

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 23 October 2023

Public Authority: Chief Constable of Surrey Police
Address: PO Box 101
Guildford
Surrey
GU1 9PE

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested, from Surrey Police, information about the number of response and support officers on duty during a specified night shift (8 May 2023).
2. Surrey Police refused to disclose the requested information, citing sections 31(1)(a) and (b) of FOIA (the law enforcement exemption).
3. The Commissioner's decision is that Surrey Police was correct to rely on sections 31(1)(a) and (b) of FOIA and refuse disclosure.
4. The Commissioner does not require any further steps as a result of this decision notice.

Request and response

5. On 1 July 2023, the complainant wrote to Surrey Police and requested information in the below terms. The request was an amended version of an earlier, wider request:

"... please can you provide data for the following amended request:

1. The total number of response officers on duty in Surrey during the night shift of **May 8, 2023**.
2. The total number of supporting officers (e.g. those in control rooms, custody suites and other facilities) on duty in Surrey during the night shift of **May 8, 2023**".
6. Surrey Police responded on 31 July 2023. It confirmed holding relevant information but refused disclosure, citing sections 31(1)(a) and (b) of FOIA.
7. Following an internal review, on 23 August 2023 Surrey Police upheld its original decision.

Scope of the case

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 23 August 2023 to complain about the way their amended request for information of 1 July 2023 had been handled.
9. They disagree with Surrey Police's refusal to provide the requested information.
10. They commented that other police forces have disclosed such information.
11. They emphasised that the request relates to police staffing for a single day only. They consider that they have requested "generalised data" that would show "merely how many officers were working a single shift".
12. The Commissioner considers that the scope of his investigation is to consider whether Surrey Police was entitled to rely on sections 31(1)(a) and (b) of FOIA to refuse the 1 July 2023 request.
13. The Commissioner has not asked Surrey Police for any submissions or a copy of the withheld information. He considers that in this instance he is able to make his decision without those things.

Reasons for decision

14. Sections 31(1)(a) and (b) of FOIA respectively provide that information is exempt if its disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the prevention or detection of crime, or the apprehension or prosecution of offenders.

15. The exemptions, if engaged, are subject to the public interest test.
16. First the Commissioner is satisfied that the envisaged harm relates to the law enforcement interests protected by sections 31(1)(a) and (b), stated at paragraph 14 above. Surrey Police has said "there is a risk of the criminal fraternity building up a picture of police officers on duty at any one time", and targeting areas of real or perceived vulnerability, ultimately risking public safety. Clearly this relates to the prevention or detection of crime, or the apprehension of offenders.
17. He is satisfied that the harm is not trivial. Crime is a serious matter and as Surrey Police noted, criminal activity risks the safety of the public. It is important that crime is detected and that offenders are apprehended.
18. He is satisfied that there is a causal link between disclosure and the harm, and disclosure 'would be likely to' cause the harm, as he explains below.
19. Surrey Police has used the word "could", as well as "would", when discussing the link between disclosure and harm. The Commissioner has therefore considered the lower level of likelihood, namely that disclosure 'would be likely to' harm the interests in question. This means there must be a real and significant risk of the harm occurring, even if the risk is less than 50%.
20. As the Commissioner's section 31 guidance¹ explains, when considering the prejudice test, account should be taken of any 'mosaic effect'.
21. The prejudice test is not limited to the harm that could be caused by the requested information on its own. Public authorities can take account of any harm likely to arise if someone pieced together the requested information with other information to form a broader picture.
22. Complying with one request can make it more difficult to refuse requests for similar information in the future. Public authorities are therefore entitled to consider any harm that could be caused by combining the requested information with the information a public authority could subsequently be required to provide, if the current request was complied with.

¹ <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi-eir-and-access-to-information/freedom-of-information-and-environmental-information-regulations/section-31-law-enforcement/>

23. Such points are clearly relevant to this case, concerning a request for the number of officers on duty during a specified night shift.
24. Whilst the complainant has argued that their request relates to a single shift only, the Commissioner would point out that other similar requests for different shifts or locations, if successful, would likely enable a wider picture to be built.
25. Surrey Police alluded to the mosaic effect, when it envisaged requesters asking for figures relating to various single days and noted the risk of criminals building a picture of the number of officers on duty at any one time.
26. The Commissioner is aware that the complainant has made the same (or a very similar) request to a number of different police forces.
27. The Commissioner also notes that the shift that is the focus of this particular series of requests from the complainant is the night shift of 8 May 2023, the bank holiday for the coronation of King Charles III.
28. The Commissioner would remind the complainant that disclosure under FOIA is 'to the world', and not just to the complainant themselves.
29. The Commissioner considers that there is a real and significant risk of disclosure causing harm to the prevention or detection of crime and the apprehension or prosecution of offenders. It is not difficult to imagine criminals using information about the number of police officers on duty at different times or locations to plan their criminal activities and evade apprehension, or try to.
30. The Commissioner therefore considers that the exemptions are engaged.

Public interest test

31. Surrey Police acknowledged considerations in favour of disclosure, such as transparency and reassuring the public about police capability.
32. However against disclosure, Surrey Police emphasised the importance of public safety, and maintaining its ability to prevent and detect crime.
33. It concluded that the public interest favours withholding the information.
34. The Commissioner recognises that there is a general public interest in promoting transparency and accountability, which must always be given some weight in the public interest test.
35. The complainant has not, in their complaint about Surrey Police, put forward any public interest arguments regarding the issue or information that their request relates to.

36. The Commissioner notes that there is already some official information publicly available on www.gov.uk regarding police workforce numbers².
37. He considers that those statistics already go some way to satisfying any public interest there may be in disclosure of the information requested by the complainant under FOIA, and transparency around police staffing.
38. As noted above, the complainant said that other police forces have disclosed such information. Even if that is so, it does not automatically follow that all police forces should disclose it.
39. The Commissioner highlights that there is a very strong public interest in protecting the ability of public authorities to enforce the law.
40. The Commissioner considers that on balance, the factors against disclosure have greater weight and the public interest lies in maintaining the exemptions.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-workforce-england-and-wales>

Right of appeal

41. 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

42. 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.
43. 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

Daniel Kennedy
Senior Case Officer
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF