

Freedom of Information

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Headlines

- US Supreme Court expands application of exemption for business data under Freedom of Information Act, p.18
- Council’s FOI review finds significant weaknesses, p.19

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Councils ignoring public right to audit accounts, claims

Local authorities are refusing to allow the public to access key information on how their money is being spent, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

The Bureau has been carrying out an investigation into the local government funding crisis, focusing on transparency and accessibility of data concerning local authority finances, over the past 18 months.

The Bureau said its results show that authorities are redacting documents to ‘protect com-

mercial interests’, setting up council-owned companies that are removed from scrutiny and failing to respond to members of the public who try to exercise their right to inspect council finances.

When they initially sought information, Bureau local reporters discovered differences in the data released by councils, and major errors in the data published by the government about their financial sustainability. The reporters used the Freedom of Information Act to fill some of the gaps, but some coun-

cils failed to reply or redacted a lot of information from their responses.

In addition to using FOI, the Bureau sought to access information using the Local Audit and Accountability Act, which allows for inspections of local authority accounts and related documents during a set period each year. To test the law, volunteers submitted requests to nearly 50 local authorities asking to inspect documents — such as contracts and invoices — relating to the

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UK to release ‘pay to slay’ audits after Freedom of Information request

The branch of the government responsible for administering overseas aid will disclose audit reports regarding aid money allegedly used to pay salaries to convicted terrorists, after abandoning its appeal against a ruling by Information Commissioner Elizabeth Denham.

In July 2018, UK Lawyers for Israel (‘UKLFI’), a British volunteer organisation of lawyers who support Israel, submitted a Freedom of Information Act

request to the Department for International Development (‘DFID’) for copies of audit reports for the Palestinian Recovery and Development Programme. The programme is a World Bank multi-donor trust fund for the Palestinian Authority (‘PA’). The DFID refused to release the information, citing among other reasons the risk of potential harm diplomatic relations between the United Kingdom and the PA.

According to UKLFI, “various countries, including the UK, paid large sums of money into the World Bank’s Palestinian Recovery and Development Program Multi Donor Trust Fund, which were then transferred to the Palestinian Authority’s Central Treasury Account.” According to the organisation, “this is the account from which payments were made to convicted terrorists, rewarding them for their

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