

## **Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)**

### **Decision notice**

**Date:** 29 November 2021

**Public Authority:** Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport ("DCMS")

**Address:** 4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

#### **Decision (including any steps ordered)**

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1. The complainant requested information from DCMS about the Counter-Disinformation Unit. By the date of this notice, DCMS had not issued a substantive response to this request.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that DCMS has failed to complete its deliberations on the balance of the public interest within a reasonable time and has therefore breached section 17(3) of the FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires DCMS to take the following step to ensure compliance with the legislation.
  - Having confirmed that information is held within the scope of the request: either disclose the requested information or issue a refusal notice in accordance with the requirements of section 17 of the FOIA.
4. DCMS must take this step within 35 calendar days of the date of this decision notice. Failure to comply may result in the Commissioner making written certification of this fact to the High Court pursuant to section 54 of the Act and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

#### **Request and response**

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5. On 26 July 2021, the complainant wrote to DCMS and requested information in the following terms:

*"To Whom It May Concern:*

*I am writing to request the provision of the following information under the Freedom of Information act:*

*1) a) Is the DCMS-led cross-government Counter-Disinformation Unit that was stood up on 5 March 2020 still in operation?*

*b) Has a provisional date been set for the unit to be stood down, or for its ongoing operation to be reviewed – or does it remain in operation until further notice?*

*2) How many DCMS full-time equivalent staff are currently dedicated to the work of the CDU?*

*3) How many instances of disinformation or misinformation has the CDU actively rebutted or sought to be removed since it was stood up in March 2020?*

*4) Can you provide the details (content, platform, and, if possible, source) of the three most recent examples (in detail or in outline) of an instance of disinformation or misinformation that the CDU rebutted online or worked with partners to have removed?"*

6. On 24 August, DCMS wrote to the complainant to explain that it held information relevant to the complainant's request, but that it would need to extend the time taken to complete its public interest test considerations in respect of an exemption under section 36 of the FOIA.

## **Scope of the case**

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7. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 26 October 2021 to complain about the delay in DCMS's consideration of the public interest test.
8. On 5 November 2021 the Commissioner wrote to DCMS, reminding it of its responsibilities and asking it to provide a substantive response to the complainant within 20 working days. To date, a substantive response has still not been provided.
9. The Commissioner has considered whether DCMS has complied with its obligations in relation to section 17 of the FOIA.

## Reasons for decision

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

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

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

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

11. Section 10(1) of the FOIA states that a public authority must respond to a request promptly and *"not later than the twentieth working day following the date of receipt"*.

12. Section 17(3) of the FOIA states that where a public authority is relying on a qualified exemption, it can have a "reasonable" extension of time to consider the public interest in maintaining the exemption or disclosing the information.

13. Although the FOIA does not define what constitutes a reasonable time, the Commissioner considers it reasonable to extend the time to provide a full response, including public interest considerations, by up to a further 20 working days. This means that the total time spent dealing with the request should not exceed 40 working days, unless there are exceptional circumstances. A public authority would need to fully justify any extension beyond 40 working days.

14. In this case, the total time taken by DCMS has exceeded 40 working days. The Commissioner does not consider there to be any exceptional circumstances and finds that, by failing to complete its deliberations on the public interest within a reasonable time frame, DCMS has not complied with section 17(3).

15. DCMS is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of the FOIA and respond to the complainant.

## Right of appeal

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

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

Tel: 0203 936 8963

Fax: 0870 739 5836

Email: [grc@justice.gov.uk](mailto:grc@justice.gov.uk)

Website: [www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber](http://www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber)

17. 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.
18. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

**Signed .....**

**Michael Lea**  
**Team Manager**  
**Information Commissioner's Office**  
**Wycliffe House**  
**Water Lane**  
**Wilmslow**  
**Cheshire**  
**SK9 5AF**