

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 25 March 2013

Public Authority: Post Office Ltd
Address: 148 Old Street
London
EC1V 9HQ

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested data used to populate the Branch Finder on the Royal Mail website.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that Royal Mail has correctly applied section 21(1) of the FOIA and does not require any steps to be taken.

Background

3. In April 2012 Royal Mail Group and Post Office became sister companies; Post Office has become an independent business. For the purposes of this decision notice the authority will be referred to as Royal Mail.

Request and response

4. On 6 September 2012, the complainant wrote to Royal Mail and requested information in the following terms:

Please can you provide me with the data used to populate the branch finder at:

<http://www.royalmail.com/branch-finder?c...>

I would prefer the data in CSV or a similar easy to parse format with the same data that is on the website (opening times, services provided, addresses etc) as well as location data (either in eastings/northings or lat/lng, whichever the easiest.

5. The Royal Mail responded on 19 September 2012. It stated that the information used to populate the branch finder is published and available from the branch finder on its website and therefore was exempt under section 21 of the FOIA.
6. Following an internal review the Royal Mail wrote to the complainant on 25 October 2012. It upheld its original decision.

Scope of the case

7. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 26 October 2012 to complain about the way his request for information had been handled.
8. The complainant stated that he had requested the information in 'bulk' and that it was not reasonably accessible via the Branch Finder.
9. The Commissioner considers the scope of this case to be to determine if Royal Mail has correctly applied section 21(1) of the FOIA.

Reasons for decision

10. Section 21(1) provides that information which is reasonably accessible to the applicant otherwise than under section 1 is exempt information.
11. The Commissioner accepts that information is reasonably accessible if the public authority:
 - Knows that the applicant has already found the information; or
 - Is able to precisely direct the applicant to the information. In this case the public authority has to be reasonably specific to ensure it is found without difficulty and not hidden within a mass of other information.
12. In its response to the complainant, Royal Mail explained that on the Branch Finder, you can search for all branches by town or postcode. The search results will list branches in the area requested. You can also click on the 'view details' button next to each address to view the opening hours for that branch along with a map of its location as well as carrying out further searches by post office services offered in a certain area.
13. Additionally, it explained why the branch finder is always the most accurate way for its customers to identify up to date and accurate information. With a network of around 11,800 branches there are constant daily changes including branches that may change operating

hours or relocate to new sites. By providing a list of branches, the information would be out of date in a very short period of time.

14. It also confirmed that Royal Mail does not hold location data for eastings/northings or lat/long, the map information contained on the branch finder is generated from the postcode.
15. When the complainant requested an internal review he explained that he requested all of the data in bulk, which is not reasonably accessible via the Branch Finder on the Royal Mail website.
16. Royal Mail responded on 25 October 2012. It explained that under Section 21 of the FOIA, a public authority does not need to provide information under Section 1 if that information is reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means.
17. It stated that it believed that the information contained within the Branch Finder tool is reasonably accessible through the Post Office website and that Section 21(1) of the FOIA does therefore apply to it.
18. However, it recognised that the complainant was seeking the complete raw data used to populate Branch Finder. It is therefore important to note that information available through Branch Finder is covered by Post Office Limited's publication scheme: <http://www.postoffice.co.uk/our-publication-scheme>
19. Royal Mail explained that Section 11 of the FOIA does make provision for someone making a request to state a preference for the means by which information is communicated to them. The requester can ask for information to be provided in any form and a public authority should comply with this so far as is reasonably practicable. However, guidance issued by the Information Commissioner's Office states that:

'Information is exempt under section 21 of the Freedom of Information Act if it is reasonably accessible to the applicant. This includes information contained within the public authority's publication scheme. Where an applicant requests information that is within a publication scheme and specifies a particular form, the public authority should explain that as the information is already available, it does not have to comply with section 11. It should give the applicant details of where to find the information.'
20. In light of this, Royal Mail considered that it was not required to provide the Branch Finder information in any alternative format. It noted that the complainant had internet access. Therefore, it considered that the information requested was exempt from disclosure under section 21(1) of the FOIA.

21. During the Commissioner's investigation Royal Mail acknowledged that there were a small number of branches that are not generally accessible to the public and are not included in the branch finder. These include, for example branches used only for training purposes. Royal Mail has subsequently provided the complainant with details of these other branches.
22. In its response to the Commissioner Royal Mail stated that as the complainant had communicated with them via email and referenced Branch Finder in his request, it was satisfied that he had internet access. It therefore concluded that the information is reasonably accessible to the complainant.
23. The Commissioner considers that the information is readily accessible to the complainant through the Branch Finder albeit not the bulk format requested. Therefore, Royal Mail has correctly applied section 21(1) of the FOIA.

Right of appeal

24. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights)
GRC & GRP Tribunals,
PO Box 9300,
LEICESTER,
LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0300 1234504

Fax: 0116 249 4253

Email: informationtribunal@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/courts-and-tribunals/tribunals/information-rights/index.htm

25. 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.
26. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

Signed

Pamela Clements
Group Manager, Complaints Resolution
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF