

Mr White
WhatDoTheyKnow.com

12 June 2009

Dear Mr White

Freedom of Information request – VTR 923

Thank you for your Freedom of Information (Fol) request of 18 May which follows up the one you made earlier - our reference for that earlier request is VTR 790.

Your latest e-mail questions the substance of the Department's response to your earlier request. You now seek "a correct and full response". You indicate, however, that you do not want your challenge to our initial reply to be treated as an "internal review".

Where we receive a reply to an earlier Fol response making clear that the requester does not accept the previous decision on their request it is customary to treat that complaint as a request for an internal review.

We have therefore re-considered your original request anew taking into account the comments made in your complaint of 18 May.

For clarity your initial request was as follows:--

Please provide the following information, broken down by Business year for the last 10 business years and Benefit claimed.

1. How many Manually held claimant files are lost or believed lost each year?
2. How many files that are believed lost or missing are recovered?
- 3 What is the mean time for recovery of a missing or presumed lost file from DWP storage facilities?

Background

The Department for Work and Pensions is a very large Government Department with a significant number of delivery businesses spread geographically across Great Britain. To give you a sense of the scale of the Department's operations Jobcentre Plus staff conduct over 45,000 adviser interviews each working day; administer 16,000 new benefit claims; receive over 10,000 job vacancies and oversee the Jobcentre Plus website which receives around 1 million job searches daily.

In addition the Pension Disability and Carers Service process 3,000 State Pension applications each working day and 3,000 new or renewal claims to Disability Benefits. The Department also answers over 300,000 telephone calls to its help-lines each working day.

I provide this background to illustrate the nature and size of the Department's business and that inevitably there are a large number of claimant files created daily and even larger numbers in remote storage.

Your request seeks detailed information relating to lost/found claimant files, by benefit claimed, spanning a decade. Given the explanation above you will understand that this request is not only very broad in its scope but also covers information going back over a very long period of time.

You are right to point out that the Department's security guidance requires any loss of a single client file to be reported to a security adviser. However, there are security advisers located in each benefit office and nearly all so called lost files are in fact temporarily mislaid within the Department. To provide the answers to your questions would require a large number of security advisers across the country to go through locally held records, some of which are likely to have been destroyed and others held in remote storage. To add to this, in recent years the transmission and storage of such files has been the responsibility of contracted courier and storage providers.

I confirm that the information you seek has not been collected centrally by the Department in the past. Given this background, and the 10 year time frame in which you are interested, I am satisfied that this information could only be identified and retrieved from the relevant benefit offices and contractors at a very significant cost.

We estimate that this cost would exceed by a very substantial margin the Fol limit for compiling the information needed to deal with your request. As you know, this cost limit is set in regulations at £600. By virtue of section 12 of the Fol Act the Department is therefore not required to comply with your request and we will not process it any further.

You suggest, however, that the information you seek should be centrally held and obtainable from the Departmental Audit Committee. That Committee does indeed receive information relating to significant incidents involving client records which, since last year, have been published in the Department's Resource Accounts. You can, for example, access, pages 12 and 13 of the 2007/08 Resource Accounts which can be found at

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/resourcecentre/corporate-publications.asp#resourceaccounts>

The Audit Committee reports do not, however, cover the level of detail that you have requested and do not therefore contain the information in question.

If you are not content with the outcome of this internal review you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner to look into the way your request has been handled. The Commissioner can be contacted at:
Email: xxxx@xxx.xxx.xx

DWP Fol Team