

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 12 July 2023

Public Authority: 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 ("the FCDO") about correspondence with the Sunday Times on the subject of Pan Am 103. By the date of this notice the FCDO had not issued a substantive response to this 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 FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires the FCDO to take the following step to ensure compliance with the legislation.
 - Having confirmed whether or not information is held within the scope of the request: either disclose the requested information, if held, or, to the extent that information is to be withheld, issue a refusal notice in accordance with the requirements of section 17 of the FOIA.
4. The FCDO 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 FOIA and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

Request and response

5. On 20 June 2022, the complainant made the following request for information to the FCDO:

"I am writing to make an open government request for all the information to which I am entitled under the freedom of information act. In order to assist you with this request, I am outlining my query as specifically as possible. If however this request is too wide or too unclear, I would be grateful if you could contact me as I understand that under the act, you are required to advise and assist requesters.

I understand that the FCO corresponded with the Sunday Times regarding an article that was published on the 23rd May 1999 alleging Colonel Gaddafi's personal involvement in the bombing of Pan Am 103. The incident was documented in several newspapers for that week. I would like any documents and internal correspondence regarding this incident to be released to me that cover the period March-June 1999.

I understand that under the act, I should be entitled to a response within 20 working days. I would be grateful if you could confirm in writing that you have received this request. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future."

6. On 14 September 2022, the FCDO 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 under FOIA.
7. When claiming an extension, public authorities should still issue a refusal notice explaining which exemption applies and why within 20 working days. This must explain that they need more time to consider the public interest test and give an estimate of the date on which they are likely to make a final decision. The FCDO's response of 14 September 2022 failed to state which exemptions apply and why.

Reasons for decision

8. 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.”

9. 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”.
10. Section 17(3) of 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.
11. FOIA does not define how long a reasonable time is. The section 45 Code of Practice on request handling states that “it is best practice for an extension to be for no more than a further 20 working days”.¹ This means that the total time spent responding to a request should not exceed 40 working days unless there are exceptional circumstances.
12. On 13 June 2023 the Commissioner wrote to the FCDO, reminding it of its responsibilities and asking it to provide a substantive response to the complainant within 10 working days. To date, a substantive response has still not been provided.
13. In this case, the total time taken by the FCDO 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, the FCDO has not complied with section 17(3).
14. The FCDO is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of FOIA and respond to the complainant.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744071/CoP_FOI_Code_of_Practice_-_Minor_Amendments_20180926_.pdf

Right of appeal

15. 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

16. 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.
17. 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
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Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF