification of any records held concerning Operation Totem I and alleged "black mist" reports;
- Schedules of potentially related records, including environmental, scientific, radiological and historical material; and
- Internal administrative information concerning the provision of advice and assistance.

To determine whether information falling within scope is held would require searches across a wide range of current and historical information repositories, electronic systems, archive catalogues, legacy records collections and records management holdings. Any potentially relevant material would then require extensive review to establish relevance, identify duplication, assess context, and determine whether exemptions apply.

The request is not confined to a specific document or clearly defined records set. Rather, it seeks information about searches, records management arrangements, metadata, archive holdings and any related records. The breadth of the request substantially increases the volume of material which would need to be examined.

In addition, much of the information sought is inherently administrative in nature and would require the reconstruction of search activity and consideration of numerous records management and archival sources.

Any information identified would require detailed review by subject matter experts, records specialists and information rights staff before a response could be provided.

AWE considers that the cumulative burden imposed by locating, retrieving, reviewing and assessing the information potentially falling within scope would be grossly disproportionate to the value of the request

and would place an unjustified strain on limited specialist resources. We therefore consider that compliance would result in a disproportionate and unjustified level of disruption to the organisation and that the request meets the threshold for engagement of Section 14(1).

Given these factors, engaging Section 14 is justified to prevent the misuse of FOIA and to protect the authority's resources from being disproportionately consumed by this request.

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