

Decision Notice

Decision 112/2019: Ms Y and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

Name of social work adviser

Reference No: 201900767

Decision Date: 2 August 2019



Scottish Information
Commissioner

Summary

The SPSO was asked for the name of a social work adviser in connection with a complaint.

The SPSO withheld the information on the basis that disclosure was prohibited by other legislation (the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002).

The Commissioner investigated and found that SPSO was entitled to withhold the information, on the basis that disclosure was prohibited by other legislation.

Relevant statutory provisions

Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA) sections 1(1) and (6) (General entitlement); 2(1)(a) and (2)(b) (Effect of exemptions); 26(a) (Prohibitions on disclosure)

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 (the SPSO Act) section 19 (Confidentiality of information)

The full text of each of the statutory provisions cited above is reproduced in Appendix 1 to this decision. The Appendix forms part of this decision.

Background

1. On 10 March 2019, Ms Y made a two-part request for information to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO): her appeal relates only to the first part. The information Ms Y requested was the name of a social work adviser used for a complaint about a public authority.
2. The SPSO responded on 4 April 2019, by withholding the name of the social work adviser under exemptions including section 26(a) of FOISA (Prohibitions on disclosure).
3. On 5 April 2019, Ms Y wrote to the SPSO requesting a review of its decision to withhold the adviser's name under FOISA. She explained why she believed the name should be disclosed.
4. The SPSO notified Ms Y of the outcome of its review on 2 May 2019, upholding the original decision with more detailed explanations.
5. On 13 May 2019, Ms Y wrote to the Commissioner's office. She applied to the Commissioner for a decision in terms of section 47(1) of FOISA. Ms Y stated she was dissatisfied with the outcome of the SPSO's review, providing reasons why she believed the name should be disclosed.

Investigation

6. The application was accepted as valid. The Commissioner confirmed that Ms Y made a request for information to a Scottish public authority and asked the authority to review its response to that request before applying to him for a decision.
7. On 14 June 2019, the SPSO was notified in writing that Ms Y had made a valid application. The case was allocated to an investigating officer.

8. Section 49(3)(a) of FOISA requires the Commissioner to give public authorities an opportunity to provide comments on an application. The SPSO was invited to comment on this application and to answer specific questions, focusing on its application of the exemptions claimed.

Commissioner's analysis and findings

9. In coming to a decision on this matter, the Commissioner considered all of the withheld information and the relevant submissions, or parts of submissions, made to him by both Ms Y and the SPSO. He is satisfied that no matter of relevance has been overlooked.

Section 26(a) – Prohibitions on disclosure

10. The Commissioner will firstly consider the SPSO's application of section 26(a) of FOISA.
11. Section 26(a) of FOISA exempts information from disclosure under FOISA, where disclosure of the information is prohibited by or under an enactment. This is an absolute exemption, in that it is not subject to the public interest test set down in section 2(1)(b) of FOISA. In this case, the SPSO argued that such a prohibition was created by sections 12 and 19 of the SPSO Act (see Appendix 1).
12. Section 19(1) of the SPSO Act provides that information obtained by the Ombudsman, or any of the Ombudsman's advisers, in connection with any matter in respect of which a complaint or a request has been made, must not be disclosed except for a limited range of purposes specified elsewhere in section 19 (see Appendix 1 for details). These purposes do not include disclosure of information under FOISA.
13. The SPSO confirmed that the adviser's information had been obtained specifically for the purpose of obtaining social work advice on the complaint referred to in Ms Y's request. In the circumstances, the Commissioner accepts that this is information of a description covered by section 19(1) of the SPSO Act. He also accepts that section 19(1) creates a prohibition on the disclosure of information that engages section 26(a) of FOISA.
14. The Commissioner therefore accepts that the SPSO was entitled to apply the exemption in section 26(a) of FOISA to withhold the information requested by Ms Y. In reaching this conclusion, he has not found it necessary to consider section 12 of the SPSO Act as well as section 19.
15. As the Commissioner has found that the withheld information was correctly withheld under section 26(a) of FOISA, there is no requirement for him to consider the application of section 38(1)(a) of FOISA, also applied by the SPSO in this case.

Decision

The Commissioner finds that the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman complied with Part 1 of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 in responding to the information request made by Ms Y.

Appeal

Should either Ms Y or the SPSO wish to appeal against this decision, they have the right to appeal to the Court of Session on a point of law only. Any such appeal must be made within 42 days after the date of intimation of this decision.

Margaret Keyse
Head of Enforcement

2 August 2019

Appendix 1: Relevant statutory provisions

Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002

1 General entitlement

- (1) A person who requests information from a Scottish public authority which holds it is entitled to be given it by the authority.

...

- (6) This section is subject to sections 2, 9, 12 and 14.

2 Effect of exemptions

- (1) To information which is exempt information by virtue of any provision of Part 2, section 1 applies only to the extent that –

- (a) the provision does not confer absolute exemption; and

...

- (2) For the purposes of paragraph (a) of subsection 1, the following provisions of Part 2 (and no others) are to be regarded as conferring absolute exemption –

...

- (b) section 26;

...

26 Prohibitions on disclosure

Information is exempt information if its disclosure by a Scottish public authority (otherwise than under this Act) —

- (a) is prohibited by or under an enactment;

...

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002

19 Confidentiality of information

- (1) Information obtained by the Ombudsman or any of the Ombudsman's advisers in connection with any matter in respect of which a complaint or a request has been made must not be disclosed except for any of the purposes specified in subsection (2) or as permitted by subsection (3).

- (2) Those purposes are –

- (a) the purposes of –

- (i) any consideration of the complaint or request (including any statement under section 11),
 - (ii) any investigation of the matter (including any report of such an investigation),
 - (b) the purposes of any proceedings for –
 - (i) an offence under the Official Secrets Acts 1911 to 1989 alleged to have been committed in respect of information obtained by the Ombudsman,
 - (ii) an offence of perjury alleged to have been committed in the course of any investigation of the matter,
 - (c) the purposes of an inquiry with a view to the taking of any of the proceedings mentioned in paragraph (b),
 - (d) the purposes of any proceedings under section 14,
 - (e) where subsection (2A) applies, the purposes of a welfare fund review.
- (2A) This subsection applies if –
- (a) the matter in respect of which the complaint or request has been made relates to an exercise of a function by a local authority on an application to receive assistance in pursuance of section 2 of the 2015 Act, and
 - (b) the welfare fund review relates to the decision made by the authority on that application.
- (2B) Information obtained by the Ombudsman or any of the Ombudsman’s advisers in connection with a welfare fund review must not be disclosed except for any of the purposes specified in subsection (2C) or as permitted by subsection (3).
- (2C) Those purposes are –
- (a) the purposes of the review,
 - (b) the purposes of any proceedings for –
 - (i) an offence under the Official Secrets Acts 1911 to 1989 alleged to have been committed in respect of information obtained by the Ombudsman,
 - (ii) an offence of perjury alleged to have been committed in the course of the review,
 - (c) the purposes of an inquiry with a view to the taking of any of the proceedings mentioned in paragraph (b),
 - (d) where subsection (2D) applies, the purposes of any consideration of a complaint or request in respect of a matter, or the investigation of the matter.
- (2D) This subsection applies if –
- (a) the matter in respect of which the complaint or request has been made relates to an exercise of a function by a local authority on an application to receive assistance in pursuance of section 2 of the 2015 Act, and

- (b) the welfare fund review relates to the decision made by the authority on that application.
- (3) Where information referred to in subsection (1) or (2B) is to the effect that any person is likely to constitute a threat to the health or safety of individuals (in particular or in general), the Ombudsman may disclose the information to any person to whom the Ombudsman thinks it should be disclosed in the interests of the health or safety of the particular individuals or, as the case may be, individuals in general.
- (4) In relation to information disclosed under subsection (3), the Ombudsman must-
 - (a) where the Ombudsman knows the identity of the person to whom the information relates, inform that person of the disclosure of the information and of the identity of the person to whom it has been disclosed, and
 - (b) inform the person from whom the information was obtained of the disclosure.
- (4A) The duty under subsection (4)(a) to inform a person about the identity of a person to whom information has been disclosed does not apply where informing the former person is likely to constitute a threat to the health and safety of the latter person.
- (5) It is not competent to call upon the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman's advisers to give evidence in any proceedings (other than proceedings referred to in subsection (2)) of matters coming to the knowledge of the Ombudsman or advisers in connection with any matter in respect of which a complaint or request has been made.
- (5A) It is not competent to call upon the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman's advisers to give evidence in any proceedings (other than proceedings referred to in subsection (2C)) of matters coming to the knowledge of the Ombudsman or advisers in connection with a welfare fund review.
- (6) A member of the Scottish Executive may give notice in writing to the Ombudsman with respect to –
 - (a) any document or information specified in the notice, or
 - (b) any class of document or information so specified,
 that, in the opinion of the member of the Scottish Executive, the disclosure of the document or information, or of documents or information of that class, would be contrary to the public interest.
- (7) Where such a notice is given nothing in this Act is to be construed as authorising or requiring the Ombudsman or any of the Ombudsman's advisers to communicate to any person or for any purpose any document or information specified in the notice, or any document or information of a class so specified.
- (8) Information obtained from -
 - (a) the Information Commissioner by virtue of section 76 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (c.36)
 - (b) the Scottish Information Commissioner by virtue of section 63 of the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (asp 13), is to be treated for the

purposes of subsection (1) as obtained in connection with any matter in respect of which a complaint or request has been made.

- (9) In relation to such information, subsection (2)(a) has effect as if-
 - (a) the reference in sub-paragraph (i) to the complaint or request were a reference to any complaint or request, and
 - (b) the reference in sub-paragraph (ii) to the matter were a reference to any matter.
- (10) In this section and section 20 references to the Ombudsman's advisers are to persons from whom the Ombudsman obtains advice under paragraph 10 of schedule 1.

Scottish Information Commissioner

Kinburn Castle
Doubledykes Road
St Andrews, Fife
KY16 9DS

t 01334 464610

f 01334 464611

enquiries@itspublicknowledge.info

www.itspublicknowledge.info