

[REDACTED]

From: FOI
Sent: 03 November 2023 11:32
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: FOI 129-23 - Response

Dear [REDACTED]

Our Ref: FOI-129-23

Thank you for your email to the Electoral Commission dated 22 August 2023.

The Commission aims to respond to requests for information promptly and regrets that it has not been able to do so within the statutory timeframe of twenty working days. The delay is a result of the high volume of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests received following the public announcement of the cyber-attack on 8 August 2023.

Your request is shown below followed by our response.

The Root Cause for the EC cyberattack, Access, and Evidence.

Our response is as follows:

We hold the information you have requested.

FOI Act section 21

With regard to the cause of cyber-attack, the information that was accessed and the steps we took to act on the evidence we have, these are answered as fully as we can in a [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#) section of our website specifically relating to the cyber-attack. Please use this link which explains what happened, what kind of information was accessible, our risk assessment of the breach, what we know about those responsible for the attack, when and how we found out about the attack, and the steps we then took.

Providing you with a link to information on our website in response to your request for information at this time is permitted by section 21 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 which removes the need to provide information in our response if it is reasonably accessible to an applicant by other means.

FOI Act section 31

Section 31(1)(a) provides an exemption where disclosure:

“would, or would be likely to, prejudice the prevention or detection of crime”.

The investigation into and findings in relation to the root cause of the cyber-attack includes sensitive, confidential information about the Electoral Commission's information technology systems and the nature of the attack on those systems. Disclosing sensitive, confidential information about our technology systems (such as how a breach happened and what security protocols were in place) would prejudice the security of our own systems and potentially also the security of similar systems used by other public bodies. Disclosure would be likely to prejudice the prevention and detection of similar cyber-attacks.

The Commission's response to the cyber-attack is currently under consideration by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for the purpose of their independent investigation and preparation of their report. Disclosure of the Commission's findings about the root cause of the attack would be likely to prejudice the ability of the ICO and other public bodies with whom we work to prevent and detect crime(s).

Information about the root cause of the attack is exempt from disclosure under section 31(1)(g) at the present time and the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Section 31(1)(g) provides an exemption where disclosure:

"would, or would be likely to, prejudice...the exercise by any public authority of its functions for any of the purposes specified in subsection (2)."

In this case the relevant purposes specified in subsection (2) are:

"(a) the purpose of ascertaining whether any person has failed to comply with the law..."

(c) the purpose of ascertaining whether circumstances which would justify regulatory action in pursuance of any enactment exist or may arise..."

The ICO's investigation into the cyber-attack at the Electoral Commission is still ongoing. To release at this stage information about the root cause of the attack would, or would be likely to, prejudice the ICO's ability to conduct and conclude its investigation in a timely, fair and confidential manner.

Section 31 is not an absolute exemption. The Commission must consider the factors in favour of disclosure and those against.

In this case, the public interest factors in disclosing the information are:

- increased transparency about how the Commission has dealt with the data breach;
- increased transparency about how the Commission has engaged with the ICO investigation.

The public interest factors in withholding the information are:

- maintaining the ICO's ability to conduct investigations in a timely, fair and confidential manner;
- maintaining the security and integrity of the Commission's information technology systems and those of other public authorities with similar IT systems;
- enabling organisations to engage openly with the ICO giving full disclosure of all relevant information without fear that information will be made public prematurely, or, as appropriate, at all.

Having considered these factors, we are satisfied that on balance the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure at the present time (while the ICO's investigation is ongoing).

The Commission strives to be an open, transparent authority, but in some circumstances we cannot responsibly release requested information, and we ask for your understanding in this regard.

If you are not satisfied with this response, please note that the Commission operates a review procedure, details of which can be found on the Commission website at:

<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/freedom-information/make-a-freedom-information-request>.

Please also note that if you have exhausted all internal Commission review procedures and you are still not satisfied you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner. Details of this procedure can be found on the ICO website: <https://ico.org.uk/>.

Yours sincerely

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The Electoral Commission

electoralcommission.org.uk