

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 9 March 2021

Public Authority: HM Treasury
Address: 1 Horse Guards Row
London
SW1A 2HQ

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested copies of any correspondence and communications to the Chancellor from The Duke and Duchess of York concerning the late Jeffrey Epstein or his business and charitable organisations made between the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001.
2. Her Majesty's Treasury (the Treasury) refused to confirm or deny whether it held the requested information and cited sections 40(5) (third party personal data) and 37(2) (communications with Her Majesty and other members of the Royal Family) as its basis for doing so.
3. The Commissioner's decision is that the Treasury is entitled to rely on section 40(5B) of the FOIA to neither confirm or deny holding whether it holds the requested information.

Background

4. The Duke of York (The Duke) has said that he first met the American financier Jeffrey Epstein in 1999 through Ms Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's then girlfriend who was already known to The Duke. The Duke and Epstein were first linked in press reports in the UK and the US in 1999, although in a letter to The Times newspaper in March 2011, The Duke's former Private Secretary, Alastair Watson, said that The Duke met

Epstein in the 'early 1990s'.¹ The Duke reportedly flew with Epstein on Epstein's private jet to his private island of Little St James in the US Virgin Islands in February 1999. The Daily Mail reported that 10 months earlier Epstein's logbook showed that he had flown to the same location to meet the Duke's ex-wife, Sarah, Duchess of York.

5. In February 2000, Ms Maxwell and Epstein were photographed together, with The Duke, at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago Club in Florida. Photographs of the three together at Royal Ascot during the summer 2000 were revealed on the BBC Panorama programme in December 2019. In June 2000 Epstein and Ms Maxwell were among the guests at a party hosted by the Queen at Windsor Castle. The Dance of the Decades event was to celebrate four Royal birthdays, including the Duke's 40th. The Duke later told the BBC² that Epstein was there at his invitation, not the Royal Family's, but was to some extent Ms Maxwell's 'plus one'. In December 2000 The Duke threw Ms Maxwell a surprise birthday party at Sandringham, the Queen's Norfolk estate, with Epstein among the guests, in what The Duke later described as '*a straightforward shooting weekend*'. The Duke told the BBC that he used to see Epstein a maximum of three times a year but confirmed that he had been on his private plane, stayed at his private island and at his homes in Palm Beach, Florida and New York.
6. In 2001, The Duke was appointed to be the UK's Special Representative for International Trade and Investment. As the UK's trade envoy, The Duke travelled the world to promote UK business interests abroad, a role which attracted some controversy (not related to Epstein).
7. Allegations about Epstein begin to surface in March 2005 when the parents of a 14 year old girl reported him to the Palm Beach police for molesting her. Epstein was accused of paying girls under the age of 18 to perform sex acts at his Manhattan and Florida mansions between 2002 and 2005. However, in a controversial plea deal, instead of facing federal sex trafficking charges, Epstein pled guilty to a lesser charge of soliciting a minor for prostitution.
8. In July 2006 Epstein was invited to a masked ball at Windsor Castle to celebrate the 18th birthday of Princess Beatrice, The Duke's elder daughter. The previous month Epstein had been charged with one count of solicitation of prostitution. According to The Duke's later

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12659571>

² During the Duke's Newsnight interview aired on 16 November 2019.

account, Epstein had been invited via Ms Maxwell and The Duke was not aware at the time of the invitation '*what was going on in the United States*'. The Duke said that Epstein never mentioned that he was under investigation.

9. In 2008 Epstein was given an 18 month sentence following the plea deal. During his sentence he was able to go on 'work release' to his office for 12 hours a day, six days a week. He was released on probation after 13 months.
10. In 2010 Epstein provided Sarah, Duchess of York with £15,000 to assist with her personal debt. When this was reported by The Telegraph the following year, she made a public apology for accepting the money, stating that:

'I personally, on behalf of myself, deeply regret that Jeffrey Epstein became involved in any way with me. I abhor paedophilia and any sexual abuse of children and know that this was a gigantic error of judgement on my behalf. I am just so contrite I cannot say. Whenever I can I will repay the money and will have nothing ever to do with Jeffrey Epstein ever again. What he did was wrong and for which he was rightly jailed'.
11. In December 2010 The Duke was photographed walking with Epstein in New York's Central Park. The Duke later said that he travelled across the Atlantic to end his friendship with Epstein. It was reported that The Duke had spent four days at Epstein's Manhattan mansion.
12. In July 2011 The Duke stood down from his role as UK trade envoy amid controversy over his relationship with Epstein. A Buckingham Palace spokesperson said that The Duke would '*continue to support business in the UK*' and that he '*will not have a specialist role as defined by government but will undertake trade engagements if requested*'.
13. In 2015 Buckingham Palace denied that The Duke had committed any impropriety after he was named in US court documents related to Epstein. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, The Duke, in his first public engagement since becoming named in the allegations, responded by stating:

'Firstly, I think I must, and want, for the record, to refer to the events that have taken place in the last few weeks. I just wish to reiterate, and to reaffirm, the statements that have already been made on my behalf by Buckingham Palace'.
14. In July 2019, Epstein was arrested again, accused of sex trafficking of underage girls over a number of years. He pleaded not guilty to the charges and was held without bail. He faced up to 45 years in prison if

convicted. On 10 August 2019, Epstein was found dead in his prison cell whilst awaiting trial. His death was determined to be suicide.

15. That same month, pictures emerged in the press allegedly showing The Duke inside Epstein's Manhattan home in 2010. Buckingham Palace released a statement in response saying that *'His Royal Highness deplores the exploitation of any human being and the suggestion he would condone, participate in or encourage any such behaviour is abhorrent'*.
16. Following Epstein's death, and breaking his silence on the issue for the first time since 2015, The Duke released a statement on 24 August 2019 in which he stated that, *'at no stage during the limited time I spent with him did I see, witness or suspect any behaviour of the sort that subsequently led to his arrest and conviction'*.
17. On 16 November 2019, the BBC aired an interview with The Duke on Newsnight. Asked by Emily Maitlis if he regretted his friendship with convicted paedophile Epstein, The Duke said he did not, saying that *'the people that I met and the opportunities that I was given to learn either by him or because of him were actually very useful'*. The interview created a furore and was widely seen as a disaster with The Duke being subject to strong criticism.
18. Days after the Newsnight interview aired, The Duke released a statement announcing that he was *'stepping back from public duties for the foreseeable future'* with permission from The Queen. The Duke stated that he *'deeply sympathised'* with all of Epstein's victims and added that he was *'willing to help any appropriate law enforcement agency with their investigations, if required'*. Businesses, charities and universities had begun to sever ties with The Duke following his interview. In May 2020 it was announced that The Duke would permanently resign from all public roles.

Request and response

19. On 28 August 2019, the complainant wrote to the Treasury and requested information in the following terms:
20. *"I would like to request the following information under The Freedom of Information and The Environmental Information Regulations. I understand my request will take twenty working days to process but I would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt. Please note that the reference to The Duke and Duchess of York should include those two individuals (acting together or separately), their private offices, as well as any press and PR representative acting*

specifically on their behalf.

Please note that the reference to The Chancellor should include The Chancellor and his private office.

Please note that I am only interested in information relating to the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001.

Please note that the reference to correspondence and communications in the questions below should include all traditional forms of correspondence including letters, faxes, telegrams and memos; all emails irrespective of whether they were sent or received via official or private accounts and all messages sent through encrypted messaging services.

Please note that I have confined this request to the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001 because this is a period when the Prince is known to have had a great deal of contact with Mr Epstein.

But please do let me know if you are ALREADY aware of any other relevant contacts and communications which fall outside this period and I will submit another request.

I believe there are strong public interest reasons for disclosure given the continuing controversy surrounding The Prince's relationship with the late Mr Epstein.

1... During the aforementioned period did The Duke and Duchess of York write or correspondence with The Chancellor about any of the following.

a... The American businessman Jeffrey Epstein

b... Any business or charitable organisation run by Jeffrey Epstein either in the UK or abroad.

c... Jeffrey Epstein's nationality and the possibility that he could apply for and or obtain a British passport.

d... Past and current police investigations which have centred on Mr Epstein's private life or his financial affairs.

e... The amount of time spent by Mr Epstein in the UK and his UK residential status.

f... The idea that Mr Epstein should be given a diplomatic or trade role which would involve him representing the UK Government overseas.

2... If the answer to question one is yes can you please provide copies of this written correspondence and communication?

3... Did The Chancellor write or correspond with The Duke and Duchess of York about any of the above (a to f)?

4... If the answer to question three is yes can you please provide copies of this correspondence and communication.

5... If any relevant correspondence and communication has been destroyed can you state when it was destroyed and why. In the case of each piece of destroyed correspondence and communication can you identify the author(s), the recipient(s), the date generated and a brief outline of its contents. If any destroyed documentation continues to be held in another form can you please provide a copy of that documentation."

21. The Treasury provided its response on 25 September 2019 and refused to confirm or deny whether it held the requested information. It confirmed that it was relying in sections 37(2) and 40(5) to do so.
22. The complainant requested an internal review on 26 September and confirmed that he was unhappy with the Treasury's refusal to confirm or deny whether it holds the requested information. He set out that he believed the information is held and that it should be disclosed. He considered that the public interest lay in understanding whether the Duke of York used his position to secure favourable treatment for Jeffrey Epstein or his businesses. He also considered that as the information requested did not relate to the Duke of York's official duties and that as the Duchess of York does not have an official programme of duties, disclosure would not prejudice either party's official duties.
23. The Treasury provided the outcome of its internal review on 27 February 2020 and upheld its original position.

Scope of the case

24. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 27 February 2020 to complain about the way his request for information had been handled.
25. The Commissioner considers that the scope of her investigation is to determine whether the Treasury is entitled to refuse to confirm or deny whether the requested information was held. The Commissioner will consider section 40(5) in the first instance, should she determine that section 40(5) is not engaged, she will proceed to consideration of section 37(2).

Reasons for decision

26. Section 40(5B)(a)(i) of the FOIA provides that the duty to confirm or deny whether information is held does not arise if it would contravene any of the principles relating to the processing of personal data set out in Article 5 of the General Data Protection Regulation EU2016/679 (GDPR) to provide that confirmation or denial.
27. Therefore, for the Treasury to be entitled to rely on section 40(5B) of FOIA to refuse to confirm or deny whether they hold information falling within the scope of the request, the following two criteria must be met:
- Confirming or denying whether this information is held would constitute the disclosure of a third party's personal data; and
 - Providing this confirmation or denial would contravene one of the data protection principles.

Would the confirmation or denial that the requested information is held constitute the disclosure of a third party's personal data?

28. Section 3(2) of the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) defines personal data as '*any information relating to an identified living individual*'.
29. The two main elements of personal data are that the information must relate to a living person and that the person must be identifiable.
30. 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.
31. If the Treasury was to confirm whether it held information within the scope of the request it would be confirming whether either The Duke of York or the Duchess of York had corresponded with the Chancellor³ between the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001, and that the correspondence related to Jeffrey Epstein or his business activities.
32. The Commissioner would note that as the request relates to correspondence from and to only three people, confirming or denying will connect them much more closely than if the request was for any correspondence from a larger group of people.

³ Gordon Brown being the Chancellor of the Exchequer during the time period requested

33. It is important to note that the question of Jeffrey Epstein's privacy rights do not arise, as information relating to a deceased person does not constitute personal data and therefore is not subject to the GDPR.
34. The Commissioner therefore accepts that issuing a confirmation or a denial that information is held would, in itself, reveal personal data about The Duke and Duchess of York. The request is worded in such a way that any information the Treasury confirmed it held or did not hold would be inextricably linked to The Duke and Duchess of York. Therefore, issuing a confirmation or a denial would reveal information which had those individuals as its focus and would therefore reveal their personal data.
35. For the reasons set out above, the Commissioner is satisfied that if the Treasury confirmed whether or not it held the requested information, this would result in the disclosure of a third party's personal data. The first criterion set out above is therefore met.
36. However, the fact that confirming or denying whether the requested information is held would reveal the personal data of a third party does not automatically prevent the Treasury from confirming whether or not it holds this information. The second element of the test is to determine whether such a confirmation or denial would contravene any of the data protection principles.

Would confirming whether or not the requested information is held contravene one of the data protection principles?

37. The Commissioner considers that the most relevant data protection principle is principle (a).
38. Article 5(1)(a)(GDPR) states that:

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

39. In the case of an FOIA request, personal data is processed when the public authority confirms or denies holding information within the scope of the request. This means that the information can only be disclosed – or as in this case the public authority can only confirm whether or not they hold the requested information – if to do so would be lawful (i.e. it would meet one of the conditions of lawful processing listed in Article 6(1)(GDPR), be fair and be transparent).

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

40. Article 6(1) of the GDPR specifies the requirements for lawful processing by providing that *'processing shall be lawful only if and to the extent*

that at least one of the conditions listed in the Article applies'. One of the conditions in Article 6(1) must therefore be met before providing a confirmation or denial in response to the request would be considered lawful.

41. The Commissioner considers that the condition most applicable on the facts of this case would be that contained in Article 6(1)(f) GDPR, which provides as follows:

'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'.

42. In considering the application of Article 6(1)(f) GDPR in the context of a request for information under 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 confirmation as to whether the requested information is held (or not) 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.

43. The Commissioner considers that the test of 'necessity' under stage (ii) must be met before the balancing test under stage (iii) is applied.

(i) Legitimate interests

44. In considering any legitimate interest(s) in the disclosure of the requested information under FOIA, the Commissioner recognises that a wide range of interests may be legitimate interests. They can be the requester's own interests or the interests of third parties, and commercial interests as well as wider societal benefits. These interests can include broad general principles of accountability and transparency for their own sakes, as well as case-specific interests. However, the more trivial and personal the interest, the less likely it is that such an interest will outweigh the rights of the data subjects such that disclosure to the world at large would be justified.

45. In its submissions to the Commissioner, the Treasury accepted that there is a legitimate interest in promoting transparency and accountability, particularly in relation to its interactions with the Royal Family, which would to some extent be advanced by confirming or denying whether the requested information is held.
46. The Commissioner notes that at the time of the complainant's request there was considerable media coverage about the exact nature of the relationship between The Duke of York (and to a lesser extent) the Duchess of York and the late convicted sex offender, Jeffrey Epstein. Much of that media interest stemmed from allegations made against The Duke by Ms Virginia Giuffre, but would dramatically intensify following the BBC's broadcast of The Duke's Newsnight interview on 16 November 2019 (which post-dated the complainant's request and request for internal review but not the provision of that review by the Treasury). As far back as 2011, it had been reported that Epstein had helped the Duchess to pay off her debts, although he had later reportedly threatened to sue her when she apologised for what she herself described as a '*gigantic error of judgement*' in associating with him.
47. The Commissioner considers that there is clearly a very serious and legitimate public interest in knowing whether The Duke and Duchess's ill-judged association with Epstein was exploited for his personal benefit or those of his business activities.
48. In his Newsnight interview, The Duke was not shy about how his friendship with Epstein had provided him (The Duke) with '*very useful*' opportunities '*to learn*'. The Commissioner considers that there is an important and legitimate public interest in knowing what reciprocity Epstein may have received from The Duke, e.g. the possibility of The Duke exercising his significant influence with the Chancellor.
49. Where members of the Royal Family choose to associate or do business with influential, high profile and controversial figures such as Jeffrey Epstein, the Commissioner considers that there should be a reasonable expectation on their part that such involvement or association (even if entirely appropriate and proper) will carry a strong and legitimate interest in terms of transparency and accountability. That legitimate interest will extend to any correspondence or communications which such members of the Royal Family may have had with government departments.
50. The Commissioner notes that there was considerable press speculation about the precise nature of the Duke's relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, however, she also notes that much of the speculation had been generated by The Duke's own actions and decisions, such as continuing to enjoy the hospitality of Epstein even after the latter's criminal

conviction. By contrast, the Duchess of York, as previously noted, explicitly distanced herself from Epstein following his conviction for such serious offences.

51. The Commissioner is mindful from her decisions in previous similar cases that if the Treasury were to confirm, hypothetically, that they held the information requested by the complainant, although it would show that either The Duke or Duchess (or both) had corresponded with the then Chancellor about Jeffrey Epstein, such a confirmation would provide little illumination about the contents of any such correspondence or communications.
52. Nevertheless, the Commissioner considers that there is a legitimate interest in knowing when and where ministers are being corresponded with by members of the Royal Family, particularly where third parties are involved.
53. However, the Commissioner considers that the 'when' in this case is a key factor in the strength and weight of the legitimate interest attached to the information requested. The complainant's request is for information concerning (amongst other topics) '*past and current police investigations*' but he specified that he was only interested in information held between 1 January 2000 and 1 January 2001. The complainant advised the Treasury in his request that he was interested in the stated 12 months '*because this is a period when the Prince is known to have had a great deal of contact with Mr Epstein*'. As detailed in the 'background' section above, it is clear that The Duke did indeed have a significant amount of contact with the financier during this period.
54. It is apparent that The Duke had known Jeffrey Epstein for some time before the period covered by the complainant's request, although the precise date and circumstances of their first meeting remains unclear. According to press reports, the Duchess appears to have met Epstein at least as early as 1998 although her contact with him was clearly much less than her former husband. However, allegations as to Epstein's sex offending did not arise, officially at least, until March 2005, when he was reported to the Florida police by the parents of a 14 year old girl. It would therefore appear that between the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001, there were no police investigations being carried out concerning Epstein and neither The Duke nor the Duchess could have corresponded with the Chancellor about the same.
55. This timing is important as the Commissioner considers that the strength and degree of the legitimate interest attached to correspondence or communications from The Duke or Duchess

concerning Epstein which may be held by the Treasury largely depends on what was known about Epstein's criminality at the time.

56. Much of the furore and public interest surrounding The Duke's friendship with Epstein arises from the fact that he remained in contact with Epstein, even after the financier's criminal conviction. Were it the case that The Duke (or the Duchess) had corresponded or communicated with the Treasury with a view to lobbying or assisting Epstein *after* his conviction in 2008 then this would constitute a strong and compelling legitimate interest in the Treasury providing a confirmation or denial as to whether they held such information.
57. However, the Commissioner considers that the legitimate interest in providing such a confirmation or denial is substantially less for the period 1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001, since this predates the allegations (and subsequent conviction) surrounding Epstein, and the controversy caused by The Duke maintaining his friendship with the convicted sex offender.
58. The Commissioner would emphasise that this does not mean that there would be no legitimate public interest if The Duke (or Duchess) had corresponded with the Chancellor on behalf of Epstein during the period specified in the complainant's request, or that the public interest in any such correspondence would be '*limited*'. Rather, it means that the legitimate interest in providing a confirmation or denial that such information was held would be substantially less strong and compelling than for a more recent period in time.
59. Whilst the Commissioner assesses the legitimate interests at the time a request is made to a public authority, the legitimate interests in the actual correspondence requested (or confirming or denying that such information is held) must take account of the facts and circumstances which existed during the period for which the information is requested. The legitimate interests attached to historical information (if held) cannot be retrospectively bolstered by events or circumstances which post-date the period in question, in this specific case, Epstein's conviction for sex offending and the further serious similar charges which he was facing at the time of his death.
60. With similar considerations in mind, the Commissioner would note that The Duke was appointed to his trade envoy role in 2001, a position in which he would have had greater scope and opportunity, should he wished to have done so, to lobby on behalf of, or otherwise assist Epstein. The twelve month period covered by the complainant's request pre-dates this appointment.

61. Nevertheless, even necessarily discounting what only later became known about Epstein, the Commissioner considers that there is a legitimate interest in knowing whether The Duke and/or Duchess corresponded with the Chancellor during 2000 with a view to lobbying for, or assisting, their then friend Jeffrey Epstein. This is a legitimate interest which the Treasury could satisfy by issuing a confirmation or denial that relevant information is held. The Commissioner therefore considers the legitimate interests test has been met and has thus gone on to consider the necessity test.

(ii) Is confirming whether or not the requested information is held necessary?

62. 'Necessary' means more than desirable, but less than indispensable or absolute necessity. Accordingly, the test is one of reasonable necessity, which involves the consideration of alternative measures, and so confirming whether or not the requested information is held would not be necessary if the legitimate aim could be achieved by something less. Confirmation or denial under FOIA, as to whether the requested information is held, must therefore be the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aim in question.

63. In submissions to the Commissioner, the Treasury set out that in its view, it is not necessary to confirm or deny whether the requested information is held in order to achieve the legitimate interest of promoting transparency and accountability. The Treasury considers that there are other ways of achieving this legitimate interest that do not compromise the privacy and data protection rights of the data subjects, for example, through information already in the public domain, for example information about the Royal Family and the Duke of York's public work⁴ and a statement by the Duke of York which refers to Jeffrey Epstein⁵.

64. The Commissioner considers that the Treasury has failed to apply the necessity test properly because it has failed to identify correctly the

⁴ <https://www.royal.uk/the-duke-york>

<https://www.royal.uk/court-circular>

<https://www.royal.uk/royal-family>

⁵ <https://www.royal.uk/statement-his-royal-highness-duke-york>

legitimate interests in issuing a confirmation or a denial that information was held.

65. In the circumstances of this case, the Commissioner considers that the legitimate interest in understanding whether or not The Duke and/or Duchess corresponded with the Chancellor in relation to Jeffrey Epstein cannot be satisfied in any way other than by the Treasury issuing a confirmation or a denial that they hold relevant information. She therefore considers that the necessity test is met and has gone on to consider the balancing test.

(iii) Balance between legitimate interests and the data subject's interests or fundamental rights and freedoms

66. Even where issuing a confirmation or denial that information is held is necessary to satisfy a legitimate interest, the Commissioner must still balance the legitimate interests against the data subjects' interests or fundamental rights and freedoms. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the impact of the confirmation or denial. For example, if the data subject would not reasonably expect the public authority to confirm whether or not they held the requested information in response to an FOI request, or if such confirmation or denial would cause unjustified harm, their interests or rights are likely to override legitimate interests in confirming or denying whether information is held.
67. In submissions to the Commissioner, the Treasury explained that it considered that the legitimate interest is not sufficiently strong to override the reasonable expectation of privacy of the Duke and Duchess or York. The Treasury cited the First-Tier Tribunal decision *Hastings v Information Commissioner and HM Treasury EA/2019/0333P*⁶ where the Tribunal determined that the balance of interest fell squarely on the side of protecting the data subjects' privacy.
68. The Treasury set out that there must a pressing social need for an interference with privacy rights and that the interference must be proportionate. The right of access under the FOIA does not constitute a pressing social need. The Treasury acknowledged that there is a great deal of media interest in the private life of the Duke of York and in particular his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, however, the Treasury

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[https://informationrights.decisions.tribunals.gov.uk/DBFiles/Decision/i2695/015%20021020%20Hastings,C%20-%20EA2019-0333P,%20051020%20DECISION%20s37\(2\)%20s%2040\(5B\).pdf](https://informationrights.decisions.tribunals.gov.uk/DBFiles/Decision/i2695/015%20021020%20Hastings,C%20-%20EA2019-0333P,%20051020%20DECISION%20s37(2)%20s%2040(5B).pdf)

does not consider that this media interest amounts to a pressing social need such as to override the Duke and Duchess of York's privacy, particularly considering the amount of information that is already in the public domain.

69. The Treasury considers that the data subjects have a legitimate expectation of confidentiality given the principle of confidentiality of communication between the Royal Family and Government. The Treasury explained that as any disclosure under the FOIA is to the world at large and free from any duty of confidence. The Treasury explained that the Duke's relationship with Jeffrey Epstein is a highly personalised matter for both the Duke and Duchess of York. The Treasury explained that although they are both, to varying degrees, public figures they are entitled to a private life, and should be able to correspond on personal matters without the fact of such correspondence being made public.
70. The Treasury considers that confirming or denying whether the requested information is held would cause considerable distress to the data subjects, particularly in the context of the intense media scrutiny around the Duke's personal life.
71. The Treasury concluded that confirming or denying whether it held the requested information would constitute a disproportionate and unwarranted level of interference with the privacy rights of the Duke and Duchess and would therefore be unlawful.
72. The Commissioner notes that at the time of the request, and indeed for the period of time (1 January 2000 to 1 January 2001) covered by the request, The Duke was a senior working Royal, in receipt of the Sovereign Grant. The Duchess, whilst retaining a royal title, is not a prominent member of the Royal Family and does not have a programme of official engagements. Nevertheless, she retains a high public profile for a number of reasons, such as being the mother of Princess Beatrice and Princess Eugenie.
73. Nevertheless, the fact that an individual may have a high profile does not mean that they give up their right to privacy or that they should not have a reasonable expectation that their right to correspond (or not correspond) with a Cabinet Minister should be protected.
74. In this particular request, the complainant has not just sought correspondence from particular individuals, but the correspondence those individuals have engaged in in relation to a particular subject.
75. Whilst the Commissioner recognises that higher profile individuals may have their correspondence handled (or at least considered) by a more senior individual within the Treasury, including the Chancellor, she still

does not consider that this alone is sufficient to remove an individual's expectation of privacy. Ordinary members of the public would not expect the fact or the content of their private correspondence with a government department to be disclosed to the world at large. The Commissioner considers that The Duke and Duchess are still entitled to have this expectation.

76. The Commissioner would note that this case can be distinguished from those concerning 'advocacy correspondence' to government departments by The Prince of Wales. In the Upper Tribunal case of *Evans v Information Commissioner [2012] UKUT 313 (AAC)*⁷ it was acknowledged that it was widely known that The Prince of Wales has written to ministers in the past. In *Evans* the Tribunal found that Mr Evans was entitled to disclosure of 'advocacy correspondence' as *'It will generally be in the overall public interest for there to be transparency as to how and when The Prince of Wales seeks to influence government, although there are cogent arguments for non-disclosure, the public interest benefits of disclosure of 'advocacy correspondence' falling within Mr Evans's requests will generally outweigh the public interest benefits of non-disclosure'*. Section 37 FOIA was amended by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act (CRA) 2010 which introduced the new section 37(1)(aa) to the FOIA. Section 37(1)(aa) exempts information from disclosure if it relates to communications with the heir to, or the person who is for the time being, second in line of succession to the Throne. As an absolute exemption there is no public interest test. However, The Duke and Duchess of York do not hold such positions of influence, and therefore cannot be said to have a similar reasonable expectation that their personal data would be disclosed.
77. The Commissioner has considered whether any already publicly available information on the subject may affect the reasonable expectations of the Duke and/or Duchess. The Commissioner is unaware of any public or official record of such information which would give rise to an expectation of disclosure. However, this is also a valid argument for providing a confirmation or denial, in order to bring transparency to this area. The Commissioner considers that the Treasury's arguments about the expectation of confidentiality of discussions between the Royal Family and government have greater weight and purchase in this case.

⁷ <https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/evans-v-information-commissioner/>

78. In FS50807609 (June 2019) which concerned an information request to the Cabinet Office for copies of correspondence between the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, and The Duke of York and/or Duchess of York, concerning the wedding of their daughter, Princess Eugenie, the Commissioner accepted that in order for members of the Royal Family to be able to carry out diplomatic and goodwill work, they must be able to exchange correspondence with public authorities with the expectation that such information would be treated confidentially. The Commissioner found that providing such a confirmation (or denial) would *'represent a direct infringement of the principle that such communications are considered to be confidential'*. In attributing weight to this argument, the Commissioner noted that the request concerned a senior member of the Royal Family, which in the Commissioner's view, arguably increased the risk of harm occurring if the Cabinet Office complied with section 1(1) (a) in that case.
79. The Commissioner accepted that there was a genuine and legitimate public interest in how Princess Eugenie's wedding was funded, but *'taking into account the wider consequences of undermining the confidentiality of such communications, and given the importance of such confidentiality to the work of the Royal Family'*, the Commissioner concluded that in the circumstances of that request, albeit by a narrow margin, that the public interest in maintaining the exemption (section 37(2) in that case) outweighed the public interest in the Cabinet Office confirming whether or not the requested information was held.
80. In the above case, the Commissioner reached her conclusion, albeit by a narrow margin, because there was some public debate at the time about the amount of public money being spent on the security of the wedding.
81. By contrast, in the present case, the Commissioner recognises that although there is considerable public debate and interest surrounding The Duke's friendship and association with Jeffrey Epstein, that debate and public interest does not strongly focus on the period covered by the complainant's request but rather some years later (primarily after Epstein's criminal conviction).
82. For the reasons set out above, and mindful that the request is largely speculative in nature, the Commissioner does not consider that the legitimate interests in confirming or denying that the requested information is held are sufficiently strong to override the fundamental interests of the data subjects and the public interest in protecting the individuals' privacy. She does not, therefore consider that there is a lawful basis for the processing of the this personal data and, accordingly, confirmation or denial under the FOIA would be unlawful.

83. As confirmation or denial would be unlawful, such processing would breach the first data protection principle and therefore the Treasury is entitled to rely on section 40(5B) of the FOIA in the manner that they did.
84. Having found that the Treasury is entitled to rely on section 40(5B) to refuse to confirm or deny whether they held the information requested, the Commissioner has not gone on to consider the application of section 37(2).

Environmental information

85. In both his request and request for an internal review, the complainant asked the Treasury to consider its responsibilities under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and respond accordingly.
86. Given the wording and nature of his request, the Commissioner is not convinced that any relevant information the Treasury held (if in fact they held any) would be self-evidently environmental – and the complainant has not advanced any arguments to explain why it would be. The Commissioner is therefore satisfied that it was appropriate for the Treasury to handle this request under the FOIA.
87. However, given the similarities between section 40(5) of the FOIA and regulation 13(5) of the EIR, the Commissioner considers that the Treasury would have been able to rely on the latter exception to neither confirm nor deny holding any relevant environmental information.

Other Matters

88. The Commissioner notes that the Treasury took approximately five months to provide its internal review. Whilst there is no statutory timeframe in which an internal review, the Commissioner has issued guidance which states that in no circumstances should it take longer than 40 working days to perform an internal review⁸.
89. The Commissioner asked the Treasury to explain the excessive delay in providing the internal review. The Treasury explained to the Commissioner that it takes its statutory obligations seriously, as well as the wellbeing of its officials. It set out that a combination of prolonged

⁸ <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-freedom-of-information/refusing-a-request/#20>

staff shortages, a headcount reduction and major casework process changes in its Information Rights Unit have resulted in heavier workloads for its staff and a subsequent delay in responses to some internal review cases. The Treasury explained that these circumstances are regrettable but it had managed these circumstances alongside managing the wellbeing of its staff and has continued to work hard to address these staff shortages and process changes and are continuing to work hard to meet its obligations under the FOIA.

90. The Treasury explained that the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, across the UK and subsequent measures put in place across the UK since March 2020, such as working from home, has affected workloads across the Treasury. This has caused increased workloads to the Information Rights Unit due to its staff assisting those officials across the department who are working on significant coronavirus Government schemes and have less time to devote to FOI cases.
91. The Treasury explained that with its reduced headcount and statutory obligations in mind, it had simplified its handling of internal reviews in order to provide shorter, more concise, and as a result, speedier replies to requests for internal review; whilst still maintaining responses to FOI requests within the statutory timeframe. The Treasury confirmed that this approach has helped it respond to internal reviews more swiftly and concisely than previously and within its current headcount limits.
92. The Commissioner understands the pressures that public authorities are under with the unprecedented difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the Commissioner notes that the excessive delay in the internal review occurred prior to the onset of the lockdown measures currently in place. The Commissioner does not therefore accept the Treasury's explanation regarding why it required such a long period of time to complete the internal review.
93. The Commissioner does, however, note that the Treasury has since implemented measures to provide internal reviews in a more timely manner and she expects to see an improvement in the Treasury's timeliness in future.
94. In his complaint to the ICO, the complainant stated that the focus of his complaint was the department's failure to disclose the information he believed it might hold rather than with its application of any particular **exemptions** (Commissioner's emboldening). As the complainant has been advised on several previous occasions, it is important to understand that in NCND cases, it is **solely** the validity (or otherwise) of the exclusion from the duty to confirm or deny which the Commissioner is required to consider – that is the Commissioner's role and remit in such cases.

Right of appeal

95. 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: 0300 1234504

Fax: 0870 739 5836

Email: grc@justice.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

96. 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.
97. 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

**Gerrard Tracey
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Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
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SK9 5AF**