

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 6 October 2022

Public Authority: West Midlands Ambulance Service University
NHS Foundation Trust

Address: Waterfront Business Park
Brierley Hill
DY5 1LX

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information from West Midlands Ambulance Service University NHS Foundation Trust (WMAS) regarding complaints against named members of staff. WMAS refused to provide the requested information by virtue of section 40(2) of FOIA – third party personal data.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that WMAS has correctly relied on section 40(2) of FOIA to refuse to disclose the requested information.
3. The Commissioner does not require WMAS to take any remedial steps.

Request and response

4. On 6 March 2022, the complainant wrote to the public authority and requested information in the following terms:

"How many formal complaints have been made against the following staff? And what was the complaint related to?

[name redacted]
[name redacted]
[name redacted]"

5. The public authority responded on 7 March 2022 and refused the request, relying on section 40 of FOIA to do so.
6. Following an internal review the public authority wrote to the complainant on 5 April 2022. It stated that it was upholding its application of section 40 of FOIA.

Scope of the case

7. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 8 April 2022 to complain about the way his request for information had been handled.
8. During the course of the Commissioner's investigation WMAS clarified that it was relying on subsection 40(2) of FOIA to refuse to disclose the requested information.
9. The Commissioner considers the scope of his investigation to be to establish whether the public authority is entitled to withhold the requested information under section 40(2) of FOIA.

Reasons for decision

Section 40 – personal information

10. Section 40(2) of FOIA provides 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 40(4A) is satisfied.
11. 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').
12. 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.

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

13. 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?

14. Section 3(2) of the DPA defines personal data as:

“any information relating to an identified or identifiable living individual”.

15. The two main elements of personal data are that the information must relate to a living person and that the person must be identifiable.
16. 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, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of the individual.
17. 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.
18. In the circumstances of this case, having considered the withheld information, the Commissioner is satisfied that the information relates to the data subjects. That is because it is information about whether any complaints have been received concerning the three individuals who were named within the request for information. This information therefore falls within the definition of ‘personal data’ in section 3(2) of the DPA.
19. 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.
20. The most relevant DP principle in this case is principle (a).

Would disclosure contravene principle (a)?

21. 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”.

22. In the case of a 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.

23. In order to be lawful, one of the lawful bases listed in Article 6(1) of the GDPR must apply to the processing. It must also be generally lawful.

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

24. 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"².

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

i) **Legitimate interest test:** Whether a legitimate interest is being pursued in the request for information;

ii) **Necessity test:** Whether disclosure of the information is necessary to meet the legitimate interest in question;

iii) **Balancing test:** Whether the above interests override the legitimate interest(s) or fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject.

26. 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

27. In considering any legitimate interest(s) in the disclosure of the requested information under FOIA, the Commissioner recognises that a wide range of interests may be legitimate interests. They can be the

² 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".

requester's own interests or the interests of third parties, and commercial interests as well as wider societal benefits.

28. These interest(s) can include broad general principles of accountability and transparency for their own sakes, as well as case-specific interests. However, if the requester is pursuing a purely private concern unrelated to any broader public interest, unrestricted disclosure to the general public is unlikely to be proportionate. They may be compelling or trivial, but trivial interests may be more easily overridden in the balancing test.
29. The Commissioner acknowledges that there is a general public interest in the conduct of ambulance staff who are responsible for the care and safety of members of the public, as well as transparency and accountability surrounding WMAS's handling of complaints.
30. In this case it is also clear to the Commissioner, from correspondence from the complainant to him, that the complainant has a personal interest in the disclosure of the requested information.
31. The Commissioner, therefore, accepts that there is both a narrow legitimate interest which is personal to the complainant, and a broader general public interest in the withheld information.

Is disclosure necessary?

32. '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 FOIA must therefore be the least intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aim in question.
33. The Commissioner does not find that disclosure to the world at large, of complaint information relating to three named individuals, is necessary to satisfy the identified broad general public interest.
34. However, he is satisfied in this case that there are no less intrusive means of achieving the legitimate aims which are personal to the complainant.

Balancing test

35. It is necessary to balance the legitimate interests in disclosure against the data subject's interests or fundamental rights and freedoms. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the impact of disclosure. For example, if the data subject would not reasonably expect that the information would be disclosed to the public under FOIA in response to

the request, or if such disclosure would cause unjustified harm, their interests or rights are likely to override legitimate interests in disclosure.

36. In considering this balancing test, the Commissioner has taken into account the following factors:

- the potential harm or distress that disclosure may cause;
- whether the information is already in the public domain;
- whether the information is already known to some individuals;
- whether the individual expressed concern to the disclosure; and
- the reasonable expectations of the individual.

37. In the Commissioner's view, a key issue is whether the individuals concerned have a reasonable expectation that their information will not be disclosed. These expectations can be shaped by factors such as an individual's general expectation of privacy, whether the information relates to an employee in their professional role or to them as individuals, and the purpose for which they provided their personal data.

38. It is also important to consider whether disclosure would be likely to result in unwarranted damage or distress to that individual.

39. The Commissioner considers that disclosure of the requested information would be disproportionately intrusive to the individual(s) concerned as it would reveal information about complaints or allegations made against them, regardless of if they were found to be guilty or cleared of any wrong-doing, which is not otherwise readily available in the public domain.

40. The law provides that there must be a pressing social need for any interference with privacy rights and that the interference must be proportionate.

41. Whilst the Commissioner understands the complainant's wish to obtain the requested information, and the wider public interest in the transparency and accountability of WMAS, he is mindful that disclosure under FOIA is disclosure to the world at large and not just to the requester.

42. Based on the above factors, the Commissioner has determined that there is insufficient legitimate interest to outweigh the data subjects' fundamental rights and freedoms in this case. The Commissioner therefore considers that there is no Article 6 basis for processing and so the disclosure of the information would not be lawful.

43. Given the above conclusion that disclosure would be unlawful, the Commissioner considers that he does not need to go on to separately consider whether disclosure would be fair or transparent.

The Commissioner's view

44. The Commissioner has reached the conclusion that WMAS was entitled to rely on section 40(2) of FOIA to withhold the requested information, by way of section 40(3A)(a), and does not need to take any further steps on this matter.

Right of appeal

45. 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

46. 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.
47. 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

Claire Churchill
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