

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 17 March 2022

Public Authority: The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Address: King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant requested information from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) relating to a UKAID Connect Consortia Grant awarded in 2019. By the date of this notice, the FCDO had not issued a substantive response to the request.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the FCDO 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 the FCDO to take the following steps 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. The FCDO must take these steps 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

5. On 30 September 2021 the complainant wrote to the FCDO and requested information in the following terms:

I am writing to request detailed information about the work, outputs and expenditure for the following UKAID Connect Consortia Grant awarded in 2019 for the period 2019-2022 titled 'Strong on Diversity, Bold on Inclusion. Promoting Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual and Transgender Inclusion'.

I would be grateful if you could provide all details of the expenditure to date that includes

- how much of the £12.9million has been spent to date
- a breakdown of expenditure per the 8 consortium member organisations
- a breakdown of expenditure on activity (travel, conferences, research, donations etc)
- a breakdown of expenditure of spent on activity in each of the 5 African cities selected by the project.

I would also like to have details and access to any outputs from this project including the publication of reports and projects/initiatives established and ongoing.”

6. The FCDO wrote to the complainant on 5 October 2021 to acknowledge the request.
7. The FCDO wrote to the complainant on 1 November 2021 and stated that it was extending the time to respond to the request in order to complete its public interest test.
8. The FCDO stated that it was considering the public interest test in line with section 10(3) of the FOIA. It stated that it was currently assessing the public interest test in relation to section 27 (international relations). The FCDO stated that it intended to respond to the request in full by 24 November 2021.
9. By the date of this notice, the FCDO had not issued a substantive response to the request.

Scope of the case

10. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 22 February 2022 to complain about the delay in the FCDO's consideration of the public interest test.
11. The scope of this notice and the following analysis is to consider whether the FCDO has complied with its obligations in relation to section 17 of the FOIA.

Reasons for decision

12. 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."
13. 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".
14. 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.
15. 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.
16. The Commissioner contacted the FCDO on 24 February 2022 reminding it of its responsibilities and asking it to provide a substantive response to the complainant within 10 working days.
17. Despite this intervention, the FCDO has failed to respond to the complainant.

18. In this case, the total time taken by the FCDO to respond to this request 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 test within a reasonable timeframe, the FCDO has not complied with section 17(3).
19. The FCDO is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of the FOIA and respond to the complainant.

Right of appeal

20. 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

21. 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.
22. 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