



Cabinet Office

Room 405  
70 Whitehall  
London, SW1A 2AS

[foi-team@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foi-team@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)  
[www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

P Seurre

By email: [request-659820-3ea6ee95@whatdotheyknow.com](mailto:request-659820-3ea6ee95@whatdotheyknow.com)

FOI Reference: FOI2020/05058

27/05/2020

Dear P Seurre

I refer to your request where you asked:

*“- The total number of COBRA meetings held during Gordon Brown's time as PM - The total number of COBRA meetings attended by Gordon Brown*

*- The total number of COBRA meetings held during Boris Johnson's time as PM - The total number of COBRA meetings attended by Boris Johnson*

I am writing to advise you that following a search of our paper and electronic records, I have established that the information you requested is held by the Cabinet Office.

This information is however exempt under sections 35(1)(a) and (b) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which protects the formulation of policy and communications between Ministers. Section 35(5) of the Act, states that ministerial communications include, in particular, “proceedings of the Cabinet or of any committee of the Cabinet”. Details of COBR meetings, given that COBR is an operational sub committee of the National Security Council, clearly satisfies this definition under section 35(5), including information about the number, timing, attendance, and chairmanship. The exemptions under section 35(1)(a) and (b) of the Act are therefore engaged. Section 35 is a

qualified exemption, requiring that we consider whether the balance of public interest lies in favour of withholding or releasing the information.

In favour of disclosure, I recognise there is a strong public interest in the transparency of Government work relating to high profile national emergencies such as the current Covid-19 response. There is a clear public interest in demonstrating that the Government is prepared for emergencies and can respond to disruptive challenges in a timely, proportionate and evidence-based manner.

However, disclosing the number and detailed attendance of meetings (other than in a controlled manner in agreed circumstances) would give rise to commentary in respect of individual involvement in particular cases and would undermine Ministers' discretion in how they organise themselves to formulate response options during future emergencies.

The fact that Ministers have decided to disclose certain information on the Government's response referencing COBR meetings publicly is a very strong indication that they have weighed the public interest in disclosure of relevant information. This adds weight to the public interests in maintaining the exemption.

In addition, I believe that the broader need for openness and accountability is met in a proportionate way through information available publicly, including Parliamentary statements, the Covid-19 public information campaign, and in particular the daily UK coronavirus briefings. <https://www.gov.uk/>.

Overall, taking into account the public interests in favour of disclosure and in favour of maintaining the exemption, the Cabinet Office concluded that the balance of public information favoured maintaining the exemption.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact the FOI Team quoting the reference number above.

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request or wish to request an internal review, you should write to:

Eirian Walsh Atkins  
Cabinet Office  
70 Whitehall  
London  
SW1A 2AS

email: [foi-team@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foi-team@cabinetoffice.gov.uk)

You should note that the Cabinet Office will not normally accept an application for internal review if it is received more than two months after the date that the reply was issued. If you are not content with the outcome of your internal review, you may apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the complaints procedure provided by Cabinet Office. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

The Information Commissioner's Office  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire  
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. B.', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

FOI Team  
Cabinet Office