

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (Section 50) Environmental Information Regulations 2004

Decision Notice

Date: 15 December 2009

Public Authority: Northern Ireland Office
Address: 11 Millbank London
SW1P 4PN

Summary

The complainant requested copies of correspondence exchanged between The Prince of Wales and government ministers at the public authority over an eight month period. The complainant also requested a list and schedule of this correspondence. The public authority initially relied on the interaction of sections 37(1)(a) and 37(2) to refuse to confirm or deny whether it held any correspondence falling within the scope of the requests. During the course of the Commissioner's investigation the public authority confirmed to the complainant that it did hold correspondence falling within the scope of his requests but it considered this information to be exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1). The public authority also confirmed that it believed that a list and/or schedule of correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales would be exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1) of the Act and that a list and/or schedule of information sent to The Prince of Wales would be exempt on the basis of sections 37(1)(a) and 40(2) of the Act.

The Commissioner has concluded that some of the correspondence is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 41(1) of the Act but the remainder of the correspondence does not meet the requirements of section 41(1)(a) and thus cannot be exempt under this exemption. However, the Commissioner is satisfied that some of the correspondence is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 37(1)(a). The Commissioner has also concluded that a list and/or schedule of correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales are exempt on the basis of section 41(1) and a list and/or schedule of information sent to The Prince of Wales are exempt on the basis of section 37(1)(a). He also finds that some of the contents of the correspondence fall within the definition of environmental information under the Environmental Regulations 2004, and accordingly exempt from disclosure on the basis of the exception at regulation 12(5)(f).

The Commissioner's Role

1. The Commissioner's duty is to decide whether a request for information made to a public authority has been dealt with in accordance with the requirements of Part 1 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the "Act"). This Notice sets out his decision.
2. The Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) were made on 21 December 2004, pursuant to the EU Directive on Public Access to Environmental Information (Council Directive 2003/4/EC). Regulation 18 provides that the EIR shall be enforced by the Information Commissioner (the "Commissioner"). In effect, the enforcement provisions of Part 4 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the "Act") are imported into the EIR.

The Request

3. The complainant submitted an email to the public authority on 11 April 2005. This email contained a number of requests which focused on correspondence which the public authority may have exchanged with The Prince of Wales. The full text of this email is included in an annex which is appended to this Notice.
4. The public authority issued a refusal notice on 31 May 2005 in which it refused to confirm or deny whether it held any information falling within the scope of the complainant's requests on the basis of section 37(2).
5. On 3 June 2005 the complainant asked the public authority to conduct an internal review of this decision.
6. The public authority informed the complainant of the outcome of the review on 30 June 2005. The review upheld the decision set out in the refusal notice.
7. Following the intervention of the Commissioner (details of which are contained below) the public authority contacted the complainant again in March 2009. In this communication the public authority confirmed that it had re-considered the balance of the public interest test and it believed that the public interest now favoured confirming that it did hold information falling within the scope of the requests. However, the public authority explained that it believed that all of this information was exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 37(1)(a) and some of the information was also exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 41(1) and 40(2). The public authority also confirmed that it did not hold a list or schedule of correspondence falling within the scope of the requests and although it agreed that it could create one, it believed the contents would also be exempt from disclosure.

The Investigation

Scope of the case

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 24 March 2006 and asked him to consider the public authority's refusal to confirm or deny whether it held information falling within the scope of his requests.
9. Following discussions between the public authority and the Commissioner in March 2009 the public authority confirmed to complainant that it held information falling within the scope his requests. Following this confirmation, the complainant asked the Commissioner to consider the public authority's decision:
 - To withhold information the correspondence falling within the scope of his requests on the basis of section 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1); and
 - Not to provide a list and/or schedule of the correspondence which was held.

Chronology

10. Although the complainant originally contacted the Commissioner in March 2006, due to a backlog of complaints received about public authorities' compliance with the Act, the Commissioner was unable to begin his investigation of this case immediately. Therefore it was not until 13 February 2007 that the Commissioner contacted the public authority in relation to this complaint.
11. The Commissioner also contacted the Cabinet Office in order to discuss the issues relating to this case as a number of other government departments had received similar requests seeking details of correspondence with The Prince of Wales and the Cabinet Office was involved in co-ordinating the various public authorities' responses. (The Commissioner subsequently received a number of complaints about the responses provided by these public authorities).
12. The public authority provided the Commissioner with a substantive response to his letter of 13 February 2007 on 11 July 2007.
13. In March 2008 representatives of the Royal Household, the Cabinet Office and the Commissioner's office met to discuss the issues raised by the various complaints the Commissioner has received involving requests for The Prince of Wales' correspondence with government departments.
14. On 7 July 2008 the Commissioner wrote to the Royal Household in order to seek further views on the application of the exemptions in these cases, in particular the refusal to confirm or deny whether information falling within the scope of the requests was in fact held.
15. The Commissioner received a response from the Royal Household in November 2008.

16. In December 2008 representatives of the Royal Household, the Cabinet Office and the Commissioner's office met again in order to further discuss the issues raised by these complainants.
17. On 27 January 2009 the Commissioner contacted the public authority to explain that following discussions with the Cabinet Office and the Royal Household, it was his understanding that the public authority was no longer refusing to confirm or deny whether it held information falling within the scope of these requests. The Commissioner therefore asked the public authority to contact the complainant and confirm to him that it did in fact hold information which fell within the scope of his requests. The Commissioner also asked the public authority to provide his office with copies of the information which fell within the scope of these requests.
18. As noted above, in March 2009 the public authority contacted the complainant and confirmed that it held information but considered it to be exempt from disclosure on the basis of the exemptions contained at sections 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1). The public authority also confirmed that its position was that it did not hold a list or schedule of correspondence falling within the scope of the requests.
19. Also in March 2009 the public authority provided the Commissioner with copies of the information which it believed fell within the scope of these requests.
20. The Commissioner contacted the public authority again on 27 August 2009 and asked it to clarify its position with regard to the application of the various exemptions. The Commissioner also noted that his initial view was that some of the withheld information may constitute environmental information as defined by the EIR. He therefore asked the public authority to provide details of which exceptions within the EIR it would seek to rely on should the Commissioner conclude that any of the information was environmental information.
21. The Commissioner received a response to this letter from the Cabinet Office on 7 October 2009 and from the public authority on 8 October 2009. The public authority confirmed that it did not believe that any of the withheld information fell within the scope of the EIR but if it did it would be exempt from disclosure on the basis of the exceptions contained at regulations 12(5)(d), 12(5)(f) and 13(1).

Findings of fact

22. As the information in the Chronology explains the Commissioner exchanged communications about this complaint both with the public authority to which the request was submitted and also with the Cabinet Office. In some instances the Cabinet Office has provided the Commissioner with a submission on the application of a particular exemption and asked the Commissioner to consider these submissions when reaching his decision in all cases involving requests for correspondence with The Prince of Wales. The Commissioner has agreed to do so. Therefore although for consistency and ease of reference the remainder of this Notice suggests that information or a particular submission has been provided by the public authority it maybe the case that it was in fact provided by the Cabinet Office on its behalf.

23. At the time that this Notice is being issued the public authority's position is that **all** of the correspondence falling within the scope of the requests is exempt from disclosure on the basis the exemptions contained at sections 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1) of the Act.
24. The public authority has also confirmed that although it believed that the withheld information did not constitute 'environmental information' it believed that it would be exempt from disclosure under the EIR by virtue of regulations 12(5)(d), 12(5)(f) and 13(1).
25. The public authority has also confirmed that it believed that a list and/or schedule of correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales would be exempt from disclosure on the basis of sections 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1) of the Act and that a list and/or schedule of information sent to The Prince of Wales would be exempt on the basis of sections 37(1)(a) and 40(2) of the Act.

Analysis

26. A full text of all the statutory provisions referred to in this section can be found in the legal annex

Is any of the requested information 'environmental'?

27. Regulation 2(1) of the EIR explains that defines 'environmental information' as any information in any material form on:

'(a) the state of the elements of the environment, such as air and atmosphere, water, soil, land, landscape and natural sites including wetlands, coastal and marine areas, biological diversity and its components, including genetically modified organisms, and the interaction among these elements;

(b) factors, such as substances, energy, noise, radiation or waste, including radioactive waste, emissions, discharges and other releases into the environment, affecting or likely to affect the elements of the environment referred to in (a);

(c) measures (including administrative measures), such as policies, legislation, plans, programmes, environmental agreements, and activities affecting or likely to affect the elements and factors referred to in (a) and (b) as well as measures or activities designed to protect those elements;

(d) reports on the implementation of environmental legislation;

(e) cost-benefit and other economic analyses and assumptions used within the framework of the measures and activities referred to in (c); and

(f) the state of human health and safety, including the contamination of the

food chain, where relevant, conditions of human life, cultural sites and built structures inasmuch as they are or may be affected by the state of the elements of the environment referred to in (a) or, through those elements, by any of the matters referred to in (b) and (c)'

28. The Commissioner considers that the phrase 'any information...on' should be interpreted widely in line with the purpose expressed in the first recital of the Council Directive 2003/4/EC, which the EIR enact. In the Commissioner's opinion a broad interpretation of this phrase will usually include information concerning, about or relating to the measure, activity, factor etc in question. In other words, information that would inform the public about the matter under consideration and would therefore facilitate effective participation by the public in environmental decision making is likely to be environmental information.
29. The Commissioner also finds support for this approach in two decisions issued by the Information Tribunal. The first being *The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform v Information Commissioner and Friends of the Earth* (EA/2007/0072). In this case the Tribunal found:

'that the Decision Notice [in which the Commissioner has concluded that none of the requested information was environmental information] fails to recognise that information on 'energy policy' in respect of 'supply, demand and pricing' will often fall within the definition of 'environmental information' under Regulation 2(1) EIR. In relation to the Disputed Information we find that where there is information relating to energy policy then that information is covered by the definition of environmental information under EIR. Also we find that meetings held to consider 'climate change' are also covered by the definition.' (Tribunal at paragraph 27).

30. In reaching this conclusion the Tribunal placed weight on two arguments advanced by Friends of the Earth (FoE), the first being that information on energy policy, including the supply, demand and pricing issues, will often affect or be likely to affect the environment and the second that term 'environmental information' should be interpreted broadly:

'23. Mr Michaels on behalf of FOE contends that policies (sub-para (c)) on 'energy supply, demand and pricing' often will (and are often expressly designed to) affect factors (sub-para (b)) such as energy, waste and emissions which themselves affect, or are likely to affect, elements of the environment (sub-para (a)) including, in particular and directly, the air and atmosphere and indirectly (in respect of climate change) the other elements.

24. He provides by way of simple and practical example, national policy on supply, demand and pricing of different energy sources (e.g., nuclear, renewable, coal, gas) has potentially major climate change implications and is at the heart of the debate on climate change. Similarly, national policy on land use planning or nuclear power has significant effect on the elements of the environment or on factors (e.g. radiation or waste) affecting those elements.

25. Mr Michaels further argues that the term 'environmental information' is required to be construed 'very broadly' so as to give effect to the purpose of the Directive. Recognition of the breadth of meaning to be applied has been recognised by the European Court of Justice, by the High Court and by this Tribunal in *Kirkaldie v Information Commissioner & Thanet District Council* EA/2006/001. The breadth is also recognised in the DEFRA guidance 'What is covered by the regulations'. It does not appear, Mr Michaels argues, that the Commissioner has adopted such an approach.'

31. Moreover in reaching this conclusion the Tribunal appeared to reject BERR's arguments that there must be a sufficiently close connection between the information and a probable impact on the environment before it can be said that the information is 'environmental information'.
32. The second Tribunal decision is *Ofcom v Information Commissioner and T-Mobile* (EA/2006/0078) which involved a request for the location, ownership and technical attributes of mobile phone cellular base stations. Ofcom had argued that the names of Mobile Network Operators were not environmental information as they did not constitute information 'about either the state of the elements of the environment....or the factors.....that may affect those elements.'
33. The Tribunal disagreed, stating at para 31 that:

'The name of a person or organisation responsible for an installation that emits electromagnetic waves falls comfortably within the meaning of the words "any information...on....radiation". In our view it would create unacceptable artificiality to interpret those words as referring to the nature and effect of radiation, but not to its producer. Such an interpretation would also be inconsistent with the purpose of the Directive, as expressed in the first recital, to achieve "... a greater awareness of environmental matters, a free exchange of views [and] more effective participation by the public in environmental decision making...". It is difficult to see how, in particular, the public might participate if information on those creating emissions does not fall within the environmental information regime.'
34. The Commissioner has reviewed the withheld information and has concluded that some of the information constitutes environmental information because it falls within the definition in regulation 2(1) of the EIR. Therefore this information must be dealt with under the EIR rather than under the Act. The information that does not fall within the definition in regulation 2(1) must be considered under the Act.
35. However, the Commissioner is not able to explain which sections of the withheld information he considers to be environmental, and why, in the body of this Notice without potentially revealing the content of this information. Therefore the Commissioner has included in the confidential annex, which will be provided to the public authority but not the complainant, an explanation of which parts of the withheld information he has concluded is environmental information and why.

Exemptions and exceptions

36. Given that the Commissioner has found that some of the withheld information is environmental information and some is not, the Commissioner must consider both the exceptions contained in the EIR and the exemptions contained in the Act.
37. The Commissioner has considered the non-environmental information first, albeit that there is inevitably some cross over between the reasoning why the exemptions contained in the Act and the exceptions contained in the EIR may apply to the withheld information.

The request for the correspondence

Section 41 – information provided in confidence

38. The Commissioner has been provided with detailed submissions to support the public authority's position that all of the withheld information is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 41 of the Act.
39. This section states that:

 '41-(1) Information is exempt information if -
 - (a) it was obtained by the public authority from any other person (including another public authority), and
 - (b) the disclosure of the information to the public (otherwise than under this Act) by the public authority holding it would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by that or any other person.'
40. Therefore for this exemption to be engaged two criteria have to be met. The public authority has to have obtained the information from a third party **and** the disclosure of that information has to constitute an actionable breach of confidence.

Section 41(1)(a)

41. The public authority has argued that correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales to it meets the first limb of section 41 because it is clearly information it received from another person. On this basis the Commissioner accepts that such information meets the requirements of section 41(1)(a).
42. However, the public authority has also argued that the requirement of section 41(1)(a) of the Act that information be 'obtained from another person' is sufficiently broad to include information about a person, as well as information actually provided by a person. To support this approach the public authority made the point that the modern law of breach of confidence (which is discussed in detail below) covers information not only obtained from a person, but also information

about a person, for example a photograph.¹ On this basis the public authority has argued that correspondence to The Prince of Wales from the Northern Ireland Office also falls within the scope of section 41(1)(a) because the content of the correspondence clearly indicates what matters His Royal Highness has raised with Ministers.

43. The Commissioner recognises that deciding whether information has been 'obtained from any other person' requires an assessment of the content of information not simply of the mechanism by which it was imparted and recorded.² However, the Commissioner does not agree with the public authority's assertion that simply because information it holds is about an identifiable individual it constitutes information obtained from that person. In the Commissioner's view such an interpretation of section 41(1)(a) is too broad for two reasons:
44. Firstly, although the Commissioner accepts – for the reasons set out below – that the modern law of breach of confidence needs to be taken into account when considering whether disclosure of information would constitute an actionable breach and thus engage section 41(1)(b), he does not believe that the case law referenced by the public authority is directly relevant to the engagement of section 41(1)(a). This is because the way in which section 41 of the Act is drafted means that information is not exempt simply if its disclosure would constitute an actionable breach of confidence as in common law. Rather the inclusion of section 41(1)(a) means that the public authority also has to have received that information from a third party. In effect section 41 of the Act creates an additional requirement for withholding information which is confidential under the common law concept of confidentiality and it would be inappropriate simply to apply the common law test to lower the threshold of engaging section 41 of the Act.
45. Secondly, the Commissioner's believes that the approach suggested by the public authority effectively represents an attempt to broaden out the basis upon which section 41 is engaged to also ensure that it offers protection to an individual's privacy regardless of whether a public authority had 'obtained' information about that individual from a third party. However, in the Commissioner's view such an interpretation of section 41 is not necessary; whilst this exemption may not always protect an individual's privacy in the way in which the public authority is arguing that it should, the Act clearly offers weighty protection to an individual's privacy in the form of the exemption contained at section 40 of the Act.
46. Therefore although the Commissioner accepts that it is possible for correspondence which was created by the public authority and sent to The Prince of Wales to still be meet the requirements of section 41(1)(a), whether it does in any particular case will depend upon the content of the information which was communicated.

¹ The public authority referenced the case of *Campbell v MGN Ltd* [2004] 2 AC 457 in which a claim was brought by Ms Campbell under the tort of breach of confidence in respect of details of drug addiction treatment and covertly taken photographs.

² The Tribunal confirmed that such an approach was correct in *DBERR v Information Commissioner and FoE* (EA/2007/0072) – see para 78.

47. In the Commissioner's opinion there has to be a significant degree of similarity to the information which the public authority is sending to The Prince of Wales and the information which His Royal Highness originally provided to the public authority. In the Commissioner's opinion it is not sufficient for the purposes of section 41(1)(a) that the information is simply on the same topic; the correspondence being sent to The Prince of Wales has to reflect the actual views or opinions His Royal Highness may have raised on a particular topic.
48. Having looked at the content of the correspondence falling within the scope of this case that the public authority sent to The Prince of Wales, the Commissioner accepts that some of it reflects the views of The Prince of Wales such that this correspondence meets the requirements of section 41(1)(a). In relation to the remaining contents of the correspondence, the Commissioner considers that they reflect the views and opinions of the public authority and/or the sender of the letter and do not therefore meet the requirements of section 41(1)(a).
49. The Commissioner has set out in the confidential annex which parts of the relevant correspondence do not in his opinion meet the requirements of section 41(1)(a).

Section 41(1)(b)

The Public Authority's position on an actionable breach of confidence

50. The public authority has provided the Commissioner with detailed submissions to support its position that the disclosure of the withheld information would constitute an actionable breach and thus meet the requirements of section 41(1)(b). The Commissioner has summarised these submissions below and then gone on to explain his view as to whether they apply to the information which has been withheld in this case.
51. In most cases involving the application of section 41 which the Commissioner has previously considered, the requested information has been of a commercial nature rather than the more personal information which is the focus of this case. The approach usually adopted by the Commissioner in assessing whether disclosure commercial information would constitute an actionable breach is to follow the test of confidence set out in *Coco v A N Clark (Engineering) Ltd* [1968] FSR 415 (the *Coco* test).
52. This judgment suggested that the following three limbed test should be considered in order to determine if information was confidential:
 - Whether the information had the necessary quality of confidence;
 - Whether the information was imparted in circumstances importing an obligation of confidence; and
 - Whether an unauthorised use of the information would result in detriment to the confider.
53. In submissions to the Commissioner the public authority explained why the *Coco* test no longer represented the law in respect of information such as The Prince

of Wales' correspondence which is the focus of this case. These submissions are summarised below:

54. The public authority noted that the *Coco* test involved a claim in relation to commercially confidential information whereas the information which was the focus of this case, The Prince of Wales' correspondence, was essentially personal information. The public authority explained that more recent cases than *Coco v Clark* had considered the law of confidence and/or misuse of personal or private information in the context of Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). Such cases included *Campbell v MGN* and *HRH The Prince of Wales v Associated Newspapers Ltd.*³ The public authority argued that it was the approach to the law of confidence set out in these cases, rather than in *Coco* that should be considered in the circumstances of this case.
55. In support of this approach the public authority referenced the only High Court case to date to deal with the application of section 41 of the Act. This case involved a request submitted to the Home Office by the British Union for Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) for applications for licenses to conduct animal experimentation.
56. The public authority highlighted the fact that in his judgment in this case Eady J confirmed that the *Coco* test was not the only test of confidence that existed and that recognition had to be given to how misuse of private information may give rise to an actionable breach of confidence and furthermore any assessment of confidence had to take into account the impact of the Human Rights Act.⁴
57. The public authority drew the Commissioner's attention to a number of sections of Eady J's judgment, including:

'[28] It is clear, for example, that the law of confidence is not confined to the principles governing the circumstances in which an equitable duty of confidence will arise; nor to the specialist field of commercial secrets. An obligation of confidence can arise by reason of an agreement, express or implied, and presumably also by the imposition of a statutory duty. Nowadays, in addition, it is recognized that there is a distinction to be drawn between "old-fashioned breach of confidence" and the tort law now characterized as "misuse of private information": see e.g. per Lord Nicholls in *Campbell v MGN Ltd* [2004] 2 AC 457 at [14] and the discussion by Buxton LJ in *McKennitt v Ash* [2008] QB 73, at 80 et seq., under the heading "A taxonomy of the law of privacy and confidence".

[29] [Counsel for the requester] described *Coco v Clark* as being "then and now the leading authority on breach of confidence". But there would seem to be traps for the unwary in placing unqualified reliance upon the case without paying due regard to what Lord Nicholls had to say about it in *Campbell v MGN Ltd* in the section of his speech entitled "Breach of confidence: misuse of private information".

³ Full citation: *HRH The Prince of Wales v Associated Newspapers Ltd* [2006] EWHC 522 (Ch), [2006] EWCA Civ 1776 [2008] Ch 57.

⁴ *The Home Office v British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection and Information Commissioner* [2008] EWCH 892 (QB) 25 April 2008.

And:

'[32]It is thus important to bear in mind, for the present case, the broad principle, stated by Buxton LJ in *McKennitt* at [11], that "...in order to find the rule of the English law of breach of confidence we now have to look in the jurisprudence of articles 8 and 10." The Tribunal did not address these developments at all and thus proceeded on the basis of an incomplete understanding of the present law.'

58. The public authority also noted the fact that Eady J doubted that the first bullet point of the *Coco* test was still applicable to the modern of law of confidence:

'[33]It is also beyond question that some information, especially in the context of personal matters, may be treated as private, even though it is quite trivial in nature and not such as to have about it any inherent "quality of confidence": see e.g. *Browne v Associated Newspapers Ltd* [2008] QB 103, 113-114...*McKennitt v Ash*...and the remarks of Lord Nicholls in *Campbell v MGN Ltd*...Thus, an obligation of confidentiality may sometimes arise in respect of such information merely because it is imparted as being confidential, either expressly or impliedly. Also, the law may imply an obligation on the basis that a communication has taken place in the context of an established relationship, which would itself give rise to such a duty.'

59. Indeed in his conclusion the public authority highlighted the fact that Eady J suggested that the only limb of the *Coco* test that may relevant was the second:

'[35] Another way of putting the point would be to say that the law will afford protection, sometimes, where only the second of the *Coco v Clark* tests is satisfied: that is to say, the right to protection arises because it is clear to those concerned that the circumstances in which the information was imparted themselves give rise to a reasonable expectation of privacy. I would prefer, however, not to be tied to *Coco v Clark* where it simply has no application. (It was not even cited in the Court of Appeal in *McKennitt*, *Browne* or *HRH The Prince of Wales v Associated Newspapers Ltd* [2008] Ch 57).

[36]...in the light of the modern authorities there is no reason to suppose that even an "actionable" breach of confidence, where sued upon, must inevitably be founded on the formulation of Sir Robert Megarry.'

60. In light of this, the public authority explained that the test of confidence not only included the traditional breach as described in *Coco v Clark* but also claims to prevent the misuse of information entitled to protection under Article 8 ECHR.

61. Article 8 provides that:

'1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.

2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society for the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the

protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.'

62. The public authority highlighted the fact that the concept of 'private life' within Article 8(1) is a broad one, based upon the need to protect a person's autonomy and relationships with others from outside interference. The public authority argued that the right is not confined to activities which are personal in the sense of being intimate or domestic but can be extended to business or professional activities. To support this broad interpretation the public authority quoted the European Court of Human Rights case of *Niemietz v Germany* and also noted that this judgment confirmed that Article 8(1) was intended to protect correspondence, (i.e. the type of information which is the focus of this case):

'[29]The Court does not consider it possible or necessary to attempt an exhaustive definition of the notion of "private life". However, it would be too restrictive to limit the notion to an "inner circle" in which an individual may choose to live his personal life as he chooses at to exclude entirely the outside world not encompassed within that circle. Respect for private life must also comprise to a certain degree the right to establish and develop relationships with other human beings.

There appears, furthermore, to be no reason of principle why this understanding of the notion of "private life" should be taken to exclude activities of a professional or business nature since it is, after all, in the course of their working lives that the majority of people have a significant, if not the greatest, opportunity of developing relationships with the outside world...'

And:

'[32] In this connection, it is sufficient to note that the provision does not use, as it does for the word "life", any adjective to qualify the word "correspondence". And, indeed, the Court has already held that, in the context of correspondence in the form of telephone calls, no such qualification is to be made...in a number of cases relating to correspondence with a lawyer...the Court did not even advert to the possibility that Article 8 might be inapplicable on the ground that the correspondence was of a professional nature.'⁵

63. Consequently, the public authority suggested that a number of different circumstances may arise in which a breach of confidence could exist:
- Some claims for the misuse of private information will cover information which has the quality of confidence, and which was imparted in circumstances inconsistent with a pre-existing relationship of confidence, but which is not entitled to protection under Article 8, e.g. trade secrets. Such claims would fall within the ambit of the traditional test set out in *Coco v Clark*.
 - Some claims will cover private information which is disclosed in breach of Article 8 ECHR, but which was not imparted in circumstances importing an obligation of confidence.

⁵ *Niemietz v Germany* (1993) 16 EHRR 97

- Further claims will concern information which was both confidential information in the sense that it was imparted in circumstances importing an obligation of confidence, and information entitled to protection under Article 8 ECHR, e.g. many claims in respect of private letters such as the information which was the focus of this present case.
64. In consideration of each of these circumstances the public authority noted that it was not necessary for any particular detriment to be demonstrated in order for a duty of confidence to be actionable. The public authority explained that this position was supported by the judge in *Coco v Clark* who questioned whether in fact detriment would always be a necessary ingredient of an actionable breach (para 421) and furthermore by the fact that in order for Article 8(1) to be engaged it was not necessary to demonstrate any detriment.
65. The public authority explained that in its view the withheld information in this case was confidential information within the sense of the traditional *Coco* test (albeit that for the reasons set out above it believed that this was incorrect test to apply) and also constituted confidential information because it attracted the protection of Article 8(1).
66. With regard to why the information met the three limbs of the *Coco* test the public authority emphasised the significance of the constitutional convention that The Prince of Wales should be educated in, and about, the business of government in order to prepare him for the time when he will be the Sovereign, without that process putting at risk the political neutrality which is essential to the role and functions of the Sovereign. It is essential to the operation of the convention that His Royal Highness should be able to express views to Ministers on important issues of government and moreover should receive their views in response. This also ensures that The Prince of Wales can carry out his role as Privy Councillor, a Counsellor of State and as next in line to the throne he also has a statutory duty under the Regency Act 1937 to act for The Queen during her absence or incapacitation. The public authority argued that convention that The Prince of Wales will be informed about the business of government in order to prepare for being Sovereign can only be maintained if both His Royal Highness, and government Ministers who advise and inform him about the business of government, can be assured that their communications with each other remain confidential.
67. The public authority explained that this convention is inextricably tied to the role of the Sovereign in the British Constitution and the separate constitutional convention which the Sovereign has: namely to counsel, encourage and warn the Government and thus to have opinions on government policy and to express those opinions to her Ministers. However, whatever personal opinions the Sovereign may hold she is bound to accept and act on the advice of her Ministers and is obliged to treat her communications with them as absolutely confidential. Such confidentiality is necessary in order to ensure that the Sovereign's political neutrality is not compromised in case Her Majesty has to exercise her executive powers, e.g. initiating discussions with political parties in the scenario of a hung Parliament in order to ensure that a government can be formed. Consequently, The Prince of Wales must not be in a position where his position of political

neutrality is compromised (or appear to be compromised) because it cannot be restored on accession to the throne. The public authority argued that if correspondence between The Prince of Wales and government Ministers was routinely disclosed His Royal Highness' political neutrality would be put at risk.

68. In light of the constitutional convention relating to the Heir to Throne, the public authority argued that it was clear that the withheld information had the quality of confidence: the content of the information was clearly not of a trivial nature but rather focused on the business of government. The information was clearly imparted in circumstances which had given rise to the obligation of confidence: all parties understood, because of the operation of the convention, the need to keep such communications private. Finally, the public authority argued that even if detriment needed to be identified, the harm which would occur to the operation of the convention, and the potential undermining of The Prince of Wales' political neutrality following disclosure of the information would constitute sufficient detriment to meet the third limb of the *Coco* test.
69. In relation to why the withheld information constituted confidential information under the modern law of confidence, the public authority explained that it was clear that the correspondence engaged Article 8(1) where the topic of the correspondence was of a particularly private nature of topic, but also, in light of the quoted case law above, where the correspondence reflects The Prince of Wales' opinions on matters of government business. Therefore disclosure of the correspondence would lead to a clear infringement of The Prince of Wales' right of privacy and thus constitute a breach of confidence.
70. Although section 41 of the Act is an absolute exemption and thus not subject to the public interest test contained at section 2 of the Act, the common law concept of confidence suggests that a breach of confidence will not be actionable in circumstances where a public authority can rely on public interest defence.
71. The public authority argued that in the circumstances of this case there was no effective public interest defence. In support of this position the public authority made the following arguments:
72. Firstly, there is an inherent public interest in the preservation of confidences and their protection by law, which in itself is a weighty factor in favour of maintaining confidentiality.
73. Secondly, in the circumstances of this case there was a specific public interest in maintaining the confidentiality of The Prince of Wales' correspondence with government in order to preserve the conventions discussed above, and specifically his political neutrality. It was strongly in the public interest to ensure the preservation of conventions in order to ensure the constitution was not undermined.
74. Thirdly, it is not simply a question of whether the information is a matter of public interest, but rather whether in all of the circumstances of the case, it is in the public interest that the duty of confidence should be breached. The public

authority highlighted the Court of Appeal in *Associated Newspapers Ltd v HRH The Prince of Wales* to illustrate this point:

'[68] But a significant element to be weighed in the balance is the importance in a democratic society of upholding duties of confidence that are created between individuals. It is not enough to justify publication that the information in question is a matter of public interest. To take an extreme example, the content of a budget speech is a matter of great public interest. But if a disloyal typist were to sell as copy to a newspaper in advance of the delivery of the speech in Parliament, there can surely be no doubt that the newspaper would be in breach of duty if it purchased and published the speech.'

75. Fourthly, to justify disclosure of confidential information on the grounds of public interest, it is not sufficient that the information is simply interesting to the public. Rather, the public interest in overriding confidentiality must be one of very considerable significance, whether that be related to, for example, the proper conduct of public affairs, public health, prevention of crime etc. Disclosure must in fact be 'necessary' in order to override obligations of confidentiality with the test of necessity reflecting both the traditional test of confidence and the test for justification with Article 8 rights under the ECHR. The public authority referenced the Court of Appeal in *McKennitt v Ash* which involved a confidence being overridden on the basis of allegations of misconduct:

'I would nevertheless accept that Mr Browne is broadly correct when he submits that for a claimant's conduct to "trigger the public interest defence" a very high degree of misbehaviour must be demonstrated'.

76. The public authority argued that it was clear from the content of the correspondence – both that sent to and received by The Prince of Wales – no such level of significance was present to meet this high threshold.
77. Fifthly, it was important not to confuse the public interest with information which the public may be interested in. To illustrate this point the public authority referenced Blackburne J in his judgment at first instance in *HRH The Prince of Wales v Associated Newspapers*:

'[118]...it is important not to overlook the fact that what may be in the public interest to know and thus for the media to publicise in exercise of their freedom of speech is not to be confused with what is interesting to the public and therefore in a newspaper's commercial interest to publish. This is particularly so in the case of someone like the claimant whose every thought and action is, in some quarters at least, a matter of endless fascination.'

78. And noted that this point was subsequently accepted by the Court of Appeal at [70]:

'As heir to the throne, Prince Charles is an important public figure. In respect of such persons the public takes an interest in information about them that is relatively trivial. For this reason public disclosure of such information can be particularly intrusive. The judge rightly had regard to this factor...'

79. Finally, the public authority suggested that whatever public interest which may exist in disclosure of this correspondence could be best described as a public interest in knowing what matters of public importance The Prince of Wales raises with Ministers, and how they respond to him, in light of the access which his constitutional position affords him. However, the public authority suggested that disclosure of some of the correspondence would not serve this public interest at all because it related to purely administrative issues or focused solely on purely private matters.

The Commissioner's position on an actionable breach of confidence

80. The Commissioner agrees with the public authority that a strict and rigid following of the *Coco* test is not an appropriate approach to the test of confidence in this case. The Commissioner's reasoning for this mirrors the arguments highlighted by the public authority namely the recent case law which has been referenced, most notably *BUAV*, and also the impact of the ECHR. Therefore when considering whether personal and private information is confidential the Commissioner agrees that consideration of Article 8 ECHR as well as a consideration of Article 10 ECHR (the right to freedom of expression) in the context of the public interest defence is necessary.
81. However, the Commissioner does not believe that some of the concepts raised in *Coco v Clark* should be abandoned completely as they can still be useful in determining whether information of a personal and private nature is confidential. Indeed as Eady J noted in his conclusion at [35] whether information was imparted in circumstances where there was an expectation of confidence can be relevant to determining whether there would be an actionable breach if information of a private and personal nature was disclosed.
82. Therefore for information which is of personal and private nature, such as the information which is the focus of this request, rather than use the three limbed test employed by *Coco v Clark*, the Commissioner will consider:
- Whether information was imparted with an expectation that it would be kept confidential (be that an explicit or implicit expectation); and
 - Whether disclosure of the information would infringe the confider's right of privacy as protected by Article 8(1) ECHR.
83. In relation to the first criteria the Commissioner accepts that the constitutional convention which provides that the Heir to the Throne should be educated in the ways and workings of government means that both The Prince of Wales, and those he corresponded with, will have had an explicit (and weighty) expectation that such communications would be confidential.
84. In reaching this conclusion the Commissioner wishes to clarify his position in relation to the scope of the constitutional convention provided to the Heir to the Throne. In the Commissioner's opinion given that the purpose of this convention is to allow the Heir to the Throne to be educated in the ways and workings of government, the only information which will attract the protective confidentiality of this convention is information in which relates to The Prince of Wales being

educated in the ways and workings of government. In the Commissioner's opinion this convention cannot be interpreted so widely as to encompass **all** of The Prince of Wales' communications with the government, for example it does not cover correspondence in which His Royal Highness may be discussing his charitable work or indeed information of particularly personal nature (this is not to say of course that the withheld information in this case includes examples of either class of information.)

85. Nevertheless, the Commissioner accepts that for communications between the parties that do not fall within his interpretation of the convention, there is still a weighty expectation that such correspondence will be kept confidential. The Commissioner finds support for such a conclusion given the established practice that communications between The Prince of Wales and government ministers have not been disclosed or commented on by either party, regardless of the content of the correspondence. Moreover, it is the Commissioner's understanding that the public authority's position is that all correspondence the Prince of Wales exchanges with government ministers falls within the scope of the convention and thus the individuals involved in exchanging this correspondence will have had a weighty and explicit expectation that such information will not be disclosed.
86. In relation to the second criteria, the Commissioner agrees with the public authority that in respect of Article 8(1) the term 'private' should be interpreted broadly to ensure that a person's relationships with others are free from interference. The Commissioner also accepts that matters of a business and professional nature are covered by the protection afforded by Article 8(1). Furthermore, in the quoted case reference to 'correspondence' confirms that Article 8(1) can apply to information contained within the format which is the focus of this request.
87. In light of this broad reading of Article 8(1) the Commissioner accepts that disclosure of information which is the focus of this case would place in the public domain details of The Prince of Wales' views and opinions on a number of issues and such an action would amount to an invasion of his privacy. Thus the Commissioner accepts that disclosure of the information would constitute an infringement of Article 8(1) and would constitute an actionable breach of confidence.
88. For these reasons the Commissioner accepts that disclosure of the withheld information would constitute an actionable breach of confidence.
89. However, before it can be concluded that this information is exempt from disclosure by virtue of section 41, the Commissioner has to consider whether there is a public interest defence to disclosing the information, which includes an assessment of the weight that should be attributed to Article 10 ECHR..
90. As explained above the public authority identified only a very general and limited public interest in disclosure of the withheld information. In the Commissioner's opinion there are a number of further public interest arguments in favour of disclosing this information than have been identified by the public authority and he has set out below what he believes these interests are. The Commissioner

has then gone on to consider whether such arguments provide a sufficient public interest defence.

Additional arguments in favour of disclosing the information

91. There is a public interest in disclosure of information to ensure that the government is accountable for, and transparent in its decision making processes.
92. Moreover, there is a specific public interest in disclosure of information that would increase the public's understanding of how the Government interacts with the Royal Family and the Royal Household, and in particular in the circumstances of this case, the Heir to the Throne. This is because the Monarchy has a central role in the British constitution and the public is entitled to know how the various mechanisms of the constitution operate. This includes, in the Commissioner's opinion, how the Heir to the Throne is educated in the ways of government in preparation for his role as Sovereign. In the Commissioner's opinion such an interest is clearly distinct from the prurient public interest alluded to by the public authority.
93. Disclosure of the information may allow the public to understand the influence (if any) exerted by The Prince of Wales on matters of public policy. If the withheld information demonstrated that the public authority or government in general had placed undue weight on the preferences of The Prince of Wales then it could add to the public interest in disclosing the information.
94. Conversely, if the withheld information actually revealed that The Prince of Wales did not have undue influence on the direction of public policy, then there would be a public interest in disclosing the information in order to reassure the public that no inappropriate weight had been placed on the views and preferences of The Heir to Throne. In essence disclosure could enhance public confidence in respect of how the government deals with The Prince of Wales.
95. These two arguments could be seen as particularly relevant in light of media stories which focus on The Prince of Wales' alleged inappropriate interference in matters of government and political lobbying.
96. Linked to this argument, is the fact that disclosure of the withheld information could further the public debate regarding the constitutional role of the Monarchy and particularly the Heir to the Throne. Similarly, disclosure of the information could inform the broader debate surrounding constitutional reform.

Can disclosure of the information be justified on public interest grounds?

97. Before turning to the balance of the public interest in respect of this case, the Commissioner wishes to highlight that the public interest test inherent within section 41 differs from the public interest test contained in the qualified exemptions contained within the Act; the default position for the public interest test in the qualified exemptions is that the information should be disclosed unless the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. With regard to the public interest test inherent within

section 41, this position is reversed; the default position being that information should not be disclosed because of the duty of confidence unless the public interest in disclosure outweighs the interest in upholding the duty of confidence and therefore withholding the information.

98. In the Commissioner's opinion the introduction of the concept of privacy and the impact of ECHR into the law of confidence has not affected this balancing exercise; Sedley L J expressed such a view in *LRT v Mayor of London*: 'the human rights highway leads to exactly the same outcome as the older road of equity and common law'.⁶
99. Therefore in conducting this balancing exercise as well as taking into account the protection afforded by Article 8(1), consideration must also be given to Article 10 ECHR which provides that:
- '1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers...
2. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.'
100. The Commissioner notes that recent European Court of Human Rights judgments have highlighted the relationship between Article 10 and access to public information. In particular, the Court has recognised that individuals involved in the legitimate process of gathering information on a matter of public importance can rely on Article 10(1) as a basis upon which to argue that public authorities interfered with this process by restricting access to information.⁷
101. Turning to the various factors identified by the public authority the Commissioner does not entirely accept the argument that for there to be a successful public interest defence against a breach of confidence there would always have to be an exceptional public interest in disclosure. The Commissioner's reasoning is as follows: The Information Tribunal in *Derry City Council v Information Commissioner* in discussing the case of *LRT v The Mayor of London* noted that in the first instance the judge said that an exceptional case had to be shown to justify a disclosure which would otherwise breach a contractual obligation of confidence. When hearing the case, the Court of Appeal although not expressly overturning this view, did leave this question open and its final decision was that the information should be disclosed. The Tribunal in *Derry* interpreted this to mean that:

⁶ Quoted by the Information Tribunal in *Derry City Council v Information Commissioner*, (EA/2006/0014).

⁷ See *Kenedi v Hungary* 37374/05.

- No exceptional case has to be made to override the duty of confidence that would otherwise exist;
 - All that was required is balancing of the public interest in putting the information into the public domain and the public interest in maintaining the confidence.
102. Consequently in cases where the information is of a commercial nature, the Commissioner's approach is to follow the lead of the Tribunal in that no exceptional case has to be made for disclosure, albeit the balancing exercise will still be of an inverse nature.
103. However, in cases where the information is of a private and personal nature, the Commissioner accepts that in light of the case law referenced by the public authority, disclosure of such information require a very strong set of public interest arguments. The difference in the Commissioner's approach to such cases can be explained by the weighty protection that Article 8 offers to private information; in other words the Commissioner accepts that there will always be an inherent and strong public interest in protecting an individual's privacy. The Commissioner's believes that a potential deviation to this approach maybe appropriate where the personal information relates to the individual's public and professional life, as opposed to their intimate personal or family life, and in such a scenario such a strong set of public interest arguments may not be needed because the interests of the individual may not be paramount.
104. In determining whether the information which is the focus of the case relates more to The Prince of Wales' professional or public life, rather than his private life, the Commissioner faces a particularly difficult dilemma given the unique position which His Royal Highness occupies. There is clearly significant overlap between the Prince of Wales' public role as Heir to the Throne and a senior member of the Royal Family and his private life; he only occupies such positions because of the family into which he was born. In the Commissioner's opinion The Prince of Wales' public and private lives can be said to be inextricably linked. Therefore for the purposes of this case, and the consideration of Article 8, the Commissioner believes that he has to adopt the position that the information which is the focus of this case can be said to more private in nature than public and thus a very strong set of public interest arguments would be needed to cited in order for there to be a valid public interest defence.
105. Before turning to whether the arguments in this case can meet such a threshold, the Commissioner wishes to make a number of comments in relation to the weight that should be attributed to the additional arguments identified by the public authority in favour non-disclosure.
106. As implied by the comments above, the Commissioner accepts the argument that there is weighty public interest in maintaining confidences. Furthermore, the Commissioner agrees that there is a significant public interest in the ensuring the convention that the Heir to the Throne can be instructed in the business of government is not undermined; it would clearly not be in the public interest if the Heir to Throne and future Monarch appeared to be politically partisan. The Commissioner of course also agrees that there is a clear and important distinction

between disclosure of information which the public would be interested in and disclosure of information which is genuinely in the public interest.

107. However, given the number of public interest arguments in favour of disclosure that the Commissioner has identified, he is of the perhaps unsurprising opinion that the benefit of disclosing this information should not be summarily dismissed in the fashion implied by the public authority. Rather the arguments identified by the Commissioner touch directly on many, if not all, of the central public interest arguments underpinning the Act, namely ensuring that public authorities are accountable for and transparent in their actions; furthering public debate; improving confidence in decisions taken by public authorities.. Furthermore, the specific arguments relevant to this case in relation to The Prince of Wales relationship with government Ministers deserves to be given particular weight.
108. Nevertheless, the Commissioner has to remember that disclosure of such information would require an exceptional set of public interest arguments and disclosure would have to be justified by the content of the withheld information itself not simply on the basis of generic or abstract public interest arguments.
109. The Commissioner has reviewed the content of the withheld information carefully and he has reached the conclusion that despite the weight of the public interest arguments in favour of disclosure, the content does not present an exceptional reason or reasons for the information to be disclosed. Consequently, the Commissioner has concluded that there would not be a public interest defence if the information that falls within the scope of section 41] were disclosed.

Section 37(1)(a) – communications with the Royal Family and Royal Household

110. For the information which the Commissioner does not believe falls within the scope of section 41(1)(a), he has considered whether such information is exempt from disclosure by virtue of section 37(1)(a).
111. This section states that:

'37 – (1) Information is exempt information if it relates to –

(a) communications with Her Majesty, with other members of the Royal Family or with the Royal Household'.
112. In line with his approach to the term 'relates to' when it appears in other sections of the Act (for example section 35), the Commissioner interprets this term broadly and thus the exemption contained at section 37(1)(a) provides an exemption for information which 'relates to' communications with the Royal Family or with the Royal Household rather than simply communications with such parties.
113. Therefore, this exemption has the potential to cover draft letters, memorandums or references to the existence of meetings with the Royal Family or Royal Household irrespective of whether such communications have in fact been sent or received or indeed whether such meetings have in fact occurred.

114. However, information must still constitute, or relate to, a communication to fall within the exemption. So, for example an internal note held by a government department that simply references the Royal Family or Royal Household will not necessarily fall within this definition. It must be evident that the information is intended for communication, or has been communicated, or that it references some other communication falling within the definition.
115. Furthermore, the Commissioner is aware that many members of the Royal Family act as patrons for a wide range of charities. If correspondence withheld by a public authority relates to those charities **and** is either from a member of the Royal Family or the Royal Household then it will fall within the scope of section 37(1)(a). However correspondence simply between one of the Royal charities which enjoys the patronage of a member of the Royal Family and a public authority will not fall within the exemption, for example letters between Companies House and the charity offices regarding the accounts because it does not relate to a communication with a member of the Royal Family or the Royal Household.
116. The Commissioner has reviewed the remaining withheld information and he is satisfied that it falls within the broad ambit of section 37(1)(a) and thus is exempt from disclosure.

Public interest test

117. Section 37 is a qualified exemption and is therefore subject to the public interest test set out in section 2(2)(b) of the Act, i.e. whether in all of the circumstances of the case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. Under the public interest test under section 2 of the Act the assumption is in favour of disclosure so if the arguments on both sides are equally weighted the public interest will favour disclosure of the information.
118. The public authority has provided the Commissioner with detailed arguments to support its position that the public interest in relation section 37(1)(a) favours maintaining the exemption. The public authority noted how these arguments overlapped and buttressed the arguments in support of the application of section 41 of the Act. The Commissioner has set out below what these arguments are and then moved onto comment on the public interest arguments in favour of disclosure before setting out his position on where the balance of the public interest lies in respect of the information in this case.

Public interest arguments in favour of maintaining the exemption

119. The public authority argued that the prime reason why the exemption should be maintained is in order to ensure that the confidentiality essential to the two conventions discussed above is not undermined. The public authority explained that it was strongly in the public interest that these conventions were not undermined as to do so would result in The Prince of Wales, who in due course would become Monarch, losing his political neutrality. Preserving the political neutrality of the Royal Family was essential to ensuring the stability of the

constitutional Monarchy (for the reasons set out in relation to section 41 above), an outcome which was clearly in the public interest.

120. Furthermore the public authority argued that disclosure of the information could lead to a chilling effect in respect of The Prince of Wales, and those he corresponds with, altering the manner in which they communicate, for example by comments no longer being recorded or the nature in which the comments are recorded being of a less free and frank nature. Such an effect would not be in the public interest because it would result in The Prince of Wales being less prepared for the business of government when he is Monarch and furthermore might undermine His Royal Highness' ability to carry out his role as a Privy Councillor, a Counsellor of State and any duties he may be called upon to undertake in line with the Regency Act 1937.
121. The public authority has also argued that disclosure of this information may also have a wider chilling effect because it could deter other private individuals from contacting the government if they felt their correspondence would be disclosed under the Act. The public authority has argued that it is in the public interest that anyone should feel free to correspond with members of the government on any subject matter and that such an input has been a valuable source of information about the public's view on many matters. Consequently, a valuable channel of communication of between government and governed could break down to great public detriment. Not only would the government lose access to otherwise unreachable ideas, citizens deprived of this long-established channel for expressing opinions to our leaders could come to feel alienated from government.
122. The public authority also argued that given the broad scope of section 37(1)(a), the public interest extended to protecting the privacy and the dignity of the Royal Family. It would not be in the public interest if disclosure of the withheld information infringed this privacy.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosing the requested information

123. The Commissioner believes that the public interest arguments in favour of disclosing this information mirror those set out above under the consideration of section 41 and thus he has not repeated them here.

Balance of the public interest arguments

124. In the Commissioner's opinion given the broad reading of the term 'relates to' the subject matter of information which can fall within the scope of section 37(1)(a) can be very broad because communications, and information relating to such communications, could potentially cover a huge variety of different issues. Therefore establishing what the inherent public interest is in maintaining the exemption contained at section 37(1)(a) is more difficult than identifying the public interest inherent in a more narrowly defined exemption, for example section 42, which clearly provides a protection for legally privileged information.
125. The Commissioner believes that the following four public interest factors can be said to be inherent in the maintaining the exemption and relevant in this case:

- Protecting the ability of the Sovereign to exercise her right to consult, to encourage and to warn her Government and to preserve her position of political neutrality;
 - Protecting the ability of the Heir to the Throne to be instructed in the business of government in preparation for when he is King and in connection with existing constitutional duties, whilst preserving his own position of political neutrality and that of the Sovereign;
 - Preserving the political neutrality of the Royal Family and particularly the Sovereign and the Heir to the Throne to ensure the stability of the constitutional Monarchy; and
 - Protecting the privacy and dignity of the Royal Family.
126. As noted above in his analysis of the application of section 41, the Commissioner believes that the scope of the constitutional convention in respect of the Heir to the Throne is relatively narrow. That is to say it will only cover correspondence in which The Prince of Wales is in fact being educated in the ways and workings of government; it cannot be interpreted so widely as to encompass **all** of The Prince of Wales' communications with the government, i.e. it does not cover correspondence in which His Royal Highness may be discussing his charitable work or indeed information of particularly personal nature (this is not to say of course that the withheld information in this case includes examples of either class of information).
127. However, where the information does fall within the Commissioner's definition of this convention, he accepts that there is a significant and weighty public interest in preserving the operation of this convention, i.e. it would not be in the public interest that the operation of the established confidential convention would be undermined. This is particularly so given that the convention is designed to protect communications at the heart of government, i.e. the Heir to the Throne and government Ministers. The significant weight which protecting the convention attracts can be seen correctly seen as akin to the strong weight applied to maintaining the exemption in contained at section 42 as it will always be strongly in the public interest to protect legal professional privilege.
128. The Commissioner also accepts that it is logical to argue that disclosure of the information covered by the convention could undermine The Prince of Wales' political neutrality for the reasons advanced by the public authority. The Commissioner believes that significant weight should be attributed to the argument that disclosure would undermine The Prince of Wales' political neutrality: it is clearly in the public interest that The Prince of Wales, either as Heir to the Throne or when Monarch is not perceived to be politically biased in order to protect his position as Sovereign in a constitutional democracy.
129. Vitally, the Commissioner believes that arguments concerning political neutrality are still relevant, and indeed attract similar weight, even when the information being withheld does not fall within the scope of the constitutional convention relating to the Heir to the Throne. In other words disclosure of correspondence not strictly on issues related to the business of government could still lead to The Prince of Wales being perceived as having particular political views or

preferences and thus could undermine his political neutrality. As noted above, the Commissioner accepts that it is inherent in the exemption contained at section 37(1)(a) that it is in the public interest for the political neutrality of all members of the Royal Family to be preserved.

130. Turning to the chilling effect arguments, as the public authority correctly suggests such arguments are directly concerned with the loss of frankness and candour in debate and advice which would flow from the disclosure of information. Such arguments can encompass a number of related scenarios:
- Disclosing information about a given policy or decision making process, whilst that particular process is ongoing, will be likely to affect the frankness and candour with which relevant parties will make future contributions to that policy/decision making;
 - The idea that disclosing information about a given policy or decision making process, whilst that process is ongoing, will be likely to affect the frankness and candour with which relevant parties will contribute to other future, different, policy debates and decision making processes; and
 - Finally an even broader scenario where disclosing information relating to the formulation and development of a given policy or decision making process (even after the process is complete), will be likely to affect the frankness and candour with which relevant parties will contribute to other future, different, policy debates and decision making processes.
131. The Commissioner is of the view that, the specific contents of the relevant correspondence he has considered under section 37(1)(a) do not relate to a policy making process. However, as he has explained below, some weight needs to be attached to the argument that disclosure could result in a chilling effect in the way in which The Prince of Wales drafts his correspondence which is akin to the chilling effect argument most closely associated with section 35.
132. With regard to attributing weight to the argument that disclosure of the withheld information would have a chilling effect on the way in which The Prince of Wales and/or government Ministers would correspond, the Commissioner believes that it is difficult to make an assessment of such an argument given the unique nature of this relationship and thus the lack of any clear precedents, e.g. previous disclosures under the Act of similar information.
133. However, the Commissioner is aware of the biography of The Prince of Wales by Jonathan Dimbleby which was published in 1994.⁸ In his introduction to this publication, Dimbleby explains that The Prince of Wales provided him with access to His Royal Highness' archives at St James's Place and Windsor Castle. Dimbleby therefore had access to The Prince of Wales' journals, papers and correspondence between with Whitehall. In relation to the inclusion of such information in his book Dimbleby explains that:

'I have been persuaded that the verbatim publication of the material might have a deleterious effect either on the conduct of British diplomacy or on the confidential

⁸ J Dimbleby, *The Prince of Wales: A Biography*, (Bath: Chivers Press, 1994)

- nature of communications between the monarchy and Whitehall or Westminster; in these cases I have either withheld information or paraphrased the relevant documents or correspondence. However, when it was obvious that only the culture of secrecy which pervades Whitehall was under threat and not the conduct of good governance, I have not complied with requests to delete pertinent material'.
134. Therefore, it would clearly be incorrect to argue that details of Prince of Wales' communications with government have **never** been placed in the public domain. To take but two examples from *The Prince of Wales: A Biography*, at page 582 Dimbleby quotes from a letter sent by His Royal Highness in 1985 to the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in addition to quoting from a draft section of the letter which did not make the final version. And at page 809 Dimbleby notes that The Prince of Wales wrote to the then Secretary of State for Defence, Malcolm Rifkind, about the implications of cutting the Army's manpower and quotes from the this letter. Although the quote is not particularly lengthy in nature it clearly shows The Prince of Wales' strong views on this issue. The Commissioner has not been provided with any evidence by the public authority that the inclusion of details of The Prince of Wales' correspondence in this book has resulted in any sort of the chilling effect.
135. However, the Commissioner accepts that a direct parallel cannot be drawn between the disclosure of the withheld information which is the focus of this case and the previous disclosures such as the Dimbleby biography. To some extent, as Dimbleby himself acknowledges, his book was been 'self-censored': extracts have not been included that would undermine the confidential nature of communications between the monarchy. In contrast, disclosure of the withheld information in this case would be without the consent of The Prince of Wales and would result in complete copies, as opposed to extracts or paraphrased sections, of correspondence being revealed.
136. Furthermore the Commissioner believes that an inherent part of the convention is the ability of both the Heir to the Throne and government ministers to be free and frank when discussing matters of government business. This is to ensure that the Heir to the Throne is instructed in the business of government in the most effective and efficient way possible. In the Commissioner's opinion, disclosure of information falling within the scope of convention would lead The Prince of Wales, and possibly the government minister with whom he corresponds, to feel constrained or more reluctant to take part in the process of being educated about the business of government. Therefore, given the protection which the Commissioner believes should be provided to the convention itself, it follows that notable weight should be given to the argument that disclosure of information which falls within the scope of the convention would result in a chilling effect.
137. In reaching this conclusion the Commissioner wishes to note that he believes that in the context of section 37(1)(a) the protection afforded to communications **from** government ministers only extends to their contribution to educating the Heir to the Throne; it would be incorrect to argue that section 37(1)(a) provides a protection for government ministers to discuss more widely matters of policy formulation or development – protection for such information is offered by, and

inherent in, the exemption contained at section 35(1)(a) of the Act not in section 37(1)(a).

138. With regard to attributing weight to the chilling effect arguments for correspondence which does not fall within the scope of the convention, the Commissioner does not believe that such arguments automatically attract weight in the way in which correspondence falling within the convention does. Rather, the assessment as to whether a chilling effect will occur will be based upon factors considered in other cases involving an assessment of the chilling effect, most notably the content of the information itself. This because in the Commissioner's opinion in order for a chilling effect argument to be convincing the information which is disclosed has to be more than anodyne in nature otherwise disclosure of such information is unlikely to dissuade individuals from making frank and candid comments in the future. In the circumstances of this case the Commissioner accepts that the correspondence which is not covered by the chilling effect is of a relatively frank and candid nature and thus some weight should be attributed to the argument that disclosure of this information would result in a chilling effect in the way in which The Prince of Wales drafts his correspondence.
139. Again, as with the concept of political neutrality, the Commissioner accepts that a chilling effect on the nature of correspondence falling within the convention could occur even if the withheld information does fall within the scope of the convention. That is to say, disclosure of information on topics not associated with the business of government, would still be likely to affect future correspondence not simply on similar topics but also on topics falling within the scope of the convention.
140. However, the Commissioner is not prepared to accept that disclosure of this information would have a chilling effect on the way in which other individuals contact the government. In the Commissioner's opinion it is not logical to suggest that because some of The Prince Wales' correspondence with government is disclosed, private individuals would fear that their correspondence would also be disclosed. Clearly, if The Prince of Wales' correspondence was disclosed in response to a request submitted under the Act, despite the strong protection afforded to it by sections 41 and 37 (and by implication the effect of the constitutional convention and Article 8 ECHR) it would be obvious that disclosure would be necessary to satisfy a significant and distinct public interest. This interest would almost inevitably be related to the position that His Royal Highness holds rather than simply the content of the information itself. Consequently, the Commissioner believes that the public would be perfectly capable of distinguishing between the government disclosing specific pieces of correspondence with The Prince of Wales (and moreover only disclosing such information after a request under the Act and/or in response to a section 50 Notice) and the potential disclosure of information which they may send to the government in their role as private citizens. Without any evidence to the contrary, and bearing in mind the comments of the Tribunal referenced above, the Commissioner believes that such an argument does not attract any particular weight.

141. With regard to the final argument, i.e. the privacy considerations contained within section 37, the Commissioner believes that these should not be dismissed lightly. There is a clear public interest in protecting the dignity of the Royal Family so as to preserve their position and ability to fulfil their constitutional role as a unifying symbol for the nation. To the extent that disclosure of the withheld information would undermine His Royal Highness' dignity by invasion of his privacy, the Commissioner accepts that this adds further weight to maintaining the exemption.
142. The Commissioner believes that his position in relation to the weight that should be attributed to the public interest arguments in favour of disclosing this information is clearly set out in relation to the comments above in section 41.
143. Again, in reaching a conclusion about where the balance of the public interest lies the Commissioner has to focus on the specific content of the information. In this case for the information which falls within the scope of the convention, the Commissioner believes that the public interest in maintaining the exemption is very strong because of weight that should be attributed to maintaining the convention, i.e. a confidential space in which the Heir to the Throne and ministers can communicate, and the concepts which underpin it, i.e. political neutrality and confidentiality, along with the weight that should be given to the chilling effect arguments for such correspondence. Even when taken together the Commissioner does not feel that the public interest arguments in favour of disclosing the particular information which falls within the scope of this request overrides this weighty public interest in maintaining the exemption.
144. In relation to any of the information which may fall outside the Commissioner's definition of the convention, the Commissioner believes that the public interest is more finely balanced because the argument in favour of maintaining a constitutional convention attracts far less weight. (It should not be inferred that such information is indeed contained within the scope of this request.) Therefore, it would certainly be possible (and easier) to envisage a scenario where disclosure of the correspondence between The Prince of Wales and government Ministers would be in the public interest. However, as noted above just because information does not fall within the scope of the convention this does not mean that its disclosure would not undermine two key concepts inherent to it: political neutrality and the potential to have a chilling effect on future correspondence. Moreover, having once again considered the content of the withheld information in this case the Commissioner believes that the public interest favours maintaining the exemption.

Regulation 12(5)(f) – interests of the person who provided the information

145. The public authority has argued that if the Commissioner finds that any of the withheld information constitutes 'environmental' information as defined by the EIR, it would seek to rely on the exceptions contained at regulations 12(5)(d), 12(5)(f) and 13(1).
146. As the Commissioner has concluded that some of the information falling within the scope of this request is environmental information, he has considered the application of these exceptions, starting within 12(5)(f).

147. Regulation 12(5)(f) states:

'a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that its disclosure would adversely affect –

(f) the interests of the person who provided the information where that person –

- (i) was not under, and could not have been put under, any legal obligation to supply it to that or any other public authority;
- (ii) did not supply it in circumstances such that that or any other public authority is entitled apart from these Regulations to disclose it; and
- (iii) has not consented to its disclosure;

148. The Commissioner is conscious that the threshold to engage an exception under regulation 12(5) of the EIR is a high one compared to the threshold needed to engage a prejudiced based exemption under the Act:

- Under regulation 12(5) for information to be exempt it is not enough that disclosure of information will have an effect, that effect must be 'adverse'.
- Refusal to disclose information is only permitted to the extent of that adverse effect – i.e. if an adverse effect would not result from disclosure of part of a particular document or piece of information, then that information should be disclosed.
- It is necessary for the public authority to show that disclosure 'would' have an adverse effect, not that it may or simply could have an effect. With regard to the interpretation of the phrase 'would' the Commissioner has been influenced by the Tribunal's comments in the case *Hogan v Oxford City Council & Information Commissioner* (EA/2005/0026 & 0030) in which the Tribunal suggested that although it was not necessary for the public authority to prove that prejudice would occur beyond any doubt whatsoever, prejudice must be at least more probable than not.⁹

149. Furthermore, the wording of the exception makes it clear that the adverse effect has to be on the person who provided the information rather than the public authority that holds the information.

150. As with section 41, correspondence sent to the public authority clearly falls within the scope of regulation 12(5)(f) because it was information 'provided' to it by a third party, i.e. The Prince of Wales. Again, as with section 41, the Commissioner accepts that correspondence which the public authority sends to The Prince of Wales can potentially fall within the scope of the regulation 12(5)(f) if it sufficiently closely replicates the content of the information originally provided to it by His Royal Highness.

⁹ These guiding principles in relation the engagement of exceptions contained at regulation 12(5) were set out in Tribunal case *Archer v Information Commissioner & Salisbury District Council* (EA/2006/0037)

151. The Commissioner has carefully considered the environmental information which falls within the scope of this request and he is satisfied that it is contained within communications sent to the public authority by The Prince of Wales or is contained within correspondence sent by the public authority to The Prince of Wales but is sufficiently focused on information His Royal Highness originally provided.
152. Before considering the nature of the adverse effect, the Commissioner has considered whether the three limbs of 12(5)(f) are met. With regard to the first limb, the Commissioner accepts that The Prince of Wales was not under any legal obligation to supply the information; although it is an established tradition, and one protected by the convention discussed above, that the Heir to The Throne will communicate with government Ministers, he is under no legally binding obligation to do so. The Commissioner believes that the second limb will be met where there is no specific statutory power to disclose the information in question. It is clear that there is no such power in this case and thus the second limb is met. Finally with regard to the third limb the Commissioner understands that The Prince of Wales has not consented to disclosure of the withheld information.
153. The nature of the adverse effect which the public authority has argued would occur if the withheld information was disclosed effectively mirrors that discussed above in relation to the application of sections 41 and 37. In essence if the information were disclosed this would adversely harm The Prince of Wales because not only would it undermine his position of political neutrality but it would also have a chilling effect on the way in which he corresponds with government ministers and thus impinge upon the established convention that he is able to confidentially correspond with government Ministers. Moreover, disclosure would impinge upon The Prince of Wales' privacy. For the reasons set out above the Commissioner accepts that disclosure of the withheld information could potentially have these effects.
154. In relation to the likelihood of such effects occurring, the Commissioner believes that the higher threshold of 'would occur' is met. This is because there are a number of ways in which the adverse effect could manifest itself: it could be to his privacy, dignity, political neutrality and/or the practical way in which he actually corresponds with government Ministers. Furthermore, it is clear that The Prince of Wales communicates with Ministers across government, rather than simply to one or two departments, thus the likelihood of the adverse effects occurring is increased.
155. The Commissioner therefore accepts that regulation 12(5)(f) is engaged. However all exceptions contained within the EIR are qualified and therefore the Commissioner must consider the public interest test set out at regulation 12(1)(b). This test is effectively the same as the test set out in section 2 of the Act and states that information may only be exempt if the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. Regulation 12(2) states explicitly that a public authority must apply a presumption in favour of disclosure.

156. In the Commissioner's opinion, the public interest arguments in favour of maintaining regulation 12(5)(f) in this case are very similar to the public interest arguments in favour of maintaining section 37(1)(a). The public interest arguments in favour of disclosing the information are also very similar. Therefore the Commissioner does not indeed to set out in full his public interest considerations in respect of 12(5)(f). Rather he is satisfied that, for the reasons set out above, the public interest in disclosing the withheld information is outweighed by the public interest in maintaining the exception contained at regulation 12(5)(f).

The requests for the lists and schedules

157. In addition to asking for copies of correspondence exchanged between The Prince of Wales and Ministers at the public authority, the complainant also requested a list of this correspondence and furthermore a schedule of such correspondence. The complainant's request specified that the list should include the recipient of the correspondence, the sender of the correspondence and the date of the correspondence. The complainant's request also specified that the schedule should include a brief description of each relevant document including the nature of the document, the date of the document, and whether the document is being released or not.
158. The public authority has argued that disclosure of a list/schedule of documents which The Prince of Wales sent to the public authority is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 37(1)(a), 40(2) and 41(1) and that disclosure of a list/schedule of documents which the public authority sent to The Prince of Wales is exempt from disclosure on basis of sections 37(1)(a) and 40(2).
159. In relation to section 41, the public authority argued that disclosure of the details of the letters The Prince of Wales sent to the public authority clearly constituted information which was provided to it by a third party and thus met the requirements of section 41(1)(a). As to why disclosure of this would constitute an actionable breach, the public authority referred to the arguments set out above in relation to the application of section 41(1)(b) to copies of the letters.
160. In relation to the application of section 37(1)(a), the public authority explained that whilst it is publicly acknowledged that The Prince of Wales corresponds on occasion with government, it is not generally known when and with whom he corresponds. Disclosure of such information, i.e. by providing a list and/or schedule of the correspondence falling within the scope of this request would not be in the public interest because disclosure of the details of when and with whom His Royal Highness corresponds, even in the absence of disclosure of the subject matter of the correspondence would lead to damaging speculation about the nature of that correspondence. Inferences would be drawn, whether warranted or not, from the knowledge that The Prince of Wales had written a certain number of times to a government department within a particular period, that he had written on particular topics or had expressed particular views. That in turn would inhibit His Royal Highness and Ministers from exchanging views on governmental matters which would inhibit the convention that the Heir to the Throne should be instructed in the business of government. Again the public authority noted that the

reasons for the application of section 41(1) overlapped and supported the application of section 37(1)(a).

161. The public authority argued that these public interest concerns should be given particular weight even without the need to demonstrate particular prejudice arising from these particular lists; section 37(1)(a) applied without proof of damage. To support this point the public authority suggested that there was a strong parallel to be drawn between this case and *HM Treasury v Information Commissioner and Evan Owen [2009] EWHC 1811*. That case, like the present case, concerned a narrow and specific exemption. In that case, the exemption related to the advice of Law Officers under section 35(1)(c). The public authority highlighted the fact that Blake J held that the general public interest considerations behind non-disclosure, which are reflected in section 35(1)(c), should be taken into account in the absence of proof of damage. This was why Parliament had enacted the specific exemption for Law Officer's advice under section 35(1)(c) without requiring proof of damage. The public authority argued that same considerations applied in the context of this case.
162. In addition to this point the public authority highlighted to the Commissioner a particular instance where a particular public authority had disclosed the number of times The Prince of Wales had contacted it and the harm this had caused to His Royal Highness, in particular his position of political neutrality. (The Commissioner does not consider it necessary or appropriate to include details of this in the main body of this Notice).
163. Having considered the arguments advanced by the public authority very carefully the Commissioner has concluded that the list and schedule information in relation to correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 41(1). The Commissioner accepts that disclosure of this information would constitute an actionable breach of confidence broadly for the reasons the Commissioner has set out above with regard to the application of section 41(1) to the correspondence itself. Although the Commissioner acknowledges that disclosure simply of a list and/or schedule of information would result in less information being placed into the public domain, the Commissioner still believes that this would constitute an infringement of The Prince of Wales' right of privacy under Article 8 ECHR. For the reasons set out above the Commissioner does not believe that there is a sufficient public interest defence to warrant disclosure of this information.
164. In relation to the application of section 37(1)(a) to the lists and schedules detailing the correspondence sent to The Prince of Wales, the Commissioner also accepts that balance of the public interest favours non-disclosure of such details. In reaching this conclusion the Commissioner again broadly adopts his logic with regard to why the public interest favours maintaining section 37(1)(a) in relation to the correspondence itself. Furthermore, the Commissioner placed some weight on the example provided to him by the public authority where disclosure of some information arguably lead to a negative impact on The Prince of Wales' position of political neutrality. In reaching this conclusion the Commissioner has also placed particular weight on the fact that the time period specified by the complainant in this request is a narrow one, eight months and the requests seek details of

correspondence between The Prince of Wales and Ministers – as opposed to a broader requests seeking for example correspondence between any individuals acting on behalf of His Royal Highness and any individual at the public authority.

165. The Commissioner notes that with regard to the part of the schedule requested by the complainant which would include a brief description of each document, if the documents contained environmental information, as some of the correspondence in this case does, any description of the environmental information contained within the documents would in itself constitute environmental information. However, the Commissioner believes that those parts of such a schedule would be exempt from disclosure either on the basis of regulation 12(5)(f) for the reasons set out above.

Procedural Requirements

166. The Commissioner has concluded that the public authority committed a number of procedural breaches when handling these requests – these breaches are as a result of the Commissioner concluding that some of the information falling within the scope of these requests is environmental information.
167. The Commissioner finds that the Northern Ireland Office breached regulation 14(1) of the EIR in failing to provide a refusal notice citing the exceptions contained within the EIR which it later relied upon (albeit that the Northern Ireland Office maintains that the information is not environmental). The Northern Ireland Office also breached regulation 14(2) and 14(3) which require that such a notice is provided within 20 working days following the request and states the exceptions that are being relied upon.
168. Regulation 11(4) of the EIR requires a public authority to inform an applicant of the outcome of its internal review 40 working days after the date of receiving a request for such a review.
169. In this case the complainant requested an internal review on 3 June 2005 and the Northern Ireland Office issued the outcome of the internal review on 12 April 2006. Therefore the Commissioner has concluded that the Northern Ireland Office breached regulation 11(4).

The Decision

170. The Commissioner has decided that the following elements of the requests were not dealt with in accordance with the Act:
- Some of the information falling within the scope of the requests constitutes environmental information and thus should have been considered by the Northern Ireland Office under the EIR rather than the Act.

- For the correspondence that falls within the scope of the Act, some of this does not meet the requirements of section 41(1)(a) and therefore is not exempt on the basis of section 41(1).

171. However, the Commissioner has also concluded that:

- The parts of the correspondence falling within the scope of the Act are exempt either on the basis of section 41(1) or section 37(1)(a). For section 37(1)(a) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.
- The parts of the correspondence falling within the scope of the EIR are exempt either on the basis of regulation 12(5)(f) and the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosure.
- The list and schedule information in relation to correspondence sent by The Prince of Wales is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 41(1) of the Act. To the extent that any parts of the schedule contain environmental information, this information is exempt from disclosure on the basis of regulation 12(5)(f) and the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosure.
- The list and schedule information in relation to correspondence sent to The Prince of Wales is exempt from disclosure on the basis of section 37(1)(a) of the Act and in all the circumstances of the case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure. To the extent that any parts of the schedule contain environmental information, this information is exempt from disclosure on the basis of regulation 12(5)(f) and the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Other matters

172. Although they do not form part of this Decision Notice the Commissioner wishes to highlight the following matters of concern:

173. In February 2007 the Commissioner issued guidance on the time public authorities should take when considering the public interest test.^[1] This guidance notes that whilst the Act and the section 45 Code of Practice do not specify how long a public authority can extend the public interest for, even in exceptional cases, the time taken should not exceed 40 working days. Clearly, in dealing with this request the Northern Ireland Office took substantially longer than 40 working days to reach its conclusions in relation to the balance of the public interest test.

174. Although the delay preceded the guidance, the Commissioner expects the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that when it extends its consideration of the

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public interest test when dealing with future requests that it adheres to the time guidelines set out in the guidance paper reference above.

Steps Required

175. The Commissioner requires no steps to be taken.

Right of Appeal

176. Either party has the right to appeal against this Decision Notice to the Information Tribunal. Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

Information Tribunal
Arnhem House Support Centre
PO Box 6987
Leicester
LE1 6ZX

Tel: 0845 600 0877
Fax: 0116 249 4253
Email: informationtribunal@tribunals.gsi.gov.uk.
Website: www.informationtribunal.gov.uk

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.

Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 calendar days of the date on which this Decision Notice is served.

Dated the 15th day of December 2009

Signed

**Graham Smith
Deputy Commissioner**

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

Annex – text of request

The complainant submitted the following request to the public authority on 8 April 2005:

'Under the act [sic], I would like to request a list of any and all correspondence which has been sent by Prince Charles to each minister in the Northern Ireland Office between September 1 2004 and April 1 2005. I assume that this would cover letters, emails, faxes, and any other forms of correspondence.

Under the act [sic], I would also like to request a list of any and all correspondence which has been sent by each minister in the Northern Ireland Office to Prince Charles between September 1 2004 and 1 April 2005. I assume that this would cover letters, emails, faxes and other forms of correspondence.

For each piece of correspondence, I would be grateful if you could list the recipient of the correspondence, the sender of the correspondence and the date of the correspondence.

Under the act [sic], I would also like to request complete copies of each piece of correspondence listed above between ministers in the Northern Ireland Office and Prince Charles between September 1 2004 and April 1 2005. This request covers correspondence which has been both received and sent by ministers in the Northern Ireland Office to and from Prince Charles. I assume that this would cover letters, emails faxes, and any other forms of correspondence.

I would also like to ask the Northern Ireland Office on answering the above request, to comply with a further request under the Freedom of Information act. This request is to provide a schedule of the documents which are relevant to the above request. I believe that there should be a brief description of each relevant documents including the nature of the document, the date of the document, and whether the documents is being released or not. I believe that providing such a schedule would clarify what documents are being released and what is being withheld. This is a specific request for information to which I believe I am entitled under the Freedom of Information act, and would also represent best practice in open government'.

Legal Annex

Freedom of Information Act 2000

Section 37 - Communications with Her Majesty.

Section 37(1) provides that –

“Information is exempt information if it relates to-

- (a) communications with Her Majesty, with other members of the Royal Family or with the Royal Household, or
- (b) the conferring by the Crown of any honour or dignity.”

Section 37(2) provides that –

“The duty to confirm or deny does not arise in relation to information which is (or if it were held by the public authority would be) exempt information by virtue of subsection (1).”

Information provided in confidence.

Section 41(1) provides that –

“Information is exempt information if-

- (a) it was obtained by the public authority from any other person (including another public authority), and
- (b) the disclosure of the information to the public (otherwise than under this Act) by the public authority holding it would constitute a breach of confidence actionable by that or any other person.”

Section 41(2) provides that –

“The duty to confirm or deny does not arise if, or to the extent that, the confirmation or denial that would have to be given to comply with section 1(1)(a) would (apart from this Act) constitute an actionable breach of confidence.”

Environmental Information Regulations 2004

Regulation 12 - Exceptions to the duty to disclose environmental information

Regulation 12(1) Subject to paragraphs (2), (3) and (9), a public authority may refuse to disclose environmental information requested if –

- (a) an exception to disclosure applies under paragraphs (4) or (5); and
- (b) in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Regulation 12(2) A public authority shall apply a presumption in favour of disclosure.

Regulation 12(3) To the extent that the information requested includes personal data of which the applicant is not the data subject, the personal data shall not be disclosed otherwise than in accordance with regulation 13.

Regulation 12(4) For the purposes of paragraph (1)(a), a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that –

- (a) it does not hold that information when an applicant's request is received;
- (b) the request for information is manifestly unreasonable;
- (c) the request for information is formulated in too general a manner and the public authority has complied with regulation 9;
- (d) the request relates to material which is still in course of completion, to unfinished documents or to incomplete data; or
- (e) the request involves the disclosure of internal communications.

Regulation 12(5) For the purposes of paragraph (1)(a), a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that its disclosure would adversely affect –

- (a) international relations, defence, national security or public safety;
- (b) the course of justice, the ability of a person to receive a fair trial or the ability of a public authority to conduct an inquiry of a criminal or disciplinary nature;
- (c) intellectual property rights;
- (d) the confidentiality of the proceedings of that or any other public authority where such confidentiality is provided by law;
- (e) the confidentiality of commercial or industrial information where such confidentiality is provided by law to protect a legitimate economic interest;
- (f) the interests of the person who provided the information where that person –
 - (i) was not under, and could not have been put under, any legal obligation to supply it to that or any other public authority;
 - (ii) did not supply it in circumstances such that that or any other public authority is entitled apart from these Regulations to disclose it; and
 - (iii) has not consented to its disclosure; or
- (g) the protection of the environment to which the information relates.

Regulation 12 (6) For the purpose of paragraph (1), a public authority may respond to a request by neither confirming or denying whether such information exists and is held by the public authority, whether or not it holds such information, if that confirmation or denial would involve the disclosure of information which would adversely affect any of the interests referred to in paragraph (5)(a) and would not be in the public interest under paragraph (1)(b).

Regulation 12(7) For the purposes of a response under paragraph (6), whether information exists and is held by the public authority is itself the disclosure of information.

Regulation 12(8) For the purposes of paragraph (4)(e), internal communications includes communications between government departments.

Regulation 12(9) To the extent that the environmental information to be disclosed relates to information on emissions, a public authority shall not be entitled to refuse to disclose that information under an exception referred to in paragraphs (5)(d) to (g).

Regulation 12(10) For the purpose of paragraphs (5)(b), (d) and (f), references to a public authority shall include references to a Scottish public authority.

Regulation 12(11) Nothing in these Regulations shall authorise a refusal to make available any environmental information contained in or otherwise held with other information which is withheld by virtue of these Regulations unless it is not reasonably capable of being separated from the other information for the purpose of making available that information.

Regulation 14 - Refusal to disclose information

Regulation 14(1) If a request for environmental information is refused by a public authority under regulations 12(1) or 13(1), the refusal shall be made in writing and comply with the following provisions of this regulation.

Regulation 14(2) The refusal shall be made as soon as possible and no later than 20 working days after the date of receipt of the request.