

Mr Jack Wippell

020 7270 5000
foirequests@hmtreasury.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/hm-treasury

8 July 2020

Dear Mr Wippell

Ref: FOI2020/23207

Freedom of Information Act 2000

Thank you for your enquiry of 15 June 2020, which we have considered under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the FOI Act).

You asked for the following information:

“There have been reports recently that the economic fallout from a pandemic hitting the UK was never modelled, is this the case? If not, could we see the model that was used?”

Following a search of our records, we can confirm that HM Treasury does hold information within the scope of your request.

The information that we have identified engages section 35(1)(a) - development of Government policy; and section 29(1)(a) – prejudice to the economic interests of the UK or any part of it. These are qualified exemptions which, in this case, relate to economic modelling specific to pandemics and we are required to balance the public interest between disclosure and non-disclosure of the information we hold.

In considering release of this information, we recognise that there is an inherent public interest in transparency and accountability of public authorities like HM Treasury. We also recognise the broad public interest in furthering public understanding of the issues dealt with by the Treasury. There is a clear public interest in the work of Government departments being transparent and open to scrutiny to increase diligence and understanding of the issues, such as previous thinking on the effects of a pandemic on the UK.

In favour of non-disclosure, with regard to section 35(1)(a) and section 29(1)(a), is the public interest in protecting the Government’s ability to candidly discuss and develop policies which affect the UK economy in a safe space and to reach well-formed conclusions for current and future risk-based planning.

The Information Commissioner has recognised that policy development needs some degree of freedom to enable the process to work effectively and we consider that there is a strong public interest in protecting this information where release would be likely to have a detrimental impact on the ongoing development of policy. The policy process is necessarily an iterative one and there is a strong public interest in protecting against encroachment on the ability of ministers and/or officials to develop policy options freely and frankly.

In this particular case the information was developed in a safe space with the expectation that it would remain in a secure environment.

We consider there is a strong public interest in protecting this information as release would be likely to have a detrimental impact on the ongoing ability of HM Treasury and other public authorities to work together and share information, including economic modelling, necessary to the development of policy in a free and frank manner. We also consider that release of the information we hold would harm the free and frank exchange of views which are essential for the purpose of providing sound economic analysis and policy advice.

In addition, economic markets can be sensitive to the release of economic planning assumptions, and we believe that the release of such modelling would be likely to prejudice the economic interests of the UK and the financial interests of the UK Government. This is because releasing such information could potentially lead to incorrect and/or misleading assumptions being made about the UK economy, leading to a harmful response from UK markets or other economic agents, that damages the UK's interests. This would not be in the public interest.

For the reasons set out above, we consider that the public interest balance lies in favour of withholding this information.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact us. Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

Information Rights Unit

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Email: foirequests@hmtreasury.gov.uk

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