

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 31 January 2024

Public Authority: Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police

Address: Headquarters
Oxford Road
Kidlington
OX5 2MX

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested the outcome notices for two misconduct hearings from Thames Valley Police. Thames Valley Police relied on section 40(2) of FOIA (third party personal information) to withhold the information.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that Thames Valley Police has correctly relied on section 40(2) of FOIA to withhold the information.
3. The Commissioner has also decided that Thames Valley Police breached section 10(1) by failing to confirm that the requested information was held, and breached section 17(1) by failing to issue a valid refusal notice within 20 working days.
4. The Commissioner does not require further steps to be taken.

Background

5. Thames Valley Police advised the Commissioner that the relevant "hearing outcomes would have been published on our website and then

taken down after 28 days in line with the Police (conduct) regulations 2020.”¹

Request and response

6. On 17 August 2023, the complainant wrote to Thames Valley Police and requested information in the following terms:

“Please send me copies of the outcome notices of misconduct proceedings for Inspector [name redacted] and PC [name redacted]...”
7. Thames Valley Police responded on 18 October 2023. It refused to provide the requested information, citing section 40(2) of FOIA.
8. Following an internal review, Thames Valley Police wrote to the complainant on 23 November 2023. It maintained its original position.

Scope of the case

9. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 30 November 2023 to complain about the way their request for information had been handled.
10. The Commissioner considers that the scope of his investigation is to establish whether Thames Valley Police is entitled to withhold the requested information under section 40(2) of the FOIA.
11. It must initially be borne in mind that, even though part of the requested information has previously been published under the Regulations, this was a distinct disclosure specifically provided for under that legislation. Once the required parameters had been met, then the information was removed from the public domain. The Commissioner is now considering whether or not that information should be disclosed under the provisions of FOIA, which is an entirely different legal gateway.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/4/made>

Reasons for decision

Section 40 - personal information

12. Section 40(2) of the FOIA provides that information is exempt from disclosure if it is the personal data of an individual other than the requester and where one of the conditions listed in section 40(3A)(3B) or 40(4A) is satisfied.
13. In this case the relevant condition is contained in section 40(3A)(a). This applies where the disclosure of the information to any member of the public would contravene any of the principles relating to the processing of personal data ('the DP principles'), as set out in Article 5 of the UK General Data Protection Regulation ('UK GDPR').
14. The first step for the Commissioner is to determine whether the withheld information constitutes personal data as defined by the Data Protection Act 2018 ('DPA'). If it is not personal data then section 40 of the FOIA cannot apply.
15. Secondly, and only if the Commissioner is satisfied that the requested information is personal data, he must establish whether disclosure of that data would breach any of the DP principles.

Is the information personal data?

16. Section 3(2) of the DPA defines personal data as:

"any information relating to an identified or identifiable living individual".
17. The two main elements of personal data are that the information must relate to a living person and that the person must be identifiable.
18. An identifiable living individual is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of the individual.
19. Information will relate to a person if it is about them, linked to them, has biographical significance for them, is used to inform decisions affecting them or has them as its main focus.
20. Clearly the requested information relates to two named individuals and the outcome of misconduct hearings they were subject to. Accordingly, it is their personal data. This information therefore falls within the definition of 'personal data' in section 3(2) of the DPA.

21. The fact that information constitutes the personal data of an identifiable living individual does not automatically exclude it from disclosure under the FOIA. The second element of the test is to determine whether disclosure would contravene any of the DP principles.
22. The most relevant DP principle in this case is principle (a).

Would disclosure contravene principle (a)?

23. Article 5(1)(a) of the GDPR states that:

“Personal data shall be processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject”.

24. In the case of an FOIA request, the personal data is processed when it is disclosed in response to the request. This means that the information can only be disclosed if to do so would be lawful, fair and transparent.
25. In order to be lawful, one of the lawful bases listed in Article 6(1) of the GDPR must apply to the processing. It must also be generally lawful.
26. Due to their differing circumstances, the Commissioner has considered the two officers separately.

Officer charged with possession of extreme pornography

Is the information criminal offence data?

27. Information relating to criminal convictions and offences is given special status in the UK GDPR.
28. Article 10 of the UK GDPR defines ‘criminal offence data’ as being personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences. Under section 11(2) of the DPA personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences includes personal data relating to:
 - (a) The alleged commission of offences by the data subject; or
 - (b) Proceedings for an offence committed or alleged to have been committed by the data subject or the disposal of such proceedings including sentencing.
29. The Commissioner has outlined his view in a similar request for information made by the same complainant in his Decision Notice IC-264178-D7D2². In that case, the Commissioner upheld the public

² [ic-264178-d7d2.pdf \(ico.org.uk\)](https://ico.org.uk/decision-notice/264178-d7d2)

authority's position that the requested information was exempt from disclosure on the basis that it was criminal offence data of identifiable parties.

30. The Commissioner will not reproduce the content of that decision notice here, but he has adopted the analysis and concluded Thames Valley Police was entitled to rely on section 40(2) for this part of the requested information, as it relates to criminal offence data.

Officer guilty of gross misconduct

Lawful processing: Article 6(1)(f) of the GDPR

31. The Commissioner considers that the lawful basis most applicable is basis 6(1)(f) which states:

"processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child"³.

32. In considering the application of Article 6(1)(f) of the GDPR in the context of a request for information under the FOIA, it is necessary to consider the following three-part test:-

- i) **Legitimate interest test:** Whether a legitimate interest is being pursued in the request for information;
- ii) **Necessity test:** Whether disclosure of the information is necessary to meet the legitimate interest in question;
- iii) **Balancing test:** Whether the above interests override the legitimate interest(s) or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject.

³ Article 6(1) goes on to state that:-

"Point (f) of the first subparagraph shall not apply to processing carried out by public authorities in the performance of their tasks".

However, section 40(8) FOIA (as amended by Schedule 19 Paragraph 58(8) DPA) provides that:-

"In determining for the purposes of this section whether the lawfulness principle in Article 5(1)(a) of the GDPR would be contravened by the disclosure of information, Article 6(1) of the GDPR (lawfulness) is to be read as if the second sub-paragraph (dis-applying the legitimate interests gateway in relation to public authorities) were omitted".

33. The Commissioner considers that the test of 'necessity' under stage (ii) must be met before the balancing test under stage (iii) is applied.
34. The Commissioner has outlined his view in a similar request for information made by the same complainant in his Decision Notice IC-264178-D7D2 (see footnote 2). In that case, the Commissioner upheld the public authority's position that the requested information was exempt from disclosure on the basis that it was third party personal data and the data subject's fundamental rights and freedoms overrode the legitimate interests in disclosure of the requested information.
35. Based on the above factors, the Commissioner has determined that there is insufficient legitimate interest to outweigh the data subject's fundamental rights and freedoms. The Commissioner therefore considers that there is no Article 6 basis for processing and so disclosure of the information would not be lawful.
36. Given the above conclusion that disclosure would be unlawful, the Commissioner considers that he does not need to go on to separately consider whether disclosure would be fair or transparent.

Procedural Matters

37. Section 10(1) of FOIA obliges the authority to comply with section 1(1) promptly and within 20 working days following the date of receipt of the request.
38. Section 17(1) obliges the authority to issue a refusal notice in regard to any exempt information within the same timescale.
39. Thames Valley Police failed to provide a valid response to this request until after 20 working days had passed, due to this it breached sections 10(1) and 17(1).

Right of appeal

40. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights)
GRC & GRP Tribunals,
PO Box 9300,
LEICESTER,
LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0203 936 8963
Fax: 0870 739 5836
Email: grc@justice.gov.uk
Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

41. If you wish to appeal against a decision notice, you can obtain information on how to appeal along with the relevant forms from the Information Tribunal website.

42. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

Signed

**Carolyn Howes
Senior Case Officer
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF**