



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Europe Directorate

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
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01 April 2016

Dear

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 - REQUEST REF: 0283-16

Thank you for your email of 08 March 2016 asking for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000. You asked:

I would like to obtain information showing all meetings between Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium and representatives of the Belgian government from 1 November 2014 to 28 February 2015. I would like to obtain a description of the purpose of each meeting where possible, and details showing where/when meetings took place.

I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information which you requested.

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) does hold information relevant to your request, which you will find annexed.

However, some of the information includes identities of third parties, and some discussions contain sensitive details. We have carefully considered if we can release this information and conducted the appropriate Public Interest Tests. We do not intend to release any of this information as we judge it is exempt from release under the following exemptions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA):

- section 27 (1) (a) (c) (d) (International relations);
- section 40 (Personal information).

Section 27 (1) (a) (c) and (d) International Relations

Some of the information you have requested is being withheld under section 27 (1) (a) (c) and (d) of the FOIA. Section 27 (1) (a) (c) and (d) provides that information is exempt if its disclosure would or would be likely to prejudice the relations between the United Kingdom and any other state, the interests of the UK abroad, or the promotion or protection by the United Kingdom of its interests abroad.

In applying section 27, we have had to balance the public interest in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosing it. Factors in favour of disclosure include the strong public interest in transparency and accountability. Disclosure would also increase public knowledge of relations with Belgium. Factors against disclosure include the strong

public interest in ensuring that the FCO is able to conduct the UK's international relations effectively and protect UK interests abroad. The effective conduct of the UK's international relations depends upon maintaining trust and confidence with other governments and international organisations. To do this there must be good working relationships with other governments and international organisations based on confidence and trust. This relationship of trust allows for the free and frank exchange of information on the understanding that it will be treated in confidence. If the UK does not maintain this trust and confidence, its ability to act as a significant player in the international arena, and protect and promote UK interests through international relations, will be hampered. Other governments and international organisations may be more reluctant to share information with the UK Government in future, and may be less likely to respect the confidentiality of information supplied by the UK Government to them, to the detriment of UK interests.

For these reasons, we consider that the public interest in maintaining this exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing it.

Section 40 (2) and (3) Personal Information

Some of the information you have requested is personal data relating to third parties, the disclosure of which would contravene one of the data protection principles. In such circumstances sections 40 (2) and (3) of the FOIA apply. In this case, our view is that disclosure would breach the first data protection principle. This states that personal data should be processed fairly and lawfully. It is the fairness aspect of this principle which, in our view, would be breached by disclosure. In such circumstances section 40 confers an absolute exemption on disclosure. There is, therefore, no public interest test to apply.

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Yours sincerely,

Europe Directorate



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