HM Government

Working with Official information

Making security classification simpler, clearer, safer.

This leaflet will provide you with guidance about working with OFFICIAL information.

We use security classifications to help us identify and work with information of different sensitivities. The OFFICIAL security classification is for the majority of Government business and public service delivery, including information that is sensitive and must not be shared freely.

There are two further security classifications (SECRET and TOP SECRET) that are used for highly sensitive information relating to defence, diplomacy or national security.

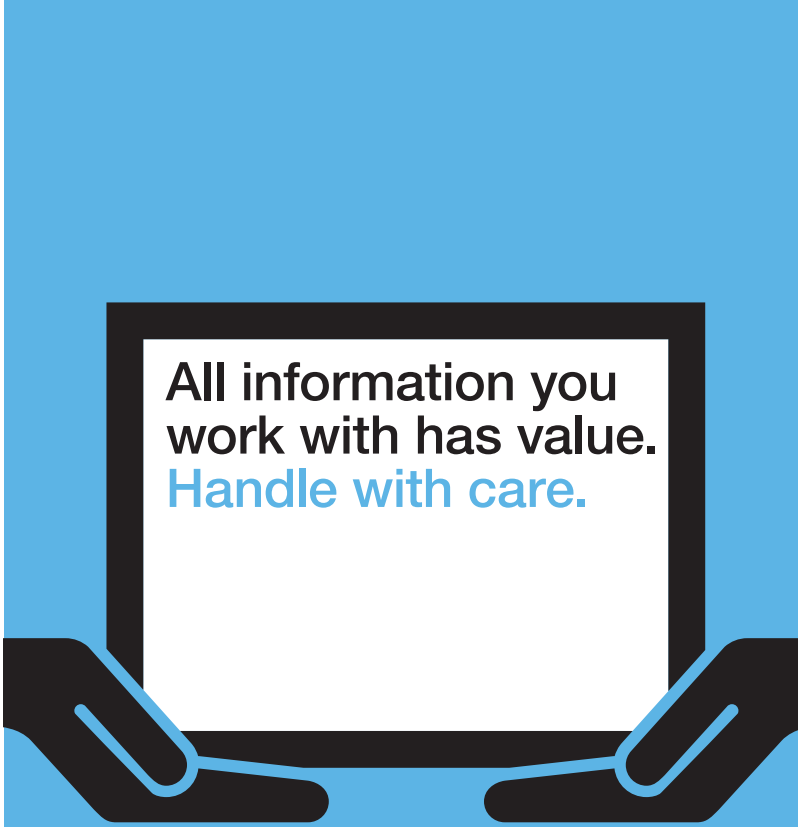
It is your responsibility to:
ensure that all information that has been entrusted to you receives the appropriate degree of care and protection.

It is your organisation's responsibility to:
explain where you will need to use security classifications.

What types of information are classified as OFFICIAL?

Here are some examples of OFFICIAL information:

- The day-to-day business of the public sector, including information about public services and finances
- Routine international relations and diplomatic activities
- Public safety, criminal justice and law enforcement
- Routine defence and security business
- Commercial information, including contractual information and intellectual property
- Personal information that is required to be protected under the Data Protection Act.



Marking sensitive OFFICIAL information

A small amount of OFFICIAL information is of a particularly sensitive nature, this is information where loss or disclosure would have damaging consequences for your organisation, Government or cause significant distress for an individual or group of people.

It is important that we are able to identify this type of information quickly and easily so that it can be protected appropriately. Sensitive OFFICIAL information should always be clearly marked as:

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

It is your responsibility to:
read your organisation's guidance so that you can identify information which will require the OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE marking.

When should information be marked as OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE?

Here are some examples of OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE information:

- The most sensitive corporate information, such as organisational restructuring, negotiations and major security or business continuity issues
- Very sensitive personal information, such as information about vulnerable or at-risk people
- Policy development and advice to ministers on contentious and very sensitive issues
- Commercially or market sensitive information
- Information about investigations and civil or criminal proceedings that could disrupt law enforcement or prejudice court cases
- Sensitive diplomatic business or international negotiations.

Marking OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE information

Security classifications can be added to information in many different ways but the most important thing is that the marking is clearly visible to anyone using or receiving the information.

This could mean:

It is your responsibility to:
find out how you are required to mark information but remember OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE information must always be marked.

The top and bottom of documents

The subject line or body of emails

The front of folders or binders

Using OFFICIAL information

All information has value and should be treated with care. Your organisational policies will be able to provide detailed handling guidance but there are some key things that you will need to remember:

- Only share information with those who have a legitimate need to see it
- Maintain a clear desk and always lock sensitive information away
- Only use authorised IT systems to work with or store information
- Dispose of information appropriately
- Only carry the information that you need when working off site
- Do not discuss sensitive issues in public places
- Report lost or stolen information immediately.

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This publication is available for download at www.official-documents.gov.uk.