



Ministry  
of Defence

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Mr R Edwards  
Via: [robeds@gmail.com](mailto:robeds@gmail.com)

Our Reference:  
25-03-2013-173601-014

Date: 25 July 2013

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Dear Mr Edwards,

Request for Information under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act

Further to my letter dated 16 July 2013, I am writing to provide you with a response to your FOI request in which you requested the following information:

*I wish to make a request under freedom of information law and environmental information regulations. I would be grateful if my request could be acknowledged.*

*The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has made a number of statements in recent years about the reducing numbers of nuclear warheads held in the UK's stockpile, kept operationally available and carried on Trident missiles by Vanguard-class submarines. But as far as I am aware, it has not explained what has happened to the warheads that have been deemed no longer necessary, and ceased being operationally available or otherwise ready for use.*

*Please could the MoD explain what has happened to the nuclear warheads that are no longer kept in the UK's stockpile ready for use? Have any of them been dismantled and, if so, how many, when and where? And what has happened to their main components?*

*If the warheads have not been dismantled, exactly how have they ceased to be operationally available or otherwise ready for use? Are they disabled or modified in any way to prevent them from being used? And how soon could they be brought back into use, if necessary?*

*I would argue that releasing this information is in the public interest as it would greatly aid trust and verification in international discussions on nuclear disarmament. If the information is difficult or expensive to extract, I would be happy to discuss ways of making it easier or less costly.*

I am writing to confirm that MOD holds information on the subject you have requested. However, I have to advise you that we will not be able to answer your request without exceeding the appropriate limit.

Section 12(1) of the Act makes provision for public authorities to refuse requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would exceed the appropriate limit, which for central government is set at £600. This represents the estimated cost of one person spending 3.5 working days in determining whether the department holds the information, and locating, retrieving and extracting it.

The MOD may be able to provide some information in scope of your request if you reduce or refine your request to bring the cost of compliance under the limit.

While Section 12(1) of the Act applies in that the provision of recorded information would exceed the appropriate limit, Section 16(1) requires advice and assistance to be provided so far as it would be reasonable. You will appreciate that information held in relation to your request is of a very highly sensitive nature. As such, should you wish to refine your request to bring it within the £600 appropriate limit, I should like to make you aware that much of the information you are seeking would be likely to be withheld under qualified exemption s.24(1) (national security). Other exemptions may also apply. However, please contact me if you would like to refine your request or require further advice on doing so.

Outside the scope of the FOI Act, I have attempted to answer the questions you have raised based on information that is not considered to be sensitive.

On 26 May 2010 the Foreign Secretary made public the maximum number of nuclear warheads that the UK holds would not exceed 225 and that the number of operationally available warheads would not exceed 160. On 29 June 2011, the Secretary of State for Defence announced the early implementation of the reductions outlined in the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). The number of warheads carried on board each submarine would reduce from a maximum of 48 to a maximum of 40, reducing the number of operational missiles in the Vanguard Class submarines to no more than eight, and reducing the number of operational warheads from fewer than 160 to no more than 120. The overall nuclear weapon stockpile would be reduced to no more than 180.

By May 2010, the number of warheads in the stockpile had been reduced to fewer than 225. The timeframe for reductions announced in the SDSR was for completion by the mid 2020s and this target remains unchanged. In a Written Ministerial Statement made on 29 June 2011 (Hansard reference Column 51 WS) the Secretary of State for Defence announced:

*I wish to inform the House that the programme for implementing the SDSR warhead reductions has commenced: at least one of the VANGUARD class ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) now carries a maximum of 40 nuclear warheads. The programme of work to complete these changes across the VANGUARD SSBN fleet will be completed within the constraints of the deterrent's operational programme. We currently expect completion to be made within this Parliament. The Government do not comment upon the operational programme and therefore updates on this implementation programme will not be given. I will update the House further once the changes have been completed across the current SSBN fleet and the SDSR commitment to reducing our stock of operationally deployed warheads has been fulfilled. On current plans, our expectation is that the subsequent reduction in our total stockpile to no more than 180 warheads will be completed by the mid 2020s.*

*The early commencement of the programme for these reductions in warheads is a significant step and further demonstrates the Government's commitment to fulfilling the UK's disarmament obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The Government remain committed to maintaining the minimum credible deterrent necessary to achieve our deterrence objectives of guaranteeing national security"*

In a written reply to a Parliamentary question from Paul Flynn, MP, on 21 January 2013 (Hansard reference Column 70W) the Minister for Defence, Equipment, Support and Technology, stated:

*The Government does not comment upon the operational programme and therefore more detail of this implementation programme will not be given at this time. As we set out in the SDSR, we will reduce the overall stockpile of nuclear warheads to no more than 180 by the mid 2020s. Once processed, the material from dismantled warheads is returned to the MOD nuclear material stockpile. It is not government policy to place this material under international safeguards.*

Since 2002, the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) has been running a Stockpile Reduction Programme to disassemble Trident warheads to reduce stockpile numbers as declared in the Strategic Defence Review 1998, the 2006 White Paper on the Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent and the SDSR. The warheads that have been identified as no longer required for service but are yet to be disassembled are stored at the Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport or as work in progress at AWE Burghfield. All warhead disassembly work is undertaken at AWE Burghfield.

The main components from warheads disassembled as part of the stockpile reduction programme have been processed in various ways according to their composition and in such a way that prevents the warhead from being reassembled. A number of warheads identified in the programme for reduction have been modified to render them unusable whilst others identified as no longer being required for service are currently stored and have not yet been disabled or modified. This is in line with the overall target date to achieve the declared reduction by the mid 2020s.

If you are not satisfied with this response or wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Deputy Chief Information Officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail [CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk](mailto:CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk)). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely,

Sue Ford