

Tel: 0370 000 2288

www.gov.uk/dfe

Email enquiry form:

www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

13 October 2020

Dear Andrew Keenan,

Thank you for your request for information, which was received on 17 September 2020.

You requested clarification on a previous FOI reply (ref: 2020-0047589) and asked for confirmation that “there was no discussion whatsoever between the Minister and her staff and/or advisers about the National Union of Students?”. You also requested “any emails, documents or other records that relate to, or mention, the National Union of Students, sent or received by the Minister and/or her staff team & advisers...The period in question is 1 July to 17 September” and “details of all meetings of the Taskforce to date (17 September), including: Date and time of meeting, Duration of meeting, Attendance and apologies for each meeting, Minutes, papers and other documents circulated to participants and the plans for any future meetings”. I am dealing with your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (“the Act”).

Regarding confirmation that “there was no discussion whatsoever between the Minister and her staff and/or advisers about the National Union of Students?”. I have established that there are no records held by the Department of discussions between Minister Donelan and her staff and/or advisers about the National Union of Students (NUS) in relation to membership of the Higher Education (HE) Taskforce. The HE Taskforce was established with the aim of taking quick decisions on the HE admissions and acceptance process, to ensure that students had the support and clarity they deserved at a time of change and uncertainty. We therefore prioritised bringing together the representatives of the sector best placed to make quick decisions, including the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and a wide range of university mission groups representing the Vice Chancellors of a broad range of HE providers. Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, we have engaged with the National Union of Students and the University and College Union at an official and ministerial level in order to ensure the government understands and is able to respond to issues currently affecting students and staff. We have continued this engagement as students and staff returned to universities.

Regarding your request for “any emails, documents or other records that relate to, or mention, the National Union of Students, sent or received by the Minister and/or her staff team & advisers...The period in question is 1 July to 17 September” and “details of all meetings of the Taskforce to date (17 September), including: Date and time of meeting, Duration of meeting, Attendance and apologies for each meeting, Minutes, papers and other documents circulated to participants and the plans for any future meetings”.

The Department holds some of the information you have requested. However, I consider that the following exemption applies to your request:

- Section 35(1)(a) – the formulation or development of government policy

The Act obliges the Department to respond to requests promptly, and in any case no later than 20 working days after receiving your request. However, the exemption listed above is applicable, the Department must consider whether the public interest lies in disclosing or withholding the information. In these circumstances the Act allows the time for response to be longer than 20 working days.

In your case the Department estimates that it will take an additional 10 days to take a decision on where the balance of the public interest lies. It is anticipated that you will receive a full response by 29 October 2020. If it appears that it will take longer than this to reach a conclusion, we will keep you informed.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number 2020-0053539 in any future communications.

If you are unhappy with the way your request has been handled, you should make a complaint to the Department by writing to me within two calendar months of the date of this letter. Your complaint will be considered by an independent review panel, which were not involved in the original consideration of your request.

If you are not content with the outcome of your complaint to the Department, you may then contact the Information Commissioner's Office.

Yours sincerely,

Toni Antrobus

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Department for Education