

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 18 May 2021

Public Authority: The NHS Commissioning Board

Address: Quarry House
Quarry Hill
Leeds
LS2 7UE

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant requested information from The NHS Commissioning Board (NHS England) regarding Covid-19 and hospitals throughout England. NHS England had failed to provide a substantive response by the date of this notice.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that NHS England failed to respond to the request within 20 working days and has therefore breached section 10 of the FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires NHS England to take the following steps to ensure compliance with the legislation.
 - Issue a substantive response, in accordance with its obligations under the FOIA, to the request.
4. NHS England 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 FOIA and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.

Request and response

5. On 12 January 2021, the complainant wrote to NHS England and requested information in the following terms:

“Under the FOI Act please advise, separately, the following for hospitals in all counties in England for the period February 2020 to December 2020:

- a. Total deaths per county solely due to COVID-19 with NO underlying illness.*
- b. Total deaths per county where COVID-19 is attributed as a secondary or possible contribution. (if you don't hold this information, please advise who does).*
- c. Total numbers of beds shown as a percentage designated solely for COVID-19 patients.*
- d. The total number of patients who have contracted COVID-19 in hospital.*
- e. The average age of patients who have died as a result of COVID-19 both with or without underlying illness.*
- f. The number of COVID-19 patients who have recovered.*
- g. The number of NHS employees who have contracted COVID-19.*
- h. The number of NHS employees who have died of COVID-19.*

If you do not hold any of the above information, then please advise who does.”

6. NHS England had failed to provide a substantive response by the date of this notice.

Scope of the case

7. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 31 March 2021 to complain about the failure, by NHS England, to respond to the request.
8. In line with her usual practice, the Commissioner contacted NHS England on 29 April 2021 to highlight the outstanding response. She requested that NHS England respond to the request within 10 working days. The correspondence was neither acknowledged nor responded to.
9. The scope of this notice and the following analysis is to consider whether NHS England has complied with section 10 of the FOIA.

Reasons for decision

10. Section 1(1) of the 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.*

11. Section 10 of the FOIA states that responses to requests made under the Act must be provided "*promptly and in any event not later than the twentieth working day following the date of receipt.*"

12. From the evidence presented to the Commissioner in this case, it is clear that, in failing to issue a response to the request within 20 working days, NHS England has breached section 10 of the FOIA.

Other matters

13. The Commissioner wishes to place on record her understanding of the immense pressures placed on public authorities during the coronavirus pandemic. She is sympathetic to the difficult decisions such authorities must make, between prioritising front-line services and continuing to meet their obligations under 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@justice.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

Susan Duffy
Senior Case Officer
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Wilmslow
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