

## **Freedom of Information – a Researcher’s Experience**

Last year I was studying for an MA at the Centre for Contemporary British History at the Institute of Historical Research. My dissertation proposal was a study into the policy decisions made by the Ministry of Defence in the late 1980s and early 1990s to open combat roles to women serving in the Navy and the Air Force.

Whilst there were some open source materials to support my research and a collection of oral histories at the Royal Naval Museum, my dissertation relied critically upon documentary evidence not yet in The National Archive. I needed sight of certain policy documents and other MoD reports. It was my intention to supplement information derived from these with interviews that I would conduct with people who were involved at the time. A key learning point for me was that FOI and the taking of oral histories or elite interviewing interact positively as research methods.

My experience in dealing with the MoD so far suggests that a successful request depends on what information you provide to the organization. Where I was able to be explicit in terms of the information which I wanted and a good approximation to its date, staff were able to find and provide documents in a reasonably quick timeframe – by which I mean less than 2 months. Where I framed my request in broad terms, I received no documents. To give typical examples of each, amongst other things, I requested:

- ‘Air Force Board paper on female aircrew (1990?)’
- ‘Reports on the assessment of the physical capability of women to undertake fast jet flying (late 1980s)’

The first I knew existed, though I was uncertain as to the exact date. My request resulted in my receiving a copy of the paper which actually went to the Board in 1989. The second I assumed existed because I was aware of a 1985 paper on medical tests on female aircrew in the USA. However, this request drew a blank.

In framing my requests I relied heavily on interviews which I conducted with former MoD personnel who had been involved in the work. They were particularly helpful in terms of the probable dates and names of other people who had been important in the processes. This enabled me to list a number of documents which I wanted. I also used bibliographies of reports already received to identify other documents for a follow up request. A further helpful means of identifying a critical document came from a press report on women serving at sea. By referencing that journalist and his article, the MoD was able to quickly retrieve a copy and send it to me. So my main mechanisms for identifying material were:

- interviews with participants
- bibliographies of MoD reports already received
- following up a journalist’s FOI request

Of course, the documents are received in isolation from their files, so this is by no means equivalent to having access to the range of supporting documents and commentaries which we are accustomed to seeing in The National Archive. Thus it is important to regard this tool as one of a number of ways to come to information. For me, the use of oral history interacted with the FOI requests throughout the period of my research. I used interviews to help frame requests. I was then able to use the documents received from the MoD to assist me in determining questions for subsequent interviews. This enabled me to find evidence in respect of attitudes which would not necessarily be apparent from policy documents in their final form after circulation for comments and redrafting. In addition, having the policy documents to hand helped to stimulate recollections of people who took part and to record their anecdotes – who went to see whom and say what – detail which might not find its way onto a file.

One of the difficulties in using FOI as a research tool is the potential to miss key information through the narrow framing of the request. By not having a file – or even a database - to browse through, you miss the chance find that can occur when you have direct access to material rather than working through someone else. I suggest that there is a reliance on the goodwill of the people involved and also on the extent to which you have informed them of your research goals. I provided a short statement of my topic along with my request. I believe that it paid dividends in that I was sent a copy of a report related to my work, though I had been unaware of its existence. This also leads me to say that it is important to recognize that the material gathered is by no means complete. Whilst my area of research was one for which the MoD could readily release documents without impinging on security issues, there was some redacting of information where it related to policy advice. Thus conclusions from the research need to be tempered with caution as more information is bound to emerge into the public domain in due course.

Naturally, there were some frustrations in making FOI requests, not least in attempting to use the MoD's website method of submitting a request. However, reverting to a telephone call and a letter overcame whatever gremlin prevented successful use of the electronic system and I found the MoD to be helpful in fulfilling my requests. Its provision of documents in a timely fashion enabled me to complete my proposed dissertation on a subject of interest to me, without having to wait for the elapse of 30 years and also whilst there was still the opportunity to interview some key players.

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