

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 13 November 2023

Public Authority: Department of Health and Social Care

Address: 1st Floor North
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant requested information from Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), regarding a meeting that took place with The Phoenix Partnership (TPP) in relation to Technology and Product Development in healthcare. By the date of this notice the public authority had not issued a substantive response to this request.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the DHSC 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 DHSC 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.¹
4. The DHSC must take this step within 35 calendar days of the date of this decision notice. Failure to comply may result in the Commissioner

¹ The Commissioner expects the public authority to take appropriate precautions to protect any personal data when disclosing information in a spreadsheet or similar format; [Information Commissioner's Office - Advisory note to public authorities | ICO](#)

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 27 June 2023, the complainant made the following request for information to the public authority:

"Please can you answer the following FOI request.

BACKGROUND INFO.

On the 17/7/22 Minister Steve Barclay meet with The Phoenix Partnership (TPP) to discuss "Technology and

Product Development in healthcare".

link: <https://openaccess.transparency.org.uk/?...>

MY REQUEST

1 - Please can you provide a copy of the following information regarding the July 2022 meeting:

A - A copy of any meeting minutes

B - Full attendance list

C - Agenda

D - Ministerial briefing documents

E - Emails between the ministers office and TPP regarding the July meeting"

6. On 25 July 2023, DHSC wrote to the complainant to explain it would need to extend the time taken to complete its public interest test considerations in respect of exemptions under sections 35 and 43 of FOIA.

Reasons for decision

7. 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."

8. 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".

9. 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.

10. 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".² This means that the total time spent responding to a request should not exceed 40 working days unless there are exceptional circumstances.

11. On 11 October 2023 the Commissioner wrote to DHSC, 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.

12. On 1 November 2023, DHSC informed the Commissioner of a delay due to awaiting sign off. The Commissioner granted DHSC with an additional 5 working days to respond. However, despite best efforts it was unable to meet this deadline.

13. In this case, the total time taken by DHSC 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 public authority has not complied with section 17(3).

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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

14. The DHSC is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of FOIA and respond to the complainant.

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

Roger Cawthorne
Team Manager
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF