

**Freedom of Information Act 2000 (Section 50)  
The Environmental Information Regulations 2004  
Decision Notice**

**Date: 30 March 2009**

**Public Authority:** The Forestry Commission Scotland  
**Address:** Silvan House  
231 Corstorphine Road  
Edinburgh  
EH12 7AT

## Summary

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The complainant requested information from the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) in relation to the provision of Mountain Biking Trails in the Carron Valley. The FCS refused to disclose the information or to confirm or deny if the information is held, citing section 14 of the Act 'vexatious requests' and 12 'cost limit'. The Commissioner has investigated and found that sections 14(1) and 12(1) of the Act are not engaged. However he found that some of the information requested would, if held be environmental information and should have been considered under the Environmental Information Regulations. The FCS applied regulation 12(4) (b), 'manifestly unreasonable', to this request as an alternative. The Commissioner concluded that 12(4) (b) was not engaged. The Commissioner requires that the FCS now confirm or deny to the complainant if the information requested is held and if held disclose this information to the complainant or issue the complainant with a valid refusal notice under section 17(1) of the Act or regulation 14 of the EIR. The FCS must take these steps within 35 calendar days of this notice.

## The Commissioner's Role

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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

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3. The complainant has advised that on 10 August 2007 he made the following request for information to The Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS):

***“1. Reference: Carron Valley Recreational Project PID document MB 12/07 Version No 3 dated 04/06/07 page 1 “The West and Central Scotland Forest Cycling Development recommendations October 2005”***

*i) Please provide full details on the consultants brief for this report and the total expenditure including a breakdown of FES / FCS costs and third party contributions. ii) Please also provide details on what FES / FCS policies were implemented as a result of the studies recommendations.*

***2. Reference: Carron Valley Recreation Project PID document MB 12/07 Version No 3 dated 04/06/07 page 2 “a new toilet block is being provided at no cost to FCS”***

*Please provide full details of the contractual arrangements between FCS and the organisation responsible for provision of this facility namely: outline Heads of Terms with the tenant providing this service including the date agreement was reached on provision of the new toilet block; the date of practical completion; what penalty clauses were written into the contract for failure to deliver the facility and expiry date of the current lease arrangements between the two parties.*

***3. Reference: Carron Valley Recreation Project PID document MB 12/07 Version No 3 dated 04/06/07 page “Forestry Commission Scotland – an ambition for forest Cycling and Mountain Biking – Towards a National Strategy Final Report Dec 2005 carried out by Tourism Resources Company.”***

*i) Please provide full details on the consultants brief for this report and the total expenditure including a breakdown a FES / FCS costs and third party contributions.*

*ii) Please also provide a summary analysis of the extent to which FES / FCS subsequently consulted other interested parties including the general public (following this report) and include a summary analysis of those third parties and general public responses.*

*iii) Please also provide details of what FES / FCS policies were implemented as a result of the studies recommendations and how those reflected any consultation exercise outlined in point ii)*

***4. Reference: Carron Valley Recreation Project PID document MB 12/07 Version No 3 dated 04/06/07 page 14 “These proposals follow discussions between FDM and Head of Recreation Tourism and Communities in October 2006. They represent a more accessible mountain bike trail provision as compared to proposals tabled by the***

***CVDG at that time and crucially, are supported by the Carron Valley partnership (with the exception of the CVDG) including the two local authorities.”***

*Please provide demonstrable (written) evidence that: “the two local authorities” had previous sight of and had approved and support the project details contained within FCS document MB 12/07 Version No 3 dated 04/06/07 prior to the report being submitted to the FES board.*

4. The FCS responded on 24 August 2007 explaining that it was writing to the complainant in his role as the Chairperson of the Carron Valley Development Group (CVDG). The FCS explained that in the previous 3 weeks 14 requests for information had been received from members (and associates) of the CVDG and from the complainant. The FCS explained that some of these requests were quite detailed, one of them including 20 separate questions / requests and many of them overlap or duplicate certain areas. Prior to these 13 requests the FCS had answered several requests from one CVDG member. The FCS explained that in light of the volume of requests from CVDG members it was left with no choice but to consider whether the requests fell under the definition of ‘vexatious’ or ‘persistent’ and therefore exempt under section 14 of the Act. The FCS also explained that it considered that section 12 of the Act applies which allows for request to be refused if the cost of complying would exceed the appropriate limit of £600. The FCS stated the costs can be aggregated where more than one request has been made within 60 consecutive days relating to the same or similar information and that requests have been made by the same person or by person who appear to be acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign. The FCS explained that it was looking at further guidance on the preparation of a Refusal Notice within the terms of the Act which would set out its reasons for not replying to the requests. In order to provide advice and assistance the FCS suggested a meeting between it and the CVDG to discuss the main issues. The FCS copied this letter to the other members of the CVDG who had recently submitted requests.
5. The complainant responded on 29 August 2007. The complainant disputed that he was acting in concert with other members of the CVDG and argued that disclosure of the requested information was in the public interest. The complainant agreed to a meeting on 12 September 2007.
6. The FCS responded on 6 September 2007 and explained that it had also received several emails from members of the CVDG in the intervening days. The FCS explained that as before it was writing to the complainant as the Chair of the Group and suggested that it would be helpful if any further correspondence from the CVDG was channelled through him to avoid unnecessary duplication or confusion. The FCS confirmed that it considered under section 14 of the Act, that the CVDG’s recent sudden stream of information requests would cause disproportionate inconvenience or expense. The FCS stressed that the intention behind the request was not the issue but the resultant effect of the requests lead to the question of whether they can be considered vexatious. The FCS also explained that it considered that, under section 12 of the Act, the staff time involved in dealing with all the recent requests from the CVDG would significantly

exceed the appropriate cost limit. The FCS did state that if the complainant (acting on behalf of the CVD) submitted a single request that it may be able to assist.

7. The complainant responded on 18 September 2007 requesting an internal review of the decision to refuse the information request under sections 12 and 14 of the Act. The complainant stated that he would be surprised if the information requested was not immediately to hand and therefore did not agree that disclosure would impose a 'significant burden' on the FCS or how the FCS could argue that the request had either 'no serious purpose of value, is designed to cause disruption, constitutes harassment or could otherwise be classed as obsessive or manifestly unreasonable'.
8. The FCS completed its internal review and communicated its findings to the complainant on 26 October 2007. The internal review upheld the decision to refuse to disclose the information under section 12 and 14 of the Act. The FCS offered the complainant and CVDG the opportunity to submit a further single request which sets out the key information the complainant and CVDG are seeking. In support of its findings the FCS attached a table detailing the requests received and the responses to them and the estimated time for compliance with those refused.
9. The complainant responded on 15 November 2007. The complainant disputed the findings of the internal review and stated that the offer of assistance only amounted to a fraction of the information 'these' people have requested; he also stated that the times quoted appear to be exaggerated.

## The Investigation

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### Scope of the case

10. On 19 December 2007 the complainant contacted the Commissioner to complain about the way his request for information had been handled. The complainant specifically asked the Commissioner to consider that he is the Chair of the CVDG which is a registered charity and is an unincorporated associate – the complainant stated that the legal definition of which is a "collection of individuals". The complainant explained the background to his and his group's relationship with the FCS and stated that there is a reasonable expectation because of this relationship that the FCS will share relevant information and make available research data, case study data, feasibility study information etc.

### Chronology

11. The Commissioner began his investigation by writing to both parties on 25 February 2008. The Commissioner first asked the complainant to comment on the FCS conclusion that the CVDG were acting in concert in relation to the information requests received. The Commissioner also asked the complainant to explain if the information requests received by the FCS as attached to their letter

- of 26 October 2007 were made by individuals acting alone or on behalf of the CVDG; what the relationship was between them, him and the CVDG; what were the links (if any) between these requests and his request of 10 August 2008; and what instigated his request for information i.e. whether he had been mandated to do so by members of the CVDG.
12. The Commissioner asked the FCS a number of questions regarding its handling of the information request including; if it had considered if the information was environmental information as defined by the EIR; and to clarify its findings under section 12 and 14 with specific reference to the information requested.
  13. The complainant responded on 3 March 2008 providing a detailed background to the request and the relationship between the CVDG and the FCS.
  14. The FCS responded on 9 May 2008 providing a detailed explanation of its handling of the request, its application of section 14 and 12 of the Act and background to its relationship with the CVDG.
  15. The Commissioner wrote again on 9 June 2008, asking the FCS to consider if the information requested fell within the definition of environmental information under the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) and as such should have been dealt with under the Regulations.
  16. The FCS responded on 26 June 2008 explaining that having reviewed the request held it now considered that some of the information requested, could if held be considered environmental. The FCS stated that it considered that if the Commissioner determined this information would be environmental it would consider the information to be exempt under EIR under regulation 12(4)(b) 'manifestly unreasonable'. This exception is subject to the public interest test and the FCS outlined its consideration of the public interest and concluded that the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighed the public interest in disclosure of the information.
  17. The Commissioner wrote to the FCS on 14 July 2008 asking the FCS to explain further its application of regulation 12(4) (b). The FCS responded on 25 July 2008.
  18. The Commissioner wrote to the FCS on 1 August 2008 outlining his initial view on the legislation under which the request should have been considered. In light of this the Commissioner invited further comment from the FCS.
  19. The FCS responded on 8 September 2008 providing additional arguments to support its reliance on 12(4) (b).

### **Findings of fact**

20. The Carron Valley Development Group (CVDG) is a participating member of the Carron Valley Partnership comprising: CVDG; FCS; Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils; Scottish Water; Central Scotland Forest Trust; and Clanranald Society. The FCS are signatory to a concordat with the organisations

which states that the purpose of the partnership is to develop recreational facilities at Carron Valley. A major part of current development concerns the planning and construction of mountain bike trails.

21. The FCS is funded by the Scottish Parliament, however despite its separate funding it is part of the Forestry Commission of Great Britain and is covered by the scope of the Act and the EIR and is not a devolved public body.
22. Section 14(1) states that section 1(1) does not apply if the request for information is vexatious. Therefore, if a public authority determines that a request is vexatious there is no requirement to confirm or deny if the requested information is held. The FCS have therefore not specifically confirmed or denied to the complainant if any information is held falling within the scope of this requests.

## Analysis

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### Procedural matters

23. The FCS dealt with the request under the Act. However, having considered the nature of the information requested the Commissioner takes the view that the information requested which would be held falling within the scope of parts 1 and 3 of the request would be environmental information as defined by the Environmental Information Regulations (EIR).
24. The Commissioner considers that the information requested in parts 1 and 3 of the request fall within the regulation 2(1) (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 measure designed to protect those elements”. The information request in one and three is on mountain biking projects on FCS land, the request relates to the analysis and background to decisions regarding the future location and development of mountain biking trails. The Commissioner considers that this request is for information on a plan in relation to an activity which is likely to effect the state of the landscape and natural sites. Parts of the request is also for information within 2(1) (e) in that the request relates to “a cost-benefit and other economic analyses and assumptions used within the framework of the measures and activities referred to in 2(1) (c)”.
25. The FCS were asked if they considered any of the information requested could fall within the definition of environmental information. The FCS acknowledged that these elements of the request could have been considered under the EIR and not under the Act and has explained that in light of this it would have relied on regulation 12 (4) (b) to withhold the information.
26. Regulation 12(6) states that a public authority may respond to a request by neither confirming or denying whether such information exists only where confirming or denying would adversely effect any of the interest referred to in

paragraph 12(5) (a). Where a public authority relies on 12 (4) (b) to withhold the information it must still confirm or deny if information is held. As the Commissioner has determined that the information requested, if held, would be environmental information he now requires the FCS to confirm or deny to the complainant if information is held falling within the scope of part 1 and 3 of the complainant's request.

27. Regulation 5(1) states that a public authority that holds environmental information shall make it available on request. Regulation 5(2) states that this information shall be made available as soon as possible and no later than 20 working days after the date of receipt of the request.
28. Regulation 14 'Refusal to disclose information' states that if a request for environmental information is refused, this refusal should be made in writing in no later than 20 working days after the date of the request. The refusal must specify any exception being relied upon under regulations 12(4), 12(5) or 13; and the matters considered in reaching a decision with respect to the public interest under regulation 12(1) (b).
29. The complainant made his request on 10 August 2007. The Commissioner considers that the response issued by the FCS on 24 August 2008 constitutes a refusal notice, this notice cited section 14 and 12 of the Act in refusing to disclose the withheld information. However, by failing to deal with these parts of the request under the correct legislation and therefore failing to issue a refusal notice which meets the requirements above FCS breached the requirements of regulation 14(3). This approach is supported by the Information Tribunal in *Archer v IC and Salisbury District Council*:

*"The fact that the Council considered and refused the Appellant's request under the FOIA rather than the EIR means, inevitably, that where the requirements of the FOIA and EIR differ, the Council will not have complied with the provision of the EIR.... It is appropriate that we record a finding that the Council did not comply with all the applicable requirements. In particular they did not comply with regulation 14(3) which requires a public authority that refuses a request for environmental information, to specify the EIR exceptions relied on."*

#### **Section 14 'Vexatious or repeated requests'**

30. Section 14(1) provides that a public authority is not obliged to deal with a request for information if the request is vexatious.
31. In reaching a decision as to whether a request is vexatious the Commissioner will consider the context and history of the request. He will also consider the strengths and weaknesses of both parties' arguments in relation to one or a combination of the following factors to reach a reasoned conclusion as to whether a reasonable public authority could refuse to comply with the request on the grounds that it is vexatious:

- Whether compliance would create a significant burden in terms of expense **and** distraction
- It is designed to cause disruption or annoyance
- It has the effect of harassing the public authority
- It can otherwise fairly be characterised as obsessive or manifestly unreasonable
- It does not have any serious purpose or value

The Commissioner acknowledges that his guidance on vexatious requests has recently changed and at the time of the request he would have expected the FCS to have applied the two-stage test in his Awareness Guidance 22. This guidance stated that a request can be treated as vexatious where it would impose a significant burden in terms of expense or distraction and meet at least one of the other criteria listed above.

32. The FCS explained that in addition to the complainant's request dated 10 August 2007 it also received a number of requests from other members of the CVDG on the following dates:

- 1 June 2007
- 17 June 2007
- 1 July 2007
- 9 July 2007
- 16 July 2007
- 25 July 2007
- 29 July 2007
- 31 July 2007
- 2 August 2007
- 8 August 2007
- 9 August 2007
- 13 August 2007
- 14 August 2007
- 15 August 2007
- 16 August 2007
- 17 August 2007
- 19 August 2007

33. The Commissioner has had sight of the detail of these requests and is currently investigating three other complaints in relation to a number of these requests. The Commissioner notes that all of these requests relate, in some way, to mountain biking in Scotland and associated projects.

34. The requests between 1 June 2007 and 25 July 2007 were all made by the secretary of the CVDG, in response to these request FCS provided the information requested. However, following receipt of the information the individual became frustrated that this request were not being dealt with to his satisfaction despite the information requested having been provided. (Attached at annex A is a table listing all the information requests received from the group and the responses).



35. The FCS provided more background to its relationship with the CVDG and the subsequent FOI requests. Prior to the influx of information requests its involvement with the group had been solely with the secretary of the group, in the few weeks leading up to what the FCS term the 'FOI campaign' from the CVDG he submitted to information requests, repeatedly challenging its response, raised three formal complaints against members of staff, including the FCS Director, and had requested internal investigations. For example he demanded an explanation as to what action the FCS had taken on a civil engineering report he had submitted regarding remedial work to a mountain bike trail. The FCS had not asked him to submit such a report and has it own long established and fully qualified civil engineering unit to deal with road and trail repairs. The FCS thanked him for his report informing him that it had taken account of its content. He did not accept this and was insistent that the FCS tell him exactly what parts of his report the FCS had followed.
36. The FCS informed the Commissioner that it was aware that the CVDG were becoming increasingly aggrieved that the mountain biking developments on FCS land at Carron Valley were not, in their view, moving quickly enough, or in the direction they wanted and in addition the secretary of the group was becoming increasingly annoyed that his information requests were not being dealt with to his satisfaction.
37. The FCS state that the handful of CVDG members that make up the core of the group have been very difficult to deal with and they have become demanding to the point of becoming obsessive. FCS states that they expect its full attention at all times and never accept the outcomes from its planning and decision making process. Their responses often finish with "this will not be tolerated by the CVDG" and it's staff are constantly having to justify their actions in detail to the group. It states they have been a significant and disproportionate drain on staff time and it has had an adverse effect on many other access and recreational activities in the Carron Valley area. The FCS state that it works closely and in harmony with many other mountain biking groups in all parts of the country.
38. The FCS also point out that despite taking the position they have regarding the CVDG information request it has continued to try its best to address their concerns and have drawn on very senior staff to hear their views. In a series of formal meetings with the CVDG it has fielded its Head of Recreation and Tourism, Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise Scotland, Director of FCS and the Scottish Government Minister for the Environment. However, the FCS claim that the CVDG Chairman has recently written a letter to the Minister, challenging everything the Minister and the FCS explained to them.
39. In addition The FCS argue that its local staff have been spending a disproportionate amount of effort trying to meet the constant demands of time which were being made by the members of the CVDG. The FCS state that they now have six full files of FOI related correspondence on the CVDG. The emails from the CVDG include the requests, the reminders from the CVDG of the time-

scales and rules of the Act, chasers for acknowledgments and answers, ad hoc enquiries, follow up queries on its replies and complaints against FCS staff.

- 40 The FCS state that it has only ever considered the 'effect' of the request from the CVDG; it has not made any assumptions about the 'intention' of the requests. The FCS feel that a surge of related requests, some of which are complex, over a short period of time, from a number of people who are in close contact with each other, was having the effect of disrupting the work of the FCS to a disproportionate extent.
41. The FCS basis for refusing the request under section 14 (1) stems from its perception that the requests are from a group of individuals acting in concert. The FCS explained that all the requests are from CVDG members and whilst they assert that they are all acting as individuals, the complainant in a newspaper article in the Sunday Herald, claims to have filed 16 requests for information with the FCS. The FCS point out that the complainant, in his own name, has only submitted the one request but 16 requests were the total number of requests received from CVDG members at that time. The FCS state that because they believed the requests to be from a group it tried to encourage the group to submit a single request detailing the key information they were looking for. This suggestion was turned down by the group who insisted that the requests were coming from individual members of the public and should be treated individually.
42. In summary the FCS concluded that the request was vexatious on the basis that it:
- arose 'in connection with a past or current grievance or complaint involving the individual and the authority'
  - would impact on the ICO's 'desire to keep compliance costs to a minimum'
  - would impose a significant burden (relatively) 'in terms of expense and distraction'
  - was designed, to a certain degree, 'to cause disruption or annoyance'
  - had the 'effect of harassing the public authority'
  - was in some cases lacking true 'serious purpose or value' in relation to the key concerns at the Carron Valley. Some of the requests appeared to be relatively ad hoc, and seem to have been submitted to keep us fully occupied dealing with the CVDG. Previous and continuing experience indicates that any answers supplied would have instigated a protracted bout of follow-up questions and / or challenges.
  - was certainly submitted as a concerted campaign by the Group.
43. To back up the final bullet point, FCS stated that the CVDG mounted a media campaign accusing the FCS of 'sabotaging' the future of mountain biking, stating that the FCS was acting as a 'secret society' and demanding that FCS officials be sacked. To support this FCS provided links to web postings which demonstrate the campaign that the CVDG is launching. These postings demonstrate the CVDG's frustration with the FCS and the development of mountain biking trails, however the postings all occurred after the requests were made. The language in the posts is derogatory and there is a link to the Forestry Commission which

when accessed does not lead to the Forestry Commission website but to a picture of snakes.

44. The Commissioner considers that it is reasonable in the circumstances of this case for the public authority to have taken the view that the request received from the complainant was part of a series of requests from the CVDG who were acting as part of a campaign. This position is supported by the statement the complainant made in the Sunday Herald article "Forestry Commissioner Accused of 'sabotaging' mountain biking boom" dated 9 September 2007 in which the complainant states that he became so frustrated at the lack of communication from the commission that he had filed 16 requests under freedom of information legislation.

45. However, being part of a campaign does not necessarily make a request vexatious but the previous behaviour of the individual or individuals can be. The Commissioner's Awareness Guidance No 22 on vexatious requests states that:

*"..even if a request appears reasonable in isolation, the previous behaviour of the requestor can be taken into account if placing the request in context will allow it to be justifiably judged as unreasonable. A public authority may therefore take account of correspondence between the request and itself (even if on other matters) to demonstrate 'previous behaviour' to support the claim of vexatious-ness. The purpose of this would be to make the case that the request itself meets the criteria of vexatious request."*

46. The FCS provided the Commissioner with a table showing the requests received from the group to date along with details of the request (annex A). As noted above the FCS received 11 separate complaints from members of the group between 29 July 2007 and 19 August 2007, some of which involve multiple requests for information. The FCS also provided details of the types of correspondence it was receiving from the group including:

- demands to justify / prove / clarify its responses to original FOI request (ones prior to this campaign)
- comments seeking confirmation that it was 'familiar with' the rules of protocol involving the Act
- early reminders for acknowledgments for routine emails, and for answers to emails.
- Requests for investigations into its procedures e.g. acknowledgement system
- formal complaints against staff
- complaints about its responses and investigations into the complaints about the staff
- calls for staff to be sacked
- refusal to accept that it was dealing with their information requests directed to the Scottish Government, despite an explanation that FCS is answerable to the Scottish Parliament despite being part of the national Forestry Commission
- resubmission of information requests, although investigations already ongoing by the ICO

- request to the Minister to ensure that information requested is released
  - regular criticism of its decisions and practices which it was often told 'would not be tolerated by the CVDG'.
47. The Commissioner has considered carefully all the circumstances of the case. Whilst he accepts that the FCS was correct to view the requestors as a group acting in concert, he does not consider that the burden and distraction of complying with the request would be excessive, this is supported by his finding on section 12 below. In all cases the group made focused and specific requests and there appears to be a legitimate purpose behind the requests. The Commissioner also notes that 'persistence' is not a valid reason for determining that a request or group of requests is vexatious.
48. Although the Commissioner also notes that prior to these FOI requests the FCS has made the following information available:
- Document entitled "Carron Valley Forest Cycle Trails Construction Methodology
  - Document on the use of Bike Counters
  - Graphs on trail use since launch and trail use by section
  - Visitor Research document
  - Document MB 12/07 Project Initiation Document on the Carron Valley Recreation Project
  - FES Management Board Meeting 11 June 2007 minutes

There is no evidence that the requestors in pursuing the information requested had previously been supplied with the specific information requested or that the issues relevant to the requests had been through many other levels of scrutiny.

49. The Commissioner does not consider that the public authority have demonstrated a pattern of behaviour that could be said to be obsessive and the language used by the complainants could be not characterised as significant harassment. The Commissioner takes the view that the FCS have not provided enough information in response to previous requests to justify that the requests have no purpose. Whilst he accepts that the pattern of request, quickly followed by correspondence with very short gaps is evident to some extent of obsessive behaviour, but he considers that the situation at the time of the request is only to a level of persistence.
50. The Commissioner accepts that at times there is a thin line between obsession and persistence and each case should be determined on its own facts. The Commissioner considers that an obsessive request can most easily be identified where a complainant continues with a request despite being in possession of other independent advice or adjudication on the same issue. In this case the Commissioner does not consider that the nature of the requests falls within this definition of obsession, there is no evidence that the matters related to the information requested by the complainant have been resolved by due process under other mechanisms. The matters the complainant is concerned about remain unresolved and there is a possibility that more information could be made available to assist understanding of the issue.

51. The Commissioner also notes that even if a request could be classed as obsessive, if there is a serious purpose of value behind the request then despite the other findings it may not be deemed as vexatious, this depends on the circumstances of each case. In this case the Commissioner considers that the requests did have legitimate purpose and value.
52. The Commissioner considers that this is a borderline case and that the request(s) are to be regarded as persistent rather than vexatious. In light of the above the Commissioner therefore finds that section 14(1) is not engaged in respect of the information requested in part 2 and 4 of the request.
53. In reaching this decision the Commissioner notes that the findings are made on the circumstances at the time of the request and that this finding does not preclude the FCS from using these provisions again in respect of requests from the same applicants if the FCS objectively find that the provisions apply. He notes that if the CVDG campaign was to use further FOI/EIR requests combined with significantly harassing language over a longer period of time he may reach a different conclusion to this decision. He therefore suggests that the complainant should think carefully about his future use of the legislation and language used in correspondence.
54. The Commissioner would also like to remind the complainant about responsible freedom of information requests and specially refers the complainant to the Commissioner guidance entitled "The ICO charter for making responsible freedom of information requests" available at [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk). This guidance states the factors a request should consider before making a request and specifically refers to request which are the latest in a series of requests or could be regarded as part of campaign that a requestor should consider:
  - Will another request serve any further purpose
  - If the request is about a changing situation, would it better to allow a reasonable period of time to pass before making a further request
  - Could you refocus the request for information that you genuinely require.

## Section 12 'Costs limit'

55. Section 12(1) provides that section 1(1) does not oblige a public authority to comply with a request for information if the authority estimates that the cost of complying with the request would exceed the appropriate limit. Section 12(2) provides that a public authority does not need to confirm or deny if the requested information is held if the cost of doing so would, in itself exceed the appropriate limit.
56. The Appropriate Limit and Fees Regulations 2004 set a limit of £600, the equivalent to 24 hours at a rate of £25 per person per hour, to the cost of complying with a request for all public authorities subject to the Act and listed in Schedule 1, Part I. In estimating the cost of complying a public authority can take the following into account:

- determining whether it holds the information requested,
- locating the information or documents containing the information,
- retrieving such information or documents, and
- extracting the information from the document containing it.

The Regulations state: *'any of the costs which a public authority takes into account are attributable to the time which persons undertaking any of the activities mentioned in paragraph (3) on behalf of the authority are expected to spend on those activities, those costs are to be estimated at a rate of £25 per person per hour'*.

57. Section 12(4)(a) states that where two or more requests for information are made to the public authority by one person the estimated cost of complying with any of the requests is taken to be the estimated total cost of complying with all of them. The Fees Regulations expand on this and state that requests can only be aggregated in the following circumstances:

- two or more requests for information must have been made to the same public authority;
- they must be either from the same person, or from 'different persons who appear to the public authority to be acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign' (section 12(4)(b) of the FOI Act);
- the requests must relate to the same or similar information; and
- they must have been received by the public authority within a space of 60 consecutive working days

58. The FCS, as discussed previously, has treated this request as one from part of a group acting in concert. The Commissioner accepts that for the purpose of this request it would be reasonable for the FCS to apply section 12(4)(a) and aggregate the cost of complying as it would appear to them that the requests were from different persons who were acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign. Further the requests relate to similar information, mountain biking, and were received from the persons within a space of 60 consecutive working days.

59. The FCS state that it is clear from the information requested that the staff cost involved in processing even just two or three of the more detailed requests submitted could significantly exceed the £600 limit. They state the by 'processing' the requests they mean the work involved in:

- Determining whether or not the information is held
- Finding the information
- Retrieving the information
- Extracting or editing material which is exempt from disclosure.

60. The Commissioner wrote to FCS on 16 December 2008 and requested further detail from the FCS to support its reliance on section 12. The Commissioner explained that in his view the issue is whether the words "extracting the information from a document containing it" include the redaction of exempt information containing it. In this context "information" is the information requested,

not the information to be disclosed. Therefore the time taken to redact a document when the process of redaction is to blank out exempt information, leaving only the information which is to be disclosed, cannot be taken into account as it does not fall within regulations. Redacting involves removing or blanking out from document information which is not to be disclosed rather than the task of extracting the requested information from a document which contains other information which has not been requested. The latter is the activity which the Commissioner considers falls within the appropriate limit calculations, not the former. The Commissioner's view on this matter has been supported by the Information Tribunal in the cases of *Jenkins vs Information Commissioner and Defra (EA/2006/0067)* and *DBERR vs Information Commissioner and Friends of the Earth (EA.2007/0072)*.

61. In response the FCS stated that it remains of the view that the individuals were acting in concert in submitting their requests within a short period of time, and that it was justified in aggregating the requests for cost purposes. It estimated that it would take around 90 man hours to produce responses for the requests and that this estimate does not include the time taken to redact as it did not anticipate any need to do so.
62. The FCS explained that the request of complying with some of the requests alone would require searching in many out stationed locations and the information would not necessarily have been in a readily available, accessible, standard format. Files would have had to be identified and located then trawled through for relevant papers which would then have had to be checked for completeness and then copied.
63. However in considering the reasonableness of the estimate, the Commissioner can challenge the public authority's process of investigation, assessment and calculation which led to their estimation that it would exceed the costs limit to comply with the request. In the case of *Mr William Urményi & the London Borough of Sutton v Information Commissioner* the Tribunal said that it was clear from the wording of section 12 that it was up to the public authority to estimate whether the appropriate limit would be exceeded in carrying out the activities described in Regulation 4 but that:

“...the Commission[er] and the Tribunal can enquire into whether the facts or assumptions underlying this estimation exist and have been taken into account by the public authority. The Commission[er] and the Tribunal can also enquire about whether the estimation has been made upon other facts or assumptions which ought not to have been taken into account. Furthermore the public authority's expectation of the time it would take to carry out the activities set out in regulation 4(3) a-d must be reasonable”.  
(para 16).
64. The issue of what constitutes a reasonable estimate was also considered in the case of *Alasdair Roberts v Information Commissioner*, the Tribunal endorses the following points made by the Tribunal at paragraphs 9 -13 of the decision:
  - “Only an estimate is required” (i.e. not a precise calculation)

- The costs estimate must be reasonable and only based on those activities described in Regulation 4(3)
  - Time spent considering exemptions or redactions cannot be taken into account (reaffirming the position in Jenkins (EA/2006/0067))
  - Estimates cannot take into account the costs relating to data validation or communication
  - The determination of a reasonable estimate can only be considered on a case-by-case basis and
  - Any estimate should be “sensible, realistic and supported by cogent evidence” (reaffirming the position in Randall (EA/2007/0004)).
65. The Commissioner does not consider the public authority’s estimate that it would take 90 man hours to comply with the requests is reasonable. The requests are focused and specific and not general or broadly made. The FCS have provided a breakdown of the time taken to deal with the requests it has refused from the group and this adds up to 90 hours. However, having looked at the requests and the time estimated, the Commissioner does not believe this is reasonable on the basis of the evidence supplied. For example FCS estimates that it would take 6 hours to comply with the request for a PID document on Ae Forest Development. This is a request for a single document in full, on a recent development and it is unreasonable to estimate that it would take 6 hours to locate and retrieve this information, unless particular justification could be provided. Another example is in relation to this complainant’s request, which they estimate would take 15 hours to comply with. This request is also focused and asks for details on a specific project. From the evidence before him the Commissioner finds that 15 hours to comply with this one request is not a reasonable estimate.
66. For these reasons the Commissioner considers that section 12(1) is not engaged as he does not consider that the FCS assertions regarding the cost limit are reasonable and he does not consider that the cost of complying with the requests or determining if the information is held would exceed the appropriate limit.

### **Regulation 12(4)(b) ‘Manifestly Unreasonable’**

67. Regulation 12(4) (b) states that a public authority may refuse to disclose information to the extent that the request for information is manifestly unreasonable.
68. The exception at 12(4) (b) is similar to that at section 14(1) of the Act. It is the Commissioner’s view that the regulation at 12(4) (b) provides an exception to the duty to comply with a request for environmental information in two circumstances: 1) where it is vexatious and 2) where it would incur unreasonable costs for the public authority or a unreasonable diversion of resources.
69. In relation to 1) Whilst the Commissioner has issued no specific guidance on 12(4) (b) he does consider that in some cases the same test in relation to ‘vexatious’ can be applied as that laid out above in paragraphs 33 to reach a determination on its application.



70. In the circumstances of this case the Commissioner considers that the arguments provided by the FCS supporting the application of section 14(1) also do not engage the exception at 12 (4) (b) in relation to the first circumstance for the reasons outlined above in paragraphs 30-55.
71. In determining whether the cost of complying with a request for environmental information would be 'manifestly unreasonable' under regulation 12(4)(b), the Commissioner considers it is also reasonable to use the FOI and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004 as a starting point. The Commissioner has considered these provisions in paragraphs 57-55 and concluded that the cost of complying with the requests would not exceed the appropriate limit. The Commissioner is clear that in relation to 12(4) (b) the inclusion of the word 'manifestly' indicates that for the information to be withheld under this exception that information request must meet a more stringent test than simply being unreasonable.
72. The Commissioner therefore finds that for the reasons outlined in paragraphs 30-55 and 57-55 that the request is not manifestly unreasonable and exception 12(4) (b) is not engaged.

## The Decision

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73. The Commissioner decision is that the public authority did not deal with this request in accordance with the provision of the Act and the EIR:
- (i) Breached the requirements of regulation 14(3) by failing to issue a refusal notice under the EIR
  - (ii) Section 14(1) is not engaged in relation to the information requested in part 2 of the request
  - (iii) Section 12(1) is not engaged in relation to the information requested in part 2 of the request
  - (iv) Exception 12(4) (b) is not engaged in relation to the part 1 and 3 of the request.

## Steps Required

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74. The Commissioner requires the public authority to take the following steps to ensure compliance with the Act:

Confirm or deny to the complainant if the information requested is held and either disclose this information to the complainant or provide him with a valid refusal notice in accordance with the requirements of section 17(1) of the Act or regulation 14 of the EIR.

75. The public authority must take the steps required by this notice within 35 calendar days of the date of this notice.

## Failure to comply

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76. Failure to comply with the steps described above may result in the Commissioner making written certification of this fact to the High Court (or the Court of Session in Scotland) pursuant to section 54 of the Act and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

## Right of Appeal

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77. 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](mailto:informationtribunal@tribunals.gsi.gov.uk).  
Website: [www.informationtribunal.gov.uk](http://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 30<sup>th</sup> day of March 2009**

**Signed .....**

**Steve Wood  
Assistant Commissioner**

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

**Annex A**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Information Requested</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
1 June 2007	Request for PID referred to at FEMB 31 May 2007	Information provided 29 June 2007
17 June 2007	FOI request extended to include very latest version of PID	Information provided 29 June 2006
1 July 2007	Pointing out no response to two questions asked re remedial works to trails following Dec 06 and Jan 07 Harvesting works	Information provided 9 July 2007
9 July 2007	Follow up request seeking clarification on points in reply of 9 July 2007	Information provided 16 July 2007
16 July 2007	Dissatisfied with reply of 16 July 2007, asked for 'direct' answers to points raised and for further information on contract	Information provided 20 July 2007
25 July 2007	Requested copy of June DEMB minutes as promised in reply of 29 June 2007	Published on FCS website
29 July 2007	Sought clarification on various points on PID document 12/07 mentioned in FEMB June board minutes and sought PID for Mabie 'black trail'. Also referred back to earlier request for information dated 1 July 2007 and asked for further clarification	Refused
31 July 2007	Request for spreadsheet mentioned in May FEMB minutes	Refused
2 August 2007	Requested PID for Ae Forest development	Refused
8 August 2007	Extension of FOI request for information on process followed that granted permission for trail construction at Kyle of Sutherland	Refused
8 August 2007	Information on Woods in and Around Towns challenge fund projects. In discussions to clarify request it transpired that the request was related to Carron Valley.	Information provided
9 August 2007	Copies of business cases for mountain bike related business to use buildings	Refused
10 August 2007	Various items relating to PID version 3 dated 4 June 2007 – sundry various details on each consultants brief for West and Scotland Forest, toilet block, evidence that two local authorities had sight of project detail, Cycling and Mountain Biking – towards a national strategy	Refused
13 August 2007	Details of SFGS award to part fund Golspie Wild Cat Trails	Refused
13	Various details of job role of Special projects	Refused

August 2007	manager at Scottish Lowland Forest District	
15 August 2007	Full details of PID process (and any previous revision) used for assessment of recreation projects on FCS land	Refused
16 August 2007	Any Scottish Executive departments invited to comment on submitted feedback on Cycling and Mountain Biking – Towards a National Strategy and if so copies of documents. Also what work Scottish Executive involved in with regards to development of mountain biking trails on FCS managed land	Refused
17 August 2007	Mountain bike centre usage numbers in FCS or related to FCS and methodology used to collect	Refused.

## **Legal Annex**

### **Freedom of Information Act 2005**

#### **Vexatious or Repeated Requests**

**Section 14(1)** provides that –

“Section 1(1) does not oblige a public authority to comply with a request for information if the request is vexatious”

**Section 14(2)** provides that –

“Where a public authority has previously complied with a request for information which was made by any person, it is not obliged to comply with a subsequent identical or substantially similar request from that person unless a reasonable interval has elapsed between compliance with a previous request and the making of the current request.”

### **Environmental Information Regulations 2004**

#### **Regulation 2 - Interpretation**

**Regulation 2(1)** In these Regulations –

“the Act” means the Freedom of Information Act 2000(c);

“applicant”, in relation to a request for environmental information, means the person who made the request;

“appropriate record authority”, in relation to a transferred public record, has the same meaning as in section 15(5) of the Act;

“the Commissioner” means the Information Commissioner;

“the Directive” means Council Directive 2003/4/EC(d) on public access to environmental information and repealing Council Directive 90/313/EEC;

“environmental information” has the same meaning as in Article 2(1) of the Directive, namely any information in written, visual, aural, electronic or any other 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 elements of the environment referred to in (b) and (c);

### **Regulation 5 - Duty to make available environmental information on request**

**Regulation 5(1)** Subject to paragraph (3) and in accordance with paragraphs (2), (4), (5) and (6) and the remaining provisions of this Part and Part 3 of these Regulations, a public authority that holds environmental information shall make it available on request.

**Regulation 5(2)** Information shall be made available under paragraph (1) as soon as possible and no later than 20 working days after the date of receipt of the request.

**Regulation 5(3)** To the extent that the information requested includes personal data of which the applicant is the data subject, paragraph (1) shall not apply to those personal data.

**Regulation 5(4)** For the purposes of paragraph (1), where the information made available is compiled by or on behalf of the public authority it shall be up to date, accurate and comparable, so far as the public authority reasonably believes.

**Regulation 5(5)** Where a public authority makes available information in paragraph (b) of the definition of environmental information, and the applicant so requests, the public authority shall, insofar as it is able to do so, either inform the applicant of the place where information, if available, can be found on the measurement procedures, including methods of analysis, sampling and pre-treatment of samples, used in compiling the information, or refer the applicant to the standardised procedure used.

**Regulation 5(6)** Any enactment or rule of law that would prevent the disclosure of information in accordance with these Regulations shall not apply.

### **Regulation 12 – Exceptions to the duty to disclose environmental information**

**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 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.

**Regulation 14(3)** The refusal shall specify the reasons not to disclose the information requested, including –

- (a) any exception relied on under regulations 12(4), 12(5) or 13; and
- (b) the matters the public authority considered in reaching its decision with respect to the public interest under regulation 12(1)(b) or, where these apply, regulations 13(2)(a)(ii) or 13(3).

**Regulation 14(4)** If the exception in regulation 12(4)(d) is specified in the refusal, the authority shall also specify, if known to the public authority, the name of any other public authority preparing the information and the estimated time in which the information will be finished or completed.

**Regulation 14(5)** The refusal shall inform the applicant –

- (a) that he may make representations to the public authority under regulation 11; and
- (b) of the enforcement and appeal provisions of the Act applied by regulation 18.