

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 10 July 2018

Public Authority: Police and Crime Commissioner for Staffordshire

Address: Staffordshire Police Headquarters
Weston Road
Stafford
ST18 0YY

Complainant: Rosie Brighthouse obo Privacy International

Address: rosieb@libertyhumanrights.org.uk

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant has requested information about the purchase and use of Covert Communications Data Capture ("CCDC") from the Staffordshire Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (the "OPCC"). The OPCC would neither confirm nor deny ("NCND") whether it holds the requested information, citing the exemptions at sections 23(5) (information supplied by, or relating to, bodies dealing with security matters), 24(2) (national security) and 31(3) (law enforcement) of the FOIA for the request in its entirety.
2. In respect of part (1) of the request, and some of parts (2) and (3) of the request, the Commissioner's decision is that sections 23(5) and 24(2) were cited correctly so the OPCC was not obliged to confirm or deny whether the requested information is held.
3. For the 'legislation' element of part (2) of the request and the 'legislation' and 'codes of practice' elements of part (3) of the request, the Commissioner's decision is that the exemptions were applied incorrectly. The OPCC is required to confirm or deny whether this information is held and either disclose it or issue a fresh response compliant with section 17 of the FOIA.

4. The OPCC 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.

Background

5. The Commissioner is considering 9 related cases from this complainant in respect of similar information requests being made to different public authorities. They are dealt with under reference numbers FS50728051 to FS50728059 inclusive.
6. As the different authorities dealt with their requests within different time frames the Commissioner agreed to deal with the substantive complaint about all the requests outside of her usual 3 month deadline for accepting complaints. This agreement was made in advance, in May 2017, when some refusal notices / internal reviews were outstanding for some of the public authorities concerned.
7. The request in this case is similar to the requests for information which the Commissioner has considered under references FS50728051 to FS50728056 and FS50728059, all of which are being issued at the same time. The decision notice FS50728051 is taking the 'lead' in respect of these decisions.

Request and response

8. On 1 November 2016 the complainant wrote to the OPCC and requested information in the following terms:

"I am writing on behalf of [name removed] to seek records ... relating to the purchase and use of mobile phone surveillance equipment by the Staffordshire Police.

Alliance Governance Group Meeting Minutes

I refer, in particular, to the recent article written by the journalist collective The Bristol Cable "Revealed: Bristol's police and mass mobile phone surveillance". The article makes reference to the minutes of an Alliance Governance Group meeting in May 2016 between Warwickshire and West Mercia Police in which the topic of "Covert Communications Data Capture" (CCDC) equipment was discussed.

Specifically, the minute's record: "Within the West Midlands region both West Midlands and Staffordshire Police have recently purchased and operated 4G compatible CCDC equipment. Both have purchased the same equipment from the company referred to as option 3".

I am unable to find relevant information regarding these purchases on the Staffordshire Police and Crime Commissioner website.

Guardian Article

I also refer to the 10 October 2016, the Guardian published the article "Controversial snooping technology 'used by at least seven police forces'" in which you were quoted as saying¹:

"Some tactics police use to keep people safe and bring criminals to justice can be intrusive and it is crucial that there are robust safeguards, framed by legislation, around the work, and there are."

Record Requests

[Name removed] requests the following records:

- 1. Records relating to the purchase of CCDC equipment, referred to in the Alliance Government Group minutes referenced above, including purchase orders, invoices, contracts, loan agreements, solicitation letters, correspondence with companies and other similar records.*
- 2. Records relating to the "robust safeguards" and "legislation" to govern the use of CCDC equipment by Staffordshire Police that you referred to in the Guardian article referenced above.*
- 3. Any other records, including legislation, codes of practice, policy statements, guides, manuals, memoranda, presentations, training materials or other records governing the use of CCDC equipment by Staffordshire Police, including restrictions on when, where, how, and against whom it may be used, limitations on retention and use of collected data, guidance on when a warrant or other legal process must be obtained, and rules governing when the existence*

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/10/controversial-phone-snooping-technologyimsi-catcher-seven-police-forces>

and use of CCDC equipment may be revealed to the public, criminal defendants, or judges.

[Name removed] seeks records regardless of how CCDC equipment is identified. In this respect, [name removed] notes that CCDC equipment can be referred to using a range of other terms, including "IMSI Catchers", "IMSI Grabbers", "Cell site simulators" and "Stingrays".

Please include copies of material that you hold either in the form of paper or electronic records, including emails. If possible, please provide all requested records in electronic format.

Upon locating the requested records, please contact us and advise us of any costs of providing copies, so that we may decide whether it is necessary to narrow our request".

9. The OPCC failed to respond to the request. On 8 January 2018 the Commissioner issued a decision notice² requiring a response.
10. The OPCC complied with the decision notice on 9 February 2018. It would NCND holding the requested information, citing the exemptions at sections 23(5), 24(2) and 31(3) of the FOIA.
11. In view of the considerable delay, the Commissioner has exercised her discretion and will investigate the complaint without an internal review.

Scope of the case

12. The complainant initially contacted the Commissioner on 17 May 2017. She advised of her intention to file a number of related complaints against different public authorities and requested a pause in the time limit for bringing such complaints.
13. Having received the necessary responses from all of the various public authorities, with the exception of the internal review in this case and one other, the complainant wrote to the Commissioner again on 12 February 2018 with her grounds of complaint in this case. She asked the Commissioner to consider the application of the exemptions cited.

²<https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2018/2173012/fs50716661.pdf>

Reasons for decision

14. The request in this case is similar to a request for information which the Commissioner has considered alongside this case, reference FS50728051. The decision notice in that case is also being issued at the same time as this case.
15. Having considered all the factors applicable to this case, the Commissioner is satisfied that the similarity between the information request in this case and the request in case reference FS50728051 is such that she is able to reach the same decision about the citing of sections 23(5) and 24(2) in this case and the lack of necessity to consider section 31(3).
16. For brevity, the Commissioner will not reproduce the content of that decision notice here but she has adopted the same analysis and concluded that the OPCC was entitled to rely on sections 23(5) and 24(2) in respect of part (1) and some of parts (2) and (3) of the request and that, in relation to the latter exemption, the public interest favoured maintaining the exemption.
17. However, in respect of the 'legislation' element of part (2) of the request and the 'legislation' and 'codes of practice' elements of part (3), the Commissioner finds that none of the exemptions cited are appropriate and the OPCC must confirm or deny whether any information is held. If information is held, it should either be disclosed or the OPCC should issue a fresh response compliant with section 17 of the FOIA.

Other matters

18. Although they do not form part of this notice the Commissioner wishes to highlight the following matters of concern.
19. The Commissioner has produced a flowchart for public authorities to refer to when dealing with a request³. This clearly indicates that where a request is received which is not proper to the receiving public authority then it should inform the requestor that the information is not held and either transfer the request to the appropriate public authority or advise the requester to write to another public authority.

³ https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1167/flowchart_of_request_handling_under_foia.pdf

20. The wording in both parts (2) and (3) of this request refers to the "*use of CCDC equipment by **Staffordshire Police***". In line with the Commissioner's guidance, the OPPC should have advised the complainant accordingly and suggested to her that it would either transfer these parts of the request to Staffordshire Police on her behalf or advised her to make her request to that public authority directly.
21. There is also a Code of Practice⁴ issued under section 45 of FOIA. This includes best practice regarding the transferring requests for information at Part III.

⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/235286/0033.pdf

Right of appeal

22. 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

23. 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.
24. 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 

Carolyn Howes
Senior Case Officer
Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF