

## **Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)**

### **Decision notice**

**Date:** 17 March 2025

**Public Authority:** Cabinet Office  
**Address:** 70 Whitehall  
London  
SW1A 2AS

### **Decision (including any steps ordered)**

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1. The complainant submitted a request to the Cabinet Office seeking information about the deployment of civil servants overseas by the Government Communications Service International. The Cabinet Office provided some of the information falling within the scope of the request but sought to withhold the remainder on the basis of sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) (international relations) of FOIA.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the withheld information is exempt from disclosure on the basis of these exemptions and that the public interest favours maintaining these exemptions.
3. The Commissioner does not require further steps.

### **Request and response**

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4. The complainant submitted the following request to the Cabinet Office on 18 September 2024:

"This request concerns the Government Communications Service International team.

- 1) Please state the number of civil service staff deployed overseas through the service in each of the following years:

- a) 2020
  - b) 2021
  - c) 2022
  - d) 2023
  - e) 2024
- 2) Please provide a breakdown of these placements by the countries to which they were deployed.
- a) Across the five year period as a whole
  - b) In each year individually."
5. The Cabinet Office responded on 16 October 2024 and confirmed that it held the information falling within the scope of the request. However, it considered this to be exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) (international relations) of FOIA.
6. The complainant contacted the Cabinet Office on 20 October 2024 and asked it to undertake an internal review.
7. The Cabinet Office informed him of the outcome of the internal review on 3 December 2024. The review upheld the application of sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) of FOIA.

### **Scope of the case**

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8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 5 December 2024 in order to complain about the Cabinet Office's decision to withhold the information falling within the scope of his request.
9. During the course of the Commissioner's investigation the Cabinet Office provided the complainant with the information sought by part 1 of his request on 21 January 2025. The Cabinet Office's position remains that the information sought by part 2 of the request is exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) of FOIA.

### **Reasons for decision**

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#### **Section 27 – international relations**

10. Sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) state that:

"Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice—

(a) relations between the United Kingdom and any other State...

...(c) the interests of the United Kingdom abroad

(d) the promotion or protection by the United Kingdom of its interests abroad."

#### The complainant's position

11. In his submissions to the Commissioner, the complainant noted that the Cabinet Office had argued that disclosure of the number of staff deployed by country could have the effect of "giving offence to other nations" or breaching the trust of other countries. However, in his view the Cabinet Office had provided no evidence as to why disclosure would have this effect and he had challenged this at internal review stage.
12. The complainant noted that in the internal review the Cabinet Office responded by upholding its refusal, arguing that the team operates in an "agile environment where disclosing the locations of the work would impact the relationship between a number of partners, and risk exposing identities which in turn jeopardises the security, safety, and privacy of the team."
13. The complainant argued that his request did not request information about the location of the team, simply which country they had been working with. He argued that the Cabinet Office also failed to explain why disclosure of the numbers deployed would have any impact on relations "between a number of partners".
14. As such, the complainant argued that there was no coherent evidence as to why the disclosure of numbers of staff working with a specific country would be of any prejudice to international relations between the UK and that country that could justify the use of any part of section 27.

#### The Cabinet Office's position

15. With regard to the complainant's grounds of complaint, the Cabinet Office noted that his request used the term 'deployment' and part 2 specifically asked for a breakdown by the country in which the staff were deployed. Therefore, the Cabinet Office explained that it was not clear why in his grounds of complaint the complainant had suggested that he had not requested information about the locations of the team. The Cabinet Office noted that part 2 of his request asked for the location, i.e. the country of deployment, not 'which country they had been working with' (which it acknowledged could be taken as not being in the country

but advising from the UK). The Cabinet Office argued that it did not consider the request can be interpreted in any way other than asking for the country of deployment.

16. By way of background, the Cabinet Office explained that the Government Communication Service International (GCSI) uses communication advisers to deliver capability building across all government communications disciplines, including crisis, digital communications, media, marketing, digital, governance, campaigns, strategy and insights and evaluation, as well as providing thematic expertise including national security, trade, climate change and governance.
17. It further explained that the portfolio of countries that GCSI works with are monitored and that in circumstances, such as a change in government following an election, if it is deemed inappropriate to continue working GCSI will (and has) ceased to work in those countries.
18. In its internal review the Cabinet Office argued that GCSI operates in an agile environment where disclosing the locations of the work would impact the relationship between a number of partners, and risk exposing identities which in turn jeopardises the security, safety, and privacy of the team.
19. In further support of section 27(1)(a) the Cabinet Office's submissions to the Commissioner explained that when supporting capability development, GCSI maintains strict confidentiality to avoid highlighting any perceived vulnerabilities in partner nations. The Cabinet Office argued that country-specific data could expose which nations are receiving UK support, potentially creating diplomatic difficulties and security concerns. The Cabinet Office explained that some partner governments explicitly require discretion regarding their collaboration, and revealing location data could strain relationships with nations expecting confidentiality. This could fundamentally damage the trust-based relationships GCSI had carefully built with its international partners.
20. The Cabinet Office explained that GCSI's work continues to evolve. It highlighted that international collaboration depends on a deep understanding of each partner's unique context and challenges in a two-way learning processes. The Cabinet Office argued that through a process of mutual learning and knowledge exchange, GCSI works closely with partner governments to identify and address specific communication challenges they face and to strengthen its own approach to delivering communications to UK citizens at home and abroad. The Cabinet Office argued that disclosure of the requested information would

be likely to prejudice relations between the UK and other states because it would remove the safe space within which both parties operate.

21. In relation to sections 27(1)(c) and (d), the Cabinet Office argued that geographical data would enable hostile actors to map out the UK's strategic communications capacity globally, providing them with valuable intelligence about the UK's operations and priorities. Country breakdowns could reveal operational priorities and focus areas, potentially compromising ongoing sensitive work. The Cabinet Office argued that release of locations could undermine the UK's work in supporting electoral organisations against disinformation and allow adversaries to identify patterns in UK support to target counter-messaging efforts. The Cabinet Office argued that the level of detail about its footprint would compromise operational security and effectiveness, while potentially making partner governments hesitant to work with GCSI in future. This would therefore damage the UK's influence and its ability to protect our interests abroad.

#### The Commissioner's position

22. In order for a prejudice based exemption, such as section 27, to be engaged the Commissioner believes that three criteria must be met:
- Firstly, the actual harm which the public authority alleges would, or would be likely, to occur if the withheld information was disclosed has to relate to the applicable interests within the relevant exemption.
  - Secondly, the public authority must be able to demonstrate that some causal relationship exists between the potential disclosure of the information being withheld and the prejudice which the exemption is designed to protect. Furthermore, the resultant prejudice which is alleged must be real, actual or of substance.
  - Thirdly, it is necessary to establish whether the level of likelihood of prejudice being relied upon by the public authority is met – i.e., disclosure would be likely to result in prejudice or disclosure would result in prejudice. If the likelihood of prejudice occurring is one that is only hypothetical or remote the exemption will not be engaged.
23. Furthermore, the Commissioner has been guided by the comments of the Information Tribunal which suggested that in the context of section 27(1), prejudice can be real and of substance 'if it makes relations more

difficult or calls for a particular damage limitation response to contain or limit damage which would not have otherwise have been necessary'.<sup>1</sup>

24. With regard to the first criterion, the Commissioner is satisfied that the interests which the Cabinet Office has identified fall within the scope of those contained at sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) of FOIA.
25. With regard to the second and third criteria and section 27(1)(a), the Commissioner acknowledges the Cabinet Office's position that when providing capability development via GCSI, strict confidentiality is maintained. The Commissioner also notes that, significantly, some of the partner governments have explicitly requested discretion regarding their involvement with GCSI. Therefore, given this general expectation of confidentiality, and the fact that some governments have specifically requested discretion, the Commissioner accepts that it is logical to argue that releasing a list of governments with which GCSI has worked risks directly - and negatively - impacting on the UK's relations with them. That is to say, using the language of the Tribunal decision above, in this context disclosure of the information would either make relations more difficult with such governments and/or potentially require a specific damage limitation response. For the above reasons, the Commissioner is satisfied that risk of such prejudice occurring is real and one that is more than hypothetical.
26. With regard to the second and third criteria and sections 27(1)(c) and (d), the Commissioner accepts that it is logical to argue, given the expectation of confidentiality, that disclosure of the withheld information could result in some partner governments being reluctant or unwilling to work with GCSI in the future. In turn, the Commissioner accepts that such an outcome would directly impact GCSI's ability to protect and promote the UK's interests abroad via partner government's being better placed to deliver effective communications to counter a range of threats, eg defending the democratic process, or countering hybrid threats to security. Furthermore, the Commissioner accepts that it is logical to argue that a breakdown of which governments GCSI has supported over the period covered by the request could provide hostile actors with useful intelligence which could compromise GCSI's work, and in turn the UK's interests. Again, the Commissioner accepts that the risk of such prejudice occurring is one that is real and significant and more than hypothetical.

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<sup>1</sup> Campaign against Arms Trade v the Information Commissioner and Ministry of Defence EA/2007/0040 (26 August 2008)

## Public interest test

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27. Sections 27(1)(a), (c) and (d) are qualified exemptions and therefore subject to the public interest test set out in section 2(2)(b) of FOIA. The Commissioner has therefore considered whether in all the circumstances of the case the public interest in maintaining each of the exemptions cited by the Cabinet Office outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.
28. The complainant argued that there is a clear public interest in transparency around the information falling within the scope of his request. He argued that if civil servants are being deployed to provide press advice overseas, including to countries with questionable human rights records, there is a clear public interest in having this material in the public domain to allow the Cabinet Office to be held accountable for its decision making. He argued that there was also a risk that UK civil servants could be inadvertently providing advice that minimises misconduct by the governments to which they are working with.
29. The Cabinet Office acknowledged that the geographical distribution of staff would enhance public understanding of the UK's global priorities and diplomatic focus areas. It noted that this transparency would enable informed public discussion about the government's international strategy and resource allocation. Furthermore, the Cabinet Office acknowledged that it would also allow for assessment of whether the UK is engaging appropriately with different regions and responding to emerging global challenges.
30. However, the Cabinet Office argued that in its view the public interest in protecting sensitive international relationships and maintaining operational security significantly outweighs the benefits of transparency in this case. It emphasised that revealing the geographical distribution of staff would provide hostile actors with detailed intelligence about UK operations and priorities. It argued that this could compromise ongoing work in sensitive areas, particularly in countering disinformation and supporting electoral integrity. Partner nations' trust in UK discretion would also be damaged, potentially leading to reduced cooperation and diminished UK influence. The risk to operational effectiveness and international relationships would be detrimental to the broader public interest in maintaining the UK's ability to protect and promote its interests abroad.
31. The Commissioner recognises the significance of the points made by the complainant. In light of these points he accepts that there is a clear public interest in transparency in respect of which governments around the world the UK is providing communications advice and support to.



More broadly, the Commissioner also agrees with the Cabinet Office that disclosure of information could inform a debate about the government's international strategy and resource allocation, an outcome which would also be in the public interest.

32. However, the Commissioner recognises the importance of the UK maintaining effective relations with its international partners. In the context of this case disclosure of the information risks undermining the UK's relations with a range of partners, and in turn having a broad impact on the UK's interests abroad by both impacting on the effectiveness of current GCSI operations and reducing the opportunities for GCSI/UK supporting partner governments in the future. The Commissioner is satisfied that such outcomes are firmly against the public interest.
33. Taking the above into account the Commissioner has concluded that the balance of the public interest favours maintaining each of the three exemptions cited by the Cabinet Office. In reaching this conclusion the Commissioner wishes to emphasise that he is not seeking to underestimate the public interest in the disclosure of such information, simply that the public interest for each exemption outweighs this given the broad consequences of disclosure.



## Right of appeal

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34. 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](mailto:grc@justice.gov.uk)

Website: [www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber](http://www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber)

35. 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.
36. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

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