

There is also a two-page questionnaire which I advise you ignore - it's just playing their silly games in the hope you might agree with their petty restrictions. Better to send them a direct response.

In effect, what ministers want to do is to restrict any individual or organisation from asking more than four detailed questions a year - severely limiting the opportunity for the most socially active to get stuff from their local council or government department.

Ministers justify this by saying organisations like the BBC get a hidden £1million subsidy to their licence fee by asking too many questions - ignoring that the BBC also gets a lot of stories of interest to the public as a result.

The second, more subtle, restriction aims to load extra costs against a £600 notional national fee (£450 for local councils) which will be used as a cut-off point by bureaucrats to say it is too expensive to get the information.

Basically the new charges include time spent reading the information to see if it can be released and time spent by ministers consulting with each other and lawyers on whether to release the information.

As you can see, the more contentious the information requested, the less likely it will now not be released. And major advances in the release of information - such as the disclosures of the [huge agricultural subsidies](#) from Tate and Lyle to the Royals - would never had been released under these regulations. Nor would all the new details of [MPs' expenses](#) either. Nor would contentious stuff on historical issues where extensive legal advice might be required before the information could go into the public domain.

The danger is that we are sleep-walking into these new restrictions. Last week Vera Baird, a junior minister at the department, complacently told MPs who were protesting at the change that the ministry had received just 21 responses to their obscure consultation paper - roughly half (surprise, surprise, from public authorities) in favour, and half against.

I urge anyone reading this blog to put in a complaint now and shake up this appalling complacency at the top. I suggest you use the email address at the department: informationrights@dca.gsi.gov.uk and also ginger up the ministers by sending a copy to bairdv@parliament.uk (the complacent minister) and martinlintonmp@parliament.uk - Lord Falconer's parliamentary private secretary (ie his dogsbody who is supposed to keep him informed in advance of any trouble).

Tell them to dump this cynical move. Otherwise you will lose a very important new democratic right after just 27 months.

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