

Call to help defend the Freedom of Information Act

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The National Secular Society is urging its members and supporters to back a campaign defending Freedom of Information (Fol).

A [petition](#) has been launched by *Press Gazette* as part of the Society of Editors' "Hands Off Fol" campaign, amid fears that the Government plan a crackdown on Fol requests. The Government has created a commission to review the working of Freedom of Information, which is [due to report](#) by the end of November 2015.

Chris Grayling, Leader of the House of Commons, said that the Freedom of Information Act should only be used by those "who want to understand why and how government is taking decisions" and not as a "research tool" for the media.

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented: "Grayling's comments don't make sense. Of course Fol is going to be used as a research tool – that is a key part of scrutinising government – and one he himself used whilst in opposition to generate press stories.

"Some of our most important recent campaign work has relied upon Freedom of Information.

"We used Fol requests to uncover and expose the faith schools that were censoring students' science exam questions on reproduction and evolution – and that an education minister was condoning it on grounds of religious sensitivity.

"The cost of religious chaplaincy to NHS Trusts was only [revealed](#) after an FOI request, and we use this vital transparency mechanism to monitor inappropriate religious interference with the state.

"I would encourage all of our members and supporters to take a moment to sign the petition and offer their support for this important campaign."

The petition to defend Fol says: "The Freedom of Information Act established the broad principle that public bodies must release information if the public interest in doing so outweighs the public interest in it remaining secret.

"We, the undersigned, urge the Government not to do anything which would detract from that principle."

Dominic Ponsford, editor of the *Press Gazette*, who set up the petition, writes, "Any charges could dramatically undermine the ability of requesters, including regional press journalists and freelancers in particular, to use the Act to hold authorities to account.

"Investigative journalism is time-consuming, expensive and sometimes difficult to justify for news organisations which are under financial pressure. It needs to be nurtured and encouraged, for the benefit of society and democracy, not subject to Freedom of Information charges which would be effectively be a tax on journalism."

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