

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 16 July 2013

Public Authority: University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust

Address: Trust Headquarters
Marlborough Street
Bristol
BS1 3NU

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information about histopathology breast care services. University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust (the Trust) refused to comply with the request as it considers it is vexatious under section 14 of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).
2. The Commissioner's decision is that the Trust has correctly applied section 14 FOIA in this case, it was not therefore obliged to comply with the request.
3. The Commissioner requires no steps to be taken.

Request and response

4. On 22 October 2012, the complainant wrote to the Trust and requested information in the following terms:

" On 15th June 2008 a doctor from North Bristol NHS Trust wrote a letter to Dr Graham Rich, then Chief Executive of your Trust, copying John Savage the Board Chair and Sonia Mills, former Chief Executive of North Bristol NHS Trust. The letter expressed serious concerns about UHBristol's Histopathology service.

Please provide me with the following information:

1. What action was taken by Dr Rich and John Savage on receipt of this letter?

2. Where are these actions documented? Please provide copies.
 3. Was this letter discussed by the Trust Board? If so, please provide the records of all such discussions, including the record of the private Board discussions.
 4. What decisions were made and by whom as to whether to inform Monitor and/or the Care Quality Commission about the letter?
 5. Where are these decisions documented? Please provide copies.
 6. Was Lindsey Scott, the Trust's then Chief Nurse and Director of Governance informed about the letter? If so please provide a copy of the notification(s) provided to her.
 7. Did Ms Scott take any action in respect of this letter? If so, what action did she take? Were her actions based on instructions from her executive and non-executive colleagues on the Board or was she given autonomy by the Board to decide whether or not to take action? Please provide a copy of her action plan - if she had one.
 8. Did the Trust inform NHS Bristol and/or NHS South West about the letter? If so, please provide copies of the notifications to them.
 9. Did the Trust discuss the letter with Sonia Mills or anyone else at North Bristol NHS Trust? If so, please provide the record of the communications.
 10. The Histopathology Inquiry Report tells us that although the response to the letter was signed by Dr Rich, the letter was written by then Medical Director, Jonathan Sheffield. Who decided that Dr Sheffield should write the response? Was the Trust Board party to this decision? Please provide a copy of the documentation explaining the decision."
5. The Trust responded on 20 December 2012 and said that the request was vexatious under section 14 FOIA.

Scope of the case

6. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 16 January 2013 to complain about the way her request for information had been handled.

7. The Commissioner has considered whether the Trust correctly applied section 14 FOIA in this case.

Reasons for decision

8. Section 14(1) provides that a public authority is not obliged to comply with a request if it is vexatious.
9. The Commissioner's published guidance¹ on section 14(1) (which was the current guidance at the time of the request) provides that the following five factors should be taken into account when considering whether a request can accurately be characterised as vexatious:
 - whether compliance would create a significant burden in terms of expense and distraction;
 - whether the request is designed to cause disruption or annoyance;
 - whether the request has the effect of harassing the public authority or its staff;
 - whether the request can otherwise fairly be characterised as obsessive or manifestly unreasonable; and
 - whether the request has any serious purpose or value.
10. The guidance stated that it is not necessary for all five factors to be engaged, but explained that the Commissioner will reach a decision based on a balance of those factors which are applicable, and any other relevant considerations brought to his attention.
11. The Commissioner has recently issued new guidance² on the application of section 14(1) and this adopts a less prescriptive approach. It refers to a recent Upper Tribunal decision³ which establishes the concepts of

¹http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/freedom_of_information/detailed_specialist_guides/vexatious_and_repeated_requests.pdf

²http://www.ico.org.uk/for_organisations/guidance_index/~media/documents/library/Freedom_of_Information/Detailed_specialist_guides/dealing-with-vexatious-requests.ashx

³ *Information Commissioner vs Devon County Council & Dransfield* [2012] UKUT 440 (AAC) (28 January 2013)

'proportionality' and 'justification' as central to any consideration of whether a request is vexatious.

12. The new guidance therefore suggests that the key question the public authority must ask itself is whether the request is likely to cause a disproportionate or unjustified level of disruption, irritation or distress. Where this is not clear, the Commissioner considers that public authorities should weigh the impact on the authority and balance this against the purpose and value of the request. Where relevant, public authorities will need to take into account wider factors such as the background and history of the request.
13. The Trust has submitted its arguments to the Commissioner with reference to the five headings as outlined in the old guidance. It has relied upon the same arguments detailed in a Decision Notice issued on 26 March 2013 under case reference FS50452727. As this case relates to a request made on the same subject matter and from the same complainant, the Commissioner considers that the reasons behind the decision in that case would equally apply in this case. That case related to 11 requests made between 23 November 2011 and 8 January 2012. The Trust explained that since March 2009 up to the date of the first request being considered (23 November 2011) it received 38 freedom of information requests from the complainant relating to histopathology or pathology services which featured in an independent Inquiry. In addition it confirmed that there had been other interactions, and challenges received from the complainant on a weekly basis. It said this included letters to Trust governors and the Chief Executive.
14. In case reference FS50452727 the Commissioner upheld the Trust's application of section 14 FOIA. The Commissioner has not included all of the detailed reasoning contained in that Notice but would reiterate that it would be equally applicable in this case as it relates to an earlier request on the same subject matter. However the Trust has provided some further submissions in support of its application of section 14 FOIA. The Commissioner has therefore considered the arguments put forward by the Trust in light of the new guidance.

Unreasonable persistence

15. The new guidance states that to show unreasonable persistence, the public authority must demonstrate that the requester is attempting to reopen an issue which has already been comprehensively addressed by the public authority, or otherwise subjected to some form of independent scrutiny.
16. The Trust has explained that a Histopathology Inquiry was independently conducted to address concerns in this area, with a range

of expert involvement and reported in 2010. The Commissioner is aware that the report and subsequent follow up actions were made publicly available.

17. The Commissioner considers that concerns relating to histopathology have been subject to independent scrutiny and the complainant is seeking to reopen this issue in this and previous information requests. This therefore displays an unreasonable persistence.

Intransigence

18. The new guidance states that to show intransigence, the public authority must demonstrate that the requester takes an unreasonably entrenched position, rejecting attempts to assist and advise out of hand and shows no willingness to engage with the authority.
19. The Trust has explained that it considers that it has tried to answer many of the complainant's previous requests, even at the stage where they began to become duplicative. It said that the Trust has met with the complainant on two occasions to try to agree an approach to conclude the issues being raised by the complainant. However this was unsuccessful in coming to a resolution.
20. The Commissioner considers that given the length of time the complainant has been making requests for information regarding this issue, the number of requests made and the fact that the issue has been subject to independent scrutiny, the Trust has demonstrated that the complainant has taken an unreasonably entrenched position.

Frequent or overlapping requests

21. The new guidance states that the public authority must demonstrate that the requester submits frequent correspondence about the same issue or sends in new requests before the public authority has had an opportunity to address their earlier enquiries.
22. The Trust reiterated that over the last three years the Trust has been managing sustained and persistent correspondence from the complainant regarding Histopathology services. It said that this correspondence has been received on an almost weekly basis across all levels of the organisation. It said that these interactions included FOIA and subject access requests but also complaints, challenges, accusations and allegations and questions posed at public meetings. The Trust explained that the complainant has also been corresponding with other local arms of the health service which the Trust has been involved in responding to.

23. The Trust said that whilst it is positive for patients to be able to engage with and challenge the NHS, the scale, scope and volume in which the complainant has done so, both through the making of FOIA requests and other correspondence, this has taken the interactions to a disabling level for the Trust. It has said that the requests have created a significant operational as well as managerial distraction which has disrupted the organisations duties to other service users.
24. The Commissioner considers that due to the length of time the complainant has been making requests to the Trust regarding this issue, the number of requests made and the fact that the requester is asking for information about matters that were dealt with as part of the independent Histopathology Inquiry, this demonstrates that the requests are frequent and overlapping.
25. The Commissioner has considered the arguments put forward by the Trust in light of the Upper Tribunal's view of the importance of 'proportionality' and 'justification' and has balanced this against the purpose and value of the request. Where relevant, he has taken into account wider factors such as the background and history of the request.
26. The Commissioner recognises that whilst there was a serious purpose and value behind the requests when the complainant first contacted the Trust, this has now been outweighed by the unreasonable persistence, intransigence and the frequency and overlapping nature of the requests. He considers that any serious purpose in the request is outweighed by the drain on resources and the diversion from the public functions of the Trust.
27. The Commissioner also recognises that the Trust has tried to answer many of the complainant's earlier requests even where they became duplicative and has attempted to try to resolve the complainant's issues. It decided to apply section 14 at the point when the complainant persisted to make requests on the same issue and it became apparent that no response would satisfy the issue as set out in detail in the Decision Notice for case reference FS50452727. Due to the volume of correspondence on these issues and the fact that the issues have been subject to significant external scrutiny, the Commissioner is satisfied that the request is vexatious and that section 14(1) has been applied correctly.

Right of appeal

28. 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: 0116 249 4253

Email: informationtribunal@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/courts-and-tribunals/tribunals/information-rights/index.htm

29. 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.
30. 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

Pamela Clements
Group Manager, Complaints Resolution
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF