



Home Office Commercial Directorate

Hugh O'Boyle
Email: request-648138-34ab78e0@whatdotheyknow.com

Commercial Directorate
2 Marsham Street
Peel Building
Fourth Floor
London
SW1P 4DF
www.gov.uk/home-office

24 March 2020

Dear Mr O'Boyle

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST 57868

Thank you for your e-mail of 19 February 2020, in which you ask for information on Home Office arrangements with Sopra Steria to provide services for UKVCAS. Your full request is shown at Annex A. Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

I am able to disclose some of the information that you have requested, as follows.

Regarding the contract / agreement I confirm that the Home Office holds the information which you have requested. The information, in redacted form, can be found at:

<https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/ec5031ea-021e-471a-86cf-af540e8d8efa?p=@xUIRRPT0=NjJNT08=UFQ>.

The contract schedules have been redacted as some information is exempt from disclosure under sections s43(2), and s40 of the FOIA respectively. These provide that information can be withheld where disclosure would impact commercial interests or contain personal information respectively, and in the instance of commercial interests, the public interest falls in favour of maintaining the exemption.

In respect to your question about changes to the contract since it was signed; there have been changes to facilitate additional routes being added through UKVCAS service alongside technical amendments to systems to support inclusions of these customers.

You requested information on contract clauses that inform service penalties. Schedule 7 of the contract outlines the level of service expected of the supplier via agreed accountability mechanisms called key performance indicators. Performance is reviewed and KPIs are agreed at monthly contract board meetings overseen by the authority. Information against current performance of the contract is withheld under section s43(2) of FOIA which relates to commercial interests.

Statistics related to the number of complaints about the service provided by Sopra Steria, are provided at Annex B covering the period January 2019, when the service commenced, to January 2020.

Sopra Steria deliver UK Visa and Citizenship Application Service (UKVCAS) across a network of 57 service points across the UK. Sopra Steria offers free appointments through 6 core service points located in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Beyond this, Sopra Steria offer a range of enhanced service points at 51 additional locations across the United Kingdom to offer customer convenience.

UK Visas & Immigration does not charge anyone for an appointment with Sopra Steria, applicants can choose a free appointment or may choose to pay for an enhanced service. Core service points, which offer free appointments for customers to submit their biometrics, are located in Croydon, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Belfast. Free appointments at these locations are available Monday to Friday between 10:00 and 16:00. Customers who choose an appointment outside these times, and those at enhanced service points, will incur a further charge. The UKVCAS core service points offer appointments up to 35 days in advance.

Lastly, you requested 'all other relevant information'. We are unable to provide a response without incurring disproportionate cost, as such we are applying s12 cost exemption as the scope is indeterminate and would exceed costs in assessing and determining whether we hold information.

The Home Office has obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and in law generally to protect personal data. We have concluded that the information you have requested is exempt from disclosure under section 40(2) of the FOIA, because of the condition at section 40(3)(a)(i). This exempts personal data if disclosure would contravene any of the data protection principles in Schedule 1 to the DPA.

Consideration of disclosure in terms of the public interest, with the reasons for our conclusion, are set out in the enclosed Annex C.

If you are dissatisfied with this response you may request an independent internal review of our handling of your request by submitting a complaint within two months to foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk, quoting reference 57868. If you ask for an internal review, it would be helpful if you could say why you are dissatisfied with the response.

As part of any internal review the Department's handling of your information request would be reassessed by staff who were not involved in providing you with this response. If you were to remain dissatisfied after an internal review, you would have a right of complaint to the Information Commissioner as established by section 50 of the FOIA.

Yours sincerely

A FEHELEY
HO COMMERCIAL

E FOIRequests@homeoffice.gov.uk

Annex A

From: Hugh O'Boyle
Sent: 19 February 2020 17:44
To: FOI Requests
Subject: Freedom of Information request - Partnership with Sopra Steria for UKVCAS services

Dear Home Office,

The Home Office entered into a partnership with Sopra Steria to provide services for UKVCAS.

Please provide the following in PDF or digital format, together with all other relevant documents highlighting the nature of this agreement:

- the contract/ agreement signed by the Home Office and Sopra Steria
- any changes which may have been made to this agreement since it was signed
- all complaints made to Sopra Steria/ the Home Office by its service-users
- any fines or penalties imposed on Sopra Steria
- agreed accountability mechanisms
- any information pertaining to UKVCAS services for new refugees, including documents or agreements which demonstrate that Sopra Steria must not charge them fees
- all other relevant information

I would also like to know: why is Sopra Steria charging refugees for biometric services? Who is accountable when Sopra Steria (incorrectly) insist that they pay? If payment is made, who is responsible for ensuring that money is returned to the refugee?

Yours faithfully,

Hugh O'Boyle

Please use this email address for all replies to this request:
request-648138-34ab78e0@whatdotheyknow.com

Annex B

Below are details for the total number of complaints over the past year.
Substantiated means if the complaints will be upheld.

Month	Total Substantiated
January '19	32
February '19	41
March '19	24
April '19	59
May '19	111
June '19	30
July '19	111
August '19	130
September '19	187
October '19	62
November '19	35
December '19	78
January '20	55

Annex C

Freedom of Information request from Hugh O'Boyle (reference 57868)

Information requested

Information on Home Office arrangements with Sopra Steria to provide services for UKVCAS

Response

A redacted contract c/w schedules is provided; the full copy withheld under S43(2) commercial interests and s40 personal information of FOIA

Information on additional contract changes

Volumes of complaints are provided

Information on accountability and performance measures provided

Information on where Sopra Steria provide services for customers to submit their biometric

Public interest test in relation to section s43(2) commercial interests

Some of the exemptions in the FOIA, referred to as 'qualified' exemptions, are subject to a public interest test (PIT). This test is used to balance the public interest in disclosure against the public interest in maintaining the exemption. We must carry out a PIT where we are considering using any of the qualified exemptions in response to a request for information.

The 'public interest' is not necessarily the same as what interests the public. In carrying out a PIT we consider the greater good or benefit to the community as a whole if the information is released or not. Transparency and the 'right to know' must be balanced against the need to enable effective government and to serve the best interests of the public.

The FOIA is 'applicant blind'. This means that we cannot, and do not, ask about the motives of anyone who asks for information. In providing a response to one person, we are expressing a willingness to provide the same response to anyone.

Section 43(2) is engaged when the release of information would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the public authority holding it). In this instance where the information released, this review confirms it would prejudice both the Home Office's commercial interests and the supplier.

If the information were released it would allow competing companies to be aware of the operating costs of our supplier, they would then be able to gain access to information which could be used to undercut our supplier when the contract comes up for Tender again, thus harming their commercial interests.

The Home Office's commercial interests would then be harmed. If suppliers become aware that the Home Office is sharing commercially sensitive information, then suppliers would be less likely willing to engage and contract with the Home Office. In turn, this would have the knock-on effect of reducing competition for the provision of contracts consequently driving up the Home Office's operating costs and not providing good value for money for the Home Office and the taxpayer.

Considerations in favour of disclosing the information

There is a public interest in disclosure to the extent that this would help ensure that there is full transparency in the Home Office's use of public funds and in particular to maintain the department's accountability to taxpayers. Disclosure of this information would also enable the public to assess

whether or not the Home office is getting best value for money in terms of its contracts with private providers and partner agencies. Disclosure of the process followed would also lead to greater accountability and reassuring the public that the tendering process was fairly run.

Considerations in favour maintaining the exemption

There is a public interest in Government departments and agencies being able to secure contracts that represent value for money and anything that would undermine this is not in the public interest. Value for money can best be obtained where there is a healthy competitive environment, coupled with the protection of the Government's commercial relationship with industry.

Release of the withheld information would provide competitors with information, not available to them by any other means, about current service providers. This would create an unfair advantage resulting in a prejudice to the commercial interests of the company concerned. Disclosure would also prejudice the Home Office's commercial interests by damaging commercial relationships with contractors and service providers. These risks are:

- Companies would be discouraged from dealing with the public sector, fearing disclosure of information that may damage them commercially; or
- Companies would withhold information where possible, making the choice of the best contractor more uncertain as it would be based on limited censored data.

Conclusion

We conclude that the balance of the public interest lies in maintaining the exemption and withholding the information.