

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 10 December 2021

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

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant requested information from the Cabinet Office regarding information relating to the handling of a previous request for information. By the date of this notice, the Cabinet Office had not issued a substantive response to this request.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the Cabinet Office has failed to complete its deliberations on the balance of the public interest within a reasonable time and has therefore breached section 17(3) of the FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires the Cabinet Office to take the following step to ensure compliance with the legislation.
 - Having confirmed that information is held within the scope of the request: either disclose the requested information or issue a refusal notice in accordance with the requirements of section 17 of the FOIA.
4. The Cabinet Office must take this step within 35 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 30 July 2021, the complainant wrote to the Cabinet Office and requested information in the following terms:

"Dear Sir/Madam,

This is a Freedom of Information request for all internal correspondence relating to the handling of FOI with reference number [reference number redacted].

Yours sincerely"

6. The Cabinet Office acknowledged the request on 26 October 2021.
7. On 26 October 2021, the Cabinet Office wrote to the complainant to explain that it held information relevant to the complainant's request, but that it would need to extend the time taken to complete its public interest test considerations in respect of an exemption under section 36 of the FOIA.

Scope of the case

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 27 October 2021 to complain about the delay in the Cabinet Office's consideration of the public interest test.
9. On 29 October 2021 the Commissioner wrote to the Cabinet Office, reminding it of its responsibilities and asking it to provide a substantive response to the complainant within 10 working days. To date, a substantive response has still not been provided.
10. The Commissioner has considered whether the Cabinet Office has complied with its obligations in relation to section 17 of the FOIA.

Reasons for decision

11. Section 1(1) of the FOIA states that:

"Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled –

(a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and

(b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him."

12. Section 10(1) of the FOIA states that a public authority must respond to a request promptly and *"not later than the twentieth working day following the date of receipt"*.
13. Section 17(3) of the FOIA states that where a public authority is relying on a qualified exemption, it can have a "reasonable" extension of time to consider the public interest in maintaining the exemption or disclosing the information.
14. Although the FOIA does not define what constitutes a reasonable time, the Commissioner considers it reasonable to extend the time to provide a full response, including public interest considerations, by up to a further 20 working days. This means that the total time spent dealing with the request should not exceed 40 working days, unless there are exceptional circumstances. A public authority would need to fully justify any extension beyond 40 working days.
15. In this case, the total time taken by the Cabinet Office has exceeded 40 working days. The Commissioner does not consider there to be any exceptional circumstances and finds that, by failing to complete its deliberations on the public interest within a reasonable time frame, the Cabinet Office has not complied with section 17(3).
16. The Cabinet Office is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of the FOIA and respond to the complainant.

Right of appeal

17. 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

18. 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.
19. 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

Michael Lea
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