

Reference: 2196256

Information Requests

information.requests@ofcom.org.uk

2 July 2026

Freedom of Information request: Right to know request

Thank you for your request for information about Social web infrastructure including ActivityPub and AT Protocol services.

We received this request on 6 May 2026 and we have considered it under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ('the FOI Act'). We wrote to you on 3 June 2026, explaining that we needed more time to consider where the public interest lay in withholding or disclosing the information requested. We have now concluded our consideration.

Your request and our response

Please provide any recorded information held by Ofcom that discusses, analyses, assesses, or gives guidance on how the Online Safety Act 2023 applies to federated or decentralised social web infrastructure, including ActivityPub and AT Protocol services.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not asking Ofcom to provide legal advice or to make a fresh assessment of any particular service. I am requesting copies of recorded information already held by Ofcom, including but not limited to internal guidance, policy papers, briefing notes, emails, meeting minutes, legal analysis, consultation responses, risk assessment materials, or other documents that address these issues.

Please include recorded information concerning the following types of services.

1. ActivityPub or AT Protocol relay services

Please provide any recorded information held by Ofcom on whether an ActivityPub relay, AT Protocol relay, Bluesky relay, firehose service, or similar federated relay service may be regarded as a user-to-user service, combined service, search service, or otherwise within scope of Part 3 of the Online Safety Act 2023.

By "relay service", I mean a service that may not provide a conventional social media front end for human users, but which receives, aggregates, indexes, forwards, relays, republishes, redistributes, or otherwise transmits public posts, activities, repository updates, firehose data, or similar content between other servers, services, instances, PDSs, AppViews, or federated network participants.

Please include any recorded information discussing whether Ofcom would treat any of the following as "users of the service" for these purposes:

- remote ActivityPub instances;*
- AT Protocol PDSs, relays, or AppViews;*
- instance, server, relay, or PDS operators;*

- automated server-to-server software;
- bots or automated accounts involved in relaying content.

2. Read-only websites or viewers for federated content

Please provide any recorded information held by Ofcom on whether a website, app, or online service that only allows visitors to view ActivityPub or AT Protocol content from other services may be regarded as a user-to-user service, search service, combined service, or otherwise within scope of Part 3 of the Online Safety Act 2023.

By “read-only viewer”, I mean a service that displays public posts, profiles, comments, feeds, repositories, records, or other content from ActivityPub, AT Protocol, Bluesky, Mastodon, or other federated or decentralised services, but where the service’s own visitors cannot post, upload, reply, like, boost, follow, direct-message, or otherwise interact through that viewer.

Please include any recorded information discussing whether remote users whose content is displayed by such a viewer could be considered users of the viewer service.

3. Bridges, cross-posting services, mirrors, and protocol translation services

Please provide any recorded information held by Ofcom on whether a bridge, cross-posting service, mirror, protocol gateway, or protocol translation service connecting ActivityPub, AT Protocol, Bluesky, Mastodon, Nostr, or other social web services may be regarded as a user-to-user service, search service, combined service, or otherwise within scope of Part 3 of the Online Safety Act 2023.

By “bridge”, I mean a service that enables content, accounts, profiles, posts, replies, follows, likes, boosts, reposts, or other social interactions to be copied, mirrored, syndicated, translated, or made available between one social networking protocol, platform, instance, server, PDS, AppView, or network and another.

Please include any recorded information discussing:

- whether bridged or mirrored accounts are treated as users of the bridge service;
- whether remote users whose content is copied, mirrored, syndicated, or translated by a bridge could be considered users of the bridge service;
- whether automated bridging software, server operators, or account holders who opt in or out of bridging could be considered users of the service;
- whether a bridge that enables replies, follows, reposts, or other interactions across protocols is treated differently from a bridge that only mirrors or displays content.

If Ofcom holds no recorded information specifically referring to ActivityPub or AT Protocol, please confirm whether Ofcom holds any recorded information about federated social networks, decentralised social networks, server-to-server social media infrastructure, relays, bridges, firehose services, protocol gateways, protocol translation services, cross-posting services, mirrors, or read-only viewers in the context of the Online Safety Act 2023.

To assist searches, relevant terms may include: ActivityPub, AT Protocol, ATProto, Bluesky, Mastodon, fediverse, federated social network, decentralised social network, relay, firehose, AppView, PDS, bridge, bridging, protocol gateway, protocol translation, cross-posting, mirror, read-only viewer, server-to-server, and federation.

If any part of this request is considered too broad, please provide advice and assistance under section 16 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to help me refine it. If Ofcom considers that only part of the requested information can be disclosed within the cost limit, please provide that part rather than refusing the request in full.

Our response

The information is being withheld as it is exempt from disclosure under sections 21(1), 36(2)(b)(ii) and (c), 42(1) of the FOI Act – we set out these provisions below.

Section 21(1) of the FOI Act provides that information which is otherwise reasonably accessible to the applicant is exempt information. Some of the information we hold which is in the scope of your request is publicly available, and therefore is withheld under the FOI Act on that basis. Section 21 is an absolute exemption and therefore not subject to the public interest test. We have published information on our website: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/information-for-industry/other/online-safety-act-explained-qa-web.pdf?v=409647>

Section 36(2)(b)(ii) and (c) of the FOI Act provide that information held by a public authority is exempt from disclosure if, in the reasonable opinion of a qualified person, disclosure of the information:

- would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation; and
- would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs.

Section 36 is a qualified exemption, which means that Ofcom is required to consider whether or not the public interest in disclosing the information you have requested outweighs the public interest in withholding the information. In this case, we consider that the public interest favours withholding the information for the reasons set out in Annex B to this letter. In Annex A of this letter, the qualified person, the Corporation Secretary for Ofcom, has confirmed that the exemption applies.

We further consider that some of the information is exempt from disclosure under section 42(1) of the FOI Act. This deals with the exemption of information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings. In applying this exemption we have had to balance the public interest in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosing the information. The attached **Annex C** to this letter sets out the exemption in full, as well as the factors Ofcom considered when deciding where the public interest lay.

Yours sincerely,

Information Requests

Request an internal review

If you are unhappy with the response you have received to your request for information, or think that your request was refused without a reason valid under the law, you may ask for an internal review. If you do, it will be subject to an independent review within Ofcom. We will either uphold the original decision, or reverse or modify it.

If you would like to ask us to carry out an internal review, you should get in touch within two months of the date of this letter. There is no statutory deadline for us to complete our internal review, and the time it takes will depend on the complexity of the request. But we will

try to complete the review within 20 working days (or no more than 40 working days in exceptional cases) and keep you informed of our progress. Please email the Information Requests team (information.requests@ofcom.org.uk) to request an internal review.

Taking it further

If you are unhappy with the outcome of our internal review, then you have the right to [complain to the Information Commissioner's Office](#).

Annex A

Freedom of Information: Right to know request

Section 36 exemption

I am a "qualified person" as referred to section 36(2) of the Act and duly authorised by a Minister of the Crown for the purposes of that section. In my reasonable opinion, disclosure of the relevant information requested

- would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation; and/or
- would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs.

In applying this exemption, I have had to balance the public interest in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosing the information.

I have set out in Annex B the exemption in full, as well as the factors I considered when deciding where the public interest lay in relation to the information concerned. If you have any queries about this letter, please contact information.requests@ofcom.org.uk.

Corporation Secretary

2 July 2026

Annex B

Section 36: Prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs

Section 36 exempts information whose disclosure would, or would be likely to, have any of the following effects:

- inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation, or
- otherwise prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.

Key points:

- Section 36 can only be used if, in the reasonable view of a "qualified person", disclosure of the requested information would have one of the specified effects.
- would, or would be likely to, inhibit the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation; and/or
- would otherwise prejudice, or would be likely otherwise to prejudice, the effective conduct of public affairs.
- The application of section 36 is subject to a public interest balance.

Factors for disclosure	Factors for withholding
• Ofcom recognises that disclosure of the documentation might be a matter of interest to the wider public. Releasing such information could be said to increase transparency in our work and allow for discussion in a public forum.	• The documentation in relation to which the exemption is claimed encompasses internal emails and internal research and information regarding service providers. • In order to fulfil its regulatory functions effectively, Ofcom needs to be able to engage internally and externally in frank discussions, and engage with members of organisations relevant to our functions as the online safety regulator. • Disclosure of information about such discussions and information would, or would be likely to, inhibit free and frank discussions in the future and this in turn would likely lead to less robust decision making, and less effective regulation. • Given the above, disclosing such communications would also likely prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs.
Reasons why public interest favours withholding information	
• At this time, Ofcom is withholding the requested information. The public interest test has been applied on the basis of disclosing information which would reveal internal discussions and planning. • We consider that the public interest in withholding outweighs the public interest in disclosure.	

- This is because the disclosure of this information is likely to prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs, as it would affect Ofcom's ability to freely and effectively deliberate on and discuss such matters.
- Whilst there may be some weight attached to the public interest in disclosing, we consider this is limited, and that significant prejudice would be caused by such a disclosure.

Annex C

Section 42 – Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings is exempt information.	
Factors for disclosure	Factors for withholding
• Open policy making and public confidence in regulated activities.	• Ofcom considers that the request includes information of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings. It is advice given by Ofcom’s own salaried in-house legal advisers and is connected with the giving or obtaining of legal advice.
Reasons why public interest favours withholding information	
• It is in the public interest that work undertaken by Ofcom in the context of regulated activities is undertaken in a fully informed legal context, where relevant. Ofcom therefore needs high quality legal advice for the effective conduct of its business. That advice needs to be given in context, and with a full appreciation of the facts. It needs to be sought and given in a timely fashion. • Legal advice cannot be effectively obtained unless Ofcom is able to put all the facts before its in-house legal advisers without fear that they may afterwards be disclosed. Without such effectively obtained advice, the quality of Ofcom’s work would be much reduced because it would not be fully informed and this would be contrary to the public interest.	