

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 17 June 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 addresses and contact details from Thames Valley Police ("TVP"). TVP responded to the request and provided a link to a map of its local policing areas. It said that it did not have direct dial numbers and it would not disclose its control room's email address, although no exemption was cited. It did not provide any response to the rest of the request.
2. By not specifying what information is held, TVP breached section 1(1)(a) (General right of access) of FOIA. Its refusal notice offered no rationale to explain its position regarding the control room's email address, thereby breaching section 17(1)(b) (Refusal of request) of FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires TVP to take the following steps:
 - Issue a fresh response which addresses all parts of the request, other than the map, and clarifies what is held. If any information is to be withheld it must issue a refusal notice which complies fully with section 17. If any information is not held it should provide a clear explanation as to why this is the case.
4. TVP must take these steps within 30 calendar days of the date of this decision notice. Failure to comply may result in the Commissioner making written certification of this fact to the High Court pursuant to section 54 of the Act and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

Request and response

5. On 8 February 2024, the complainant wrote to TVP and requested the following information:
- “Can you please provide:
- Email address for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team that is part of Thames Valley Police.
 - Direct telephone number for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team that is part of Thames Valley Police.
 - Name and contact for individual responsible for the online contact for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team.
 - A map of Thames Valley Police boundaries showing each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team.
 - Email address for the Thames Valley Force Control Room”.
6. On 27 February 2024, TVP responded. It provided a website link¹ saying: “ Please see the below link, you can find name and contact information for any neighbourhood policing team by searching on the post codes you are interested in. A map of the boundaries can also be found at this link”.
7. It said: “there is no direct telephone number, 101 should be used to contact members of the neighbourhood policing team” and added that there was no email address for the control room that was for “public use”.
8. The complainant requested an internal review on 28 February 2024. He said:
- “...the response provided does not meet the criteria of the request. In the response, I have been provided a national website with no information clearly obtainable and no information pertaining to the request.
- I asked for the email address for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team that is part of Thames Valley Police. The response provided directed me to <https://www.police.uk/> and from there I can search an area, where I used a postcode for an address I used to live in, just off the town centre. This showed Bicester Town and on this webpage, there is a section marked ‘contact’ and the only contact details are an address for the police station. This is not the

¹ <https://www.police.uk/>

information I requested and I am aware that this information is available.

I asked for the name and contact for individual responsible for the online contact for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team. The website ... does not provide the information requested. It does not provide who is responsible for online inquiries/ contact and it does not provide the contact details for them.

I asked for a map of Thames Valley Police boundaries showing each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team, this was not provided. I was directed to the aforementioned website and have to search by postcode and hope I get a different area each time. I did not request a link to try a lucky dip on boundaries, I requested a single map showing each of the individual boundaries as a collective. It is beyond expectation that Thames Valley Police holds a map showing this.

I asked for the direct telephone number for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team that is part of Thames Valley Police. Whilst I appreciate the response provided was to call 101, I do not believe that there is not a telephone number for each team. If not a collective number for each team, there will be a point of contact which will fall within the parameters of my request name and contact for individual responsible for the online contact for each Local Neighbourhood Policing Team. Further to this, if the response is to call 101, how once I have called 101 to speak to an officer or team, am I then transferred to the officer or relevant team member to speak to them by telephone?

The reasons for my request are in order to make relevant inquiries as part of my statutory duties to members of the public when they request assistance. I have used online 'contact us' boxes in the past and have had a plethora of issues, ranging from 'we have not received it', 'there must have been an error' etc. The online contact boxes do not include the facility to provide a document showing the express and written consent of the citizen to discuss matters pertaining to their situation. I have made an attempt to request information through the data protection officer and was told that I need to contact the local policing team, I have asked for details of the local policing team and have been provided a national website, I have checked the response information on the national website and it does not hold the information that Thames Valley Police does hold".

9. TVP provided an internal review on 12 March 2024 in which it revised its position. It provided a link to a map showing local policing areas² but made no further comment regarding the remainder of the request.

Scope of the case

10. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 13 March 2024 to complain about the way his request for information had been handled. His grounds were as follows:

"I have requested contact details for relevant departments within Thames Valley Police but these have been refused to have been provided. Their response was to provide information which was not requested.

I have requested a map of the local neighbourhood policing areas managed by Thames Valley Police and the information they have provided does not match the request.

I am not asking for personal details and the details I have requested are solely for the purposes of requesting information in a professional capacity. I have made a request for information to the DPO [Data Protection Officer] but they said it is for the local teams but will not provide the details on how to contact them".

11. He added that: "Contact has been made via 101 to speak to relevant policing team and specific officers as noted on the TVP website but refused to be connected or details provided".
12. Having looked at the link provided at internal review, the Commissioner considers that this does show TVP's local policing areas. He will not therefore consider this element of the request any further. However,

²https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=ixzMydRC&id=C35D63D931F3139762326110E5F489C00FDD5E82&thid=OIP.ixzMydRC3ffK9YDkY-GrfgHaIY&mediaurl=https%3a%2f%2ftvpcareers.co.uk%2fwp-content%2fuploads%2f2021%2f04%2ftvp_website_jurisdiction_map_1024px.jpg&cdnurl=https%3a%2f%2fth.bing.com%2fth%2fid%2fR.8b1cccc9d442ddf7caf580e463e1ab7e%3frik%3dgl7dD8CJ9OUQYQ%26pid%3dImgRaw%26r%3d0&exph=760&expw=672&q=tvpcareers.co.uk%2fboundaries&simid=607998757954469472&FORM=IRPRST&ck=6BBAF48699B7AC67AC36C1AD11736DCA&selectedIndex=0&itb=0&idpp=overlayview&ajaxhist=0&ajaxserp=0

he will consider TVP's response to the remaining parts of the request below.

13. The Commissioner has used his discretion to proceed directly to a decision notice in this case.

Reasons for decision

Section 8 – Request for information

14. The Commissioner has first considered whether the remaining parts of the request were valid.
15. Section 8(1) of FOIA deals with the validity of requests for information and states:

“any reference to “a request for information” is a reference to such a request which-

- (a) is in writing,
- (b) states the name of the applicant and an address for correspondence, and
- (c) describes the information requested”.

16. If a request does not comply with all of the requirements of section 8(1)(a) - (c), then it is invalid. This means there is no obligation for a public authority to confirm or deny whether the information is held under section 1(1), or to issue a formal refusal notice under section 17.
17. The request in this case was made in writing and a name and address was given. The Commissioner is therefore only considering the extent of the information described in the request, ie whether it described the requested information.
18. The complainant has stated that he wishes to be provided with contact details for specific business areas at TVP. The Commissioner considers this to have been clearly worded with no room for misinterpretation. He is therefore satisfied that all parts of the request were valid.

Section 1 – General right of access

19. Section 1 of FOIA states that any person making a request for information is entitled to be informed by the public authority whether it holds that information and, if so, to have that information communicated to them.

20. In this case, TVP has failed to specify whether it holds the requested information. It has only said there are no direct telephone numbers and that the control room email address was not for "public use". It has made no reference to the remainder of the request.
21. The Commissioner considers it unlikely that there are no direct telephone numbers available as he considers it unlikely that all internal calls must have to go via 101 or that staff have no other way of accessing the telephone network when they are out of the office. However, in the absence of any explanation from TVP it is not possible to know whether or not this is the case.
22. In failing to advise the complainant whether or not it holds the requested information, TVP has breached 1(1)(a) of FOIA. It should take the step at paragraph 3 above.

Section 17 – Refusal of request

23. By virtue of section 17 of the Act, where a public authority is to any extent relying on a claim that any of the exemptions in Part II apply to the request it must give the applicant a notice which - (a) states that fact, (b) specifies the exemption in question, (c) states (if that would not otherwise be apparent) why the exemption applies.
24. TVP said that it would not disclose the email address of its control room but did not cite any exemption to evidence its position.
25. In failing to identify the exemption relied on it breached section 17(1)(b). It should take the step at paragraph 3 above.

Other matters

26. Although they do not form part of this notice the Commissioner wishes to make the following observation.
27. Clearly the complainant works for a local council and it is within his job remit to require contact with TVP for various matters. Such contact should be available via alternative channels, outside of FOIA.
28. Whilst the Commissioner understands that disclosure of the requested information to the world at large may not be in the public interest, this is different to facilitating contact with a local authority where such direct contact may be necessary. It is disappointing that this issue has not been resolved outside of FOIA.

Internal review

29. An internal review offers an opportunity for the complainant to present their views – which was clearly done in this case – and for the public authority to respond accordingly. Unfortunately, TVP has failed to respond to any of the clear points which the complainant made, other than by providing a further weblink.
30. The Commissioner is disappointed with this approach and considers it to be poor practice. This will be logged for monitoring purposes.

Right of appeal

31. 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

32. 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.
33. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

Carolyn Howes
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