



## GOVERNMENT OFFICE NETWORK

I am writing in response to your letter of 29 September clarifying paragraphs 3b and 3c of your request of 16 July for information relating to the future of the Government Office Network. Your request has been considered under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

The information that you have requested is exempt information under section 35(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act. This is because the information you are requesting relates to the formulation of Government policy.

This exemption is however subject to a public interest test which means that the information may only be withheld where the public interest in disclosing the information is outweighed by the public interest in maintaining the exception. There is a general public interest underlying the Freedom of Information Act in disclosure of information held by public authorities on the premise that such disclosure will contribute to a greater understanding of decision-making in Government and lead to a better informed and hence more effective public debate and thereby enhance the democratic process.

In this case, however, making decisions such as those about the future of the Government Office Network requires that ministers are able to consider fully a range of options and their implications. To be able to do this it is particularly important that the necessary degree of private thinking space exists in which ministers can ask for and receive full information and frank impartial advice from officials.

Although a final decision on the future of the Government Office Network has now been made, there are still a number of issues around staffing and ongoing functions that are to be finalised. Disclosure of the information would make it likely that ongoing discussions related to these matters would not be as free and frank as they need to be if it was thought the information would be routinely released.

On the basis of the above we consider that the public interest in withholding the information outweighs that in disclosure at this particular time. Accordingly, we are withholding the information that you have requested. However, statistical information is not covered by the section 35(1)(a) exemption. Section 35(4) of the FOIA states that in assessing the balance of the public interest in relation to factual background material, regard should be had to the particular public interest in releasing factual information which has been used or is intended to be used to make policy decisions, to provide an informed background to decision-taking. Therefore, factual and statistical information falling within the scope of your request is attached at Annex A.