

## **Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)**

### **Decision notice**

**Date:** 20 April 2022

**Public Authority:** Department for Culture, Media & Sport  
**Address:** 100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

#### **Decision (including any steps ordered)**

---

1. The complainant requested information from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport ("DCMS") about a meeting held between Oliver Dowden and Lord Brownlow in January 2021. By the date of this notice DCMS had not issued a substantive response to this request.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that DCMS 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 the FOIA.
3. The Commissioner requires DCMS to take the following step to ensure compliance with the legislation.
  - Having confirmed that information is held within the scope of the request: either disclose the requested information or issue a refusal notice in accordance with the requirements of section 17 of the FOIA.
4. DCMS must take this step 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 7 January 2022, the complainant wrote to DCMS and requested information in the following terms:

"I am sending this request under the Freedom of Information Act.

This request concerns the meeting between Oliver Dowden and Lord Brownlow registered as being held on 18th January 2021 as to "To discuss plans for Great Exhibition 2.0"

Please provide a copy of:

-All email correspondence between Dowden or the department, and Brownlow or his representatives or private office, concerning this meeting (setting up and summing up) and any attachments to these emails.

Please confirm you have checked whether any messages were sent via any private email used by Dowden for work purposes to Brownlow related to this meeting.

-The minutes of this meeting.

-Any reports, annexes or reference documents provided for and/or utilised at the meeting.

-The attendance list for this meeting.

-Any texts, WhatsApps, or other messages between Dowden and Brownlow related to this meeting."

6. DCMS acknowledged the request on 4 February 2022.
7. On 4 February 2022, DCMS wrote to the complainant to explain that it held information relevant to the complainant's request, but that it would need to extend the time taken to complete its public interest test considerations in respect of an exemption under section 36 (prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs) of the FOIA.

## Scope of the case

---

8. The complainant contacted the Commissioner on 11 March 2022 to complain about the delay in DCMS's consideration of the public interest test.

9. On 21 March 2022 the Commissioner wrote to DCMS, 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.
10. The Commissioner has considered whether DCMS has complied with its obligations in relation to section 17 of the FOIA.

## **Reasons for decision**

---

11. 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."

12. Section 10(1) of the 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".
13. Section 17(3) of the 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.
14. Although the FOIA does not define what constitutes a reasonable time, the Commissioner considers it reasonable to extend the time to provide a full response, including public interest considerations, by up to a further 20 working days. This means that the total time spent dealing with the request should not exceed 40 working days, unless there are exceptional circumstances. A public authority would need to fully justify any extension beyond 40 working days.
15. In this case, the total time taken by DCMS 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, DCMS has not complied with section 17(3).
16. DCMS is now required to finalise its public interest considerations under section 17(3) of the FOIA and respond to the complainant.

## Right of appeal

---

17. 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](mailto:grc@justice.gov.uk)

Website: [www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber](http://www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber)

18. 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.
19. 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 .....**

**Michael Lea**  
**Team Manager**  
**Information Commissioner's Office**  
**Wycliffe House**  
**Water Lane**  
**Wilmslow**  
**Cheshire**  
**SK9 5AF**