

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 31 October 2022

Public Authority: London Borough of Hounslow
Address: Hounslow House
7 Bath Road
Hounslow
Middlesex
TW3 3EB

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information regarding the addresses of properties owned by the public authority that had become vacant and for how long.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that London Borough of Hounslow ("the Council") has provided relevant information within the scope of the request and has correctly applied section 40(2).
3. The Council did however breach section 10(1) of FOIA by failing to provide a valid response to the request within the statutory time frame of 20 working days.
4. The Commissioner requires no further action from the Council.

Request and response

5. On 9 April 2021, the complainant wrote to the Council and requested information in the following terms:
 - "1. the addresses of all properties (flats) owned/managed by your client, which have become vacant since 8 March 2017 in Alexandra Gardens W4 2RY;
 2. which of the identified properties in Alexandra Gardens W4 2RY were empty for a period of weeks/months;

3. the dates when these said properties were let to new tenants;
 4. the addresses of all properties owned/managed by your clients which have become vacant since 8 March 2017 and are close by to Alexandra Gardens W4 2RY; and
 5. the dates when these said properties were let to new tenants.”
6. The Council responded on 14 July 2021. It provided some of the information within the scope of the request, but did not disclose the remaining information citing section 40(2) as an exemption.
 7. Following an internal review, the Council wrote to the complainant on 19 October. It disclosed additional information within the scope of the requested, but upheld its decision to withhold the remaining information under section 40(2).

Scope of the case

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 17 September 2021 to complain about the way their request for information had been handled.
9. The Commissioner considers that the scope of his investigation is to consider whether the Council is entitled to rely on section 40(2) of FOIA as a basis for refusing to provide the full addresses of the properties as requested.
10. The Commissioner has to take into account that disclosure under FOIA is effectively a disclosure to the wider public. He must therefore consider the wider public interest issues and fairness to the persons involved when deciding whether or not the information is suitable for disclosure.

Reasons for decision

Section 40 Personal Information

11. Section 40(2) of FOIA states that information is exempt from disclosure if it is the personal data of an individual other than the requester and where one of the conditions listed in section 40(3A), (3B) or (4A) is satisfied.

12. In this case the relevant condition is contained in section 40(3A)(a)¹. This applies where the disclosure of the information to any member of the public would contravene any of the principles relating to the processing of personal data ('the DP principles'), as set out in Article 5 of the UK General Data Protection Regulation ('UK GDPR').
13. The first step for the Commissioner is to determine whether the withheld information constitutes personal data as defined by the Data Protection Act 2018 ('DPA'). If it is not personal data, then section 40 of FOIA cannot apply.
14. Secondly, and only if the Commissioner is satisfied that the requested information is personal data, he must establish whether disclosure of that data would breach any of the DP principles.

Is the information personal data?

15. Section 3(2) of the DPA defines personal data as:
 - a. "any information relating to an identified or identifiable living individual".
16. The two main elements of personal data are that the information must relate to a living person and that the person must be identifiable.
17. An identifiable living individual is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data or an online identifier, or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of the individual.
18. Information will relate to a person if it is about them, linked to them, has biographical significance for them, is used to inform decisions affecting them or has them as its main focus.
19. In the circumstances of this case and having considered the withheld information, the Commissioner is satisfied that if the information requested (full addresses of Council owned properties, the times these properties were vacant and for how long they were vacant) were disclosed, it could identify individuals.
20. The Commissioner further advises that those individuals may not only be identifiable from the requested information, but when combined with

¹ As amended by Schedule 19 Paragraph 58(3) DPA.

other information (such as the number of occupiers) the complainant is 'reasonably likely'² able to use the electoral roll data and establish the identity of the occupants. This information therefore falls within the definition of 'personal data' in section 3(2) of the DPA.

21. The fact that information constitutes the personal data of an identifiable living individual does not automatically exclude it from disclosure under FOIA. The second element of the test is to determine whether disclosure would contravene any of the DP principles.
22. The most relevant DP principle in this case is principle (a).

Would disclosure contravene principle (a)?

23. Article 5(1)(a) of the UK GDPR states that:

"Personal data shall be processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject."

24. In the case of an FOIA request, the personal data is processed when it is disclosed in response to the request. This means that the information can only be disclosed if to do so would be lawful, fair, and transparent.
25. In order to be lawful, one of the lawful bases listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR must apply to the processing. It must also be generally lawful.

Lawful processing: Article 6(1)(f) of the GDPR

² The ICO's Code of Practice on Anonymisation notes that:

"The High Court in [R (on the application of the Department of Health) v Information Commissioner [201] EWHC 1430 (Admin)] stated that the risk of identification must be greater than remote and 'reasonably likely' for information to be classed as personal data under the DPA."

In summary, the motivated intruder test is that if the risk of identification is 'reasonably likely', the information should be regarded as personal data.

[Anonymisation: managing data protection risk code of practice \(ico.org.uk\)](https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/individuals-consent-to-processing/individuals-consent-to-processing-2018-05-01)

26. The Commissioner considers that the lawful basis most applicable is basis 6(1)(f) which states:

"processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party except where such interests are overridden by the interests or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child"³.

27. In considering the application of Article 6(1)(f) of the GDPR in the context of a request for information under the FOIA, it is necessary to consider the following three-part test:-

- a. **Legitimate interest test:** Whether a legitimate interest is being pursued in the request for information;
- b. **Necessity test:** Whether disclosure of the information is necessary to meet the legitimate interest in question;
- c. **Balancing test:** Whether the above interests override the legitimate interest(s) or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject.

28. The Commissioner considers that the test of 'necessity' under stage (ii) must be met before the balancing test under stage (iii) is applied.

Legitimate Interests

29. In considering any legitimate interest(s) in the disclosure of the requested information under the FOIA, the Commissioner recognises that such interest(s) can include broad general principles of accountability and transparency for their own sakes, as well as case specific interests.

³ Article 6(1) goes on to state that:- "Point (f) of the first subparagraph shall not apply to processing carried out by public authorities in the performance of their tasks".

However, section 40(8) FOIA (as amended by Schedule 19 Paragraph 58(8) DPA) provides that:-

"In determining for the purposes of this section whether the lawfulness principle in Article 5(1)(a) of the GDPR would be contravened by the disclosure of information, Article 6(1) of the GDPR (lawfulness) is to be read as if the second sub-paragraph (dis-applying the legitimate interests gateway in relation to public authorities) were omitted".

30. Further, a wide range of interests may be legitimate interests. They can be the requester's own interests or the interests of third parties, and commercial interests as well as wider societal benefits. They may be compelling or trivial, but trivial interests may be more easily overridden in the balancing test
31. In this case, the complainant indicated that they have a personal interest in the information being disclosed. The requested information was needed to evidence their claim that the Council unnecessarily tried to [temporarily] move the complainant over 20 miles away, when there were alleged properties available in the area. Therefore, the Commissioner can appreciate that there may be a legitimate interest in ensuring the Council is operating legally and fairly.
32. The Council argued in the circumstances of the request there is no strong legitimate interest that would override the prejudice to the rights and freedoms of the data subjects.
33. The Commissioner has to take into account the fact that disclosure under FOIA is effectively an unlimited disclosure to the public. He must therefore consider the wider public interest issues and fairness to the persons involved when deciding whether or not the information is suitable for disclosure.
34. The Commissioner does consider that there is a legitimate interest in disclosing the requested information. The withheld information may demonstrate the unfair treatment of the complainant.
35. The Council has clearly indicated due to the small numbers of addresses and the fact the Council do not own all the properties within the requested areas, that if it were to disclose the withheld information, this would lead to disclosure of personal data as defined by the Data Protection Act.

Is disclosure necessary?

36. 'Necessary' means more than desirable but less than indispensable or absolute necessity. Accordingly, the test is one of reasonable necessity and involves consideration of alternative measures which may make disclosure of the requested information unnecessary. Disclosure under the FOIA must therefore be the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aim in question.
37. The Council has already disclosed the partial information falling within the scope of the request. The Council argues that due to the small numbers involved, if it were to disclose the withheld information this would in-turn breach the fairness principle in the Data Protection Act and therefore would be unlawful.

38. The Council further suggested that it did not consider that disclosing this information to the requester, and consequently the public, was necessary or justified to satisfy the information request and requirements under FOIA.
39. The complainant requested the information to find out if; the Council had asked the complainant to move over twenty miles away to temporary accommodation when the Council did in fact hold vacant properties within the area the complainant lived.
40. The Commissioner recognises that some of the requested information would support the complainants dispute with the Council. However, the Commissioner is satisfied that this information has already been disclosed by the Council and would satisfy the legitimate interest for the information.
41. The complainant is now able to cross-reference the dates the properties were vacant (which has been provided by the Council) with the dates that the Council sought to temporarily move the complainant 20 miles away. The Commissioner does not see any additional benefit from the disclosure of the full addresses.
42. As the Council provided the complainant with a breakdown of properties within the requested area, the dates they were vacant and for how long they were vacant for. The Commissioner is satisfied that the complainant would be able to cross-reference the dates the properties were vacant against the dates the Council sought to [temporarily] move the complainant 20 miles away. The Commissioner does not see any additional benefit in disclosing the full address of the properties as this will not give any further insight into the motive of the request.
43. The Commissioner has therefore considered whether disclosure under the FOIA is the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aim in question, the Commissioner is not satisfied that this would be the least intrusive means of achieving the complainants aim in question.

The Commissioner's Decision

44. As the Commissioner has decided in this case that disclosure to the world at large is not necessary to meet the legitimate interest in disclosure, he has not gone on to conduct the balancing test. As disclosure is not necessary, there is no lawful basis for this processing and it is unlawful. It therefore does not meet the requirements of principle (a).
45. 42. The Commissioner has therefore decided that the Council was entitled to withhold the information under section 40(2) FOIA.

46. The Commissioner has considered both sides of the request and has decided that the Council was entitled to withhold information under section 40(2), by way of section 40(3A)(a)

Procedural Matters

47. Section 1(1) of 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."
48. Section 10(1) of 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".
49. In this case the request was made on 9 April 2021 and a response was not provided until 14 July 2021. The Commissioner finds that the Council has breached section 10(1) by failing to respond to the request within 20 working days and it is now required to respond to the request in accordance with FOIA.

Other matters

50. The Commissioner would like to add that the initial response to this Request for Information was inadequate, the Council's response was difficult to understand and it also withheld information without an explanation.
51. The Commissioner would like to remind the Council that if it wishes to withhold information, it needs to apply a relevant exemption which explains why the information is being withheld.

Right of appeal

52. 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

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

53. 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.
54. 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

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