

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 17 January 2018

Public Authority: Home Office
Address: 2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information from the Home Office regarding complaints made in Immigration Removal Centre's (IRC's).
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the Home Office has breached section 10(1) of the FOIA as it has failed to give a substantive response to the request within the reasonable timeframe specified by section 10(3).
3. The Commissioner requires the public authority to take the following steps to ensure compliance with the legislation.
 - The Home Office must issue a substantive response to the request in accordance with its obligations under the FOIA.
4. The public authority 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 14 June 2017, the complainant wrote to the Home Office and requested information in the following terms:

"1) Please state the number of recorded complaints made by immigration detainees held in immigration removal centres to centre staff or management

Please provide information for each individual immigration removal centre that you operate.

Please state

- a) The reason for the complaint.*
- b) If the complaint was found to be substantiated or unsubstantiated*
- c) The outcome of the complaint*

Please provide information for each of the following financial years:

- i) 2014/15*
- ii) 2015/16*
- iii) 2016/17*

If providing information for part C of this request would push it over the cost limit set out under the FOIA, please just provide a response for questions A and B."

6. The Home Office responded on 12 July 2017. It stated that:

"We are considering your request. Although the Act carries a presumption in favour of disclosure, it provides exemptions which may be used to withhold information in specified circumstances.

Some of these exemptions, referred to as 'qualified exemptions', are subject to a public interest test. This test is used to balance the public interest in disclosure against the public interest in favour of withholding the information. The Act allows us to exceed the 20 working day response target where we need to consider the public interest test fully."

7. On the 22 August 2017 the Home Office told the complainant that they were still progressing the request and apologising for the delay. A substantive response has not yet been issued.

Scope of the case

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 9 August 2017 to complain about the way his request for information had been handled.
9. Following receipt of the complaint the Commissioner contacted the Home Office, reminding it of its responsibilities and asking it to respond to the complainant within 10 working days.
10. Despite this intervention the Home Office has failed to respond to the complainant.

Reasons for decision

11. Section 10(1) of the FOIA states that an authority must comply with section 1(1) of the FOIA '...promptly and in any event not later than the twentieth working day following the date of receipt'. However, section 10(3) enables an authority to extend the 20 working day limit up to a 'reasonable' time in cases where the public interest test attached to the application of a qualified exemption is being considered.
12. The FOIA does not define what constitutes a 'reasonable' extension of time. It is the view of the Commissioner that an authority should normally take no more than an additional 20 working days to consider the public interest test, meaning that the total time spent dealing with the request should not exceed 40 working days.
13. The Commissioner has found that the time taken to produce a substantive response to this request considerably exceeds the 40 working days and is therefore not reasonable. She has therefore decided that the Home Office has breached section 10(1) of the FOIA.

Right of appeal

14. 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: 0300 1234504
Fax: 0870 739 5836
Email: GRC@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk
Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

15. 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.
16. 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

Alun Johnson
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