

17 October 2024

FOI Ref 17265

Request - You asked us the following:

1. A record of all emails that were blocked by your email system over the last five (5) years, including:
 - o The total number of emails blocked.
 - o The reasons for each blocked email (e.g., identified as spam, containing malware, flagged as malicious, phishing attempts, etc.).
 2. A breakdown of the categories for blocked emails, providing details such as:
 - o The number of emails blocked for each category (spam, malware, phishing, etc.) on a month-by-month basis for the last five (5) years.
 3. Any specific procedures or systems in place that identify and block such emails.
- I do not require the exact date each email was blocked but would appreciate monthly statistics over the requested time period.

We received your request on 17/09/2024 and have processed this under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Staffordshire Police's response to your enquiry is as follows:

Staffordshire Police holds/does not hold the requested information.

1. A record of all emails that were blocked by your email system over the last five (5) years, including:
The total number of emails blocked.
The reasons for each blocked email (e.g., identified as spam, containing malware, flagged as malicious, phishing attempts, etc.). – **Withheld.**
2. A breakdown of the categories for blocked emails, providing details such as:
The number of emails blocked for each category (spam, malware, phishing, etc.) on a month-by-month basis for the last five (5) years. – **Withheld.**
3. Any specific procedures or systems in place that identify and block such emails.
I do not require the exact date each email was blocked but would appreciate monthly statistics over the requested time period. – **Withheld.**

The following exemptions have been applied:

In accordance with Section 17(1) of the Freedom of Information Act, this letter represents a refusal notice for this particular request.

- Section 24 – National Security

Section 24 is a qualified, prejudice-based exemption and as such there is a requirement to articulate the harm and conduct a test of the public interest.

- Section 31 (1) (a) (b) - Law Enforcement.

Information is exempt from disclosure under S31 (1) (a) (b) where the release of Information would, or would likely to, prejudice the prevention and detection of crime and/ or the apprehension or prosecution of offenders. This exemption is qualified and prejudice-based and, as such, we are required to evidence the harm in disclosure and apply the public interest test.

Harm

A Freedom of Information Act request is not a private transaction. Both the request itself, and any information disclosed, are considered suitable for open publication. This is because, under Freedom of Information, any information disclosed is released into the wider public domain, effectively to the world and not just to one individual.

Whilst Staffordshire Police confirm information is held regarding blocked emails, to provide the total number and an additional breakdown by type could undermine the safeguarding of national security, and operational law enforcement by allowing those with a criminal intent to gain an operational advantage over Staffordshire Police.

Groups planning attacks are known to conduct extensive research and will take advantage of the 'mosaic effect' by combining information from different sources. To disclose data on malicious email attempts which have been unsuccessful, could be used in conjunction with other publically available information to provide knowledge of where attacks have actually been successful and thus where possible weaknesses exist.

To further disclose a breakdown of the reason/type of email which has been blocked may also further assist potential attackers by indicating that a specific attack had gone undetected. With this knowledge, attackers may then be able to tailor their methods to increase their chances of success. This harm increases when further requests are made for similar data over time, as if disclosed, multiple data would cumulate to reveal a clearer picture of Staffordshire Police forces' cyber-security strengths and vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, in order to counter criminal and terrorist behaviour it is vital that the police and other agencies have the ability to work together, where necessary covertly, in order to obtain intelligence within current legislative frameworks to ensure the arrest and prosecution of offenders who commit or plan to commit acts of terrorism, whereby their modus operandi may involve cyber-attacks on secure databases. In order to achieve this goal, it is vitally important that information sharing takes place with other police forces and law enforcement bodies within the United Kingdom in order to support counter-terrorism measures in the fight to deprive terrorist networks of their ability to commit crime. To disclose specific details which would identify breaches of information technology and security would be extremely useful to those involved in terrorist activity as it would enable them to map vulnerable information security databases.

Public Interest Test

Factors favouring disclosure under Section 24(1)

The public are entitled to know how public funds are spent and how resources are distributed within an area of policing. To disclose the requested information would enable the general public to hold Staffordshire Police to account ensuring all such breaches are recorded and investigated appropriately.

In the current financial climate of cuts and with the call for transparency of public spending this would enable improved public debate.

Factors against disclosure under Section 24(1)

Security measures are put in place to protect the community we serve. As evidenced within the harm to disclose the information requested would highlight to terrorists and individuals intent on carrying out criminal activity vulnerabilities within force systems which could be further exploited.

Taking into account the current security climate within the United Kingdom, no information which may aid a terrorist should be disclosed. The public entrust the Police Service to make appropriate decisions with regard to their safety and protection and the only way of reducing risk is to be cautious with what is placed into the public domain. The cumulative effect of terrorists gathering information from various sources is that over time a more detailed account of the tactical infrastructure of not only a force area but also the country as a whole will be revealed.

Any incident that results from such a disclosure would, by default, affect National Security.

Factors favouring disclosure under Section 31(1)

Disclosure of information relevant to this request would lead to a better informed public which may encourage individuals to provide intelligence in order to reduce the risk of security breaches.

Factors against disclosure under Section 31(1)

Disclosure of information relevant to this request would suggest Staffordshire Police take their responsibility to protect information and information systems from unauthorised access, destruction, etc., dismissively and inappropriately.

Balance Test

The points above highlight the merits and de-merits of disclosure. The Police Service is charged with enforcing the law, preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve. As part of that policing purpose, information is gathered which can be highly sensitive relating to high profile investigative activity. Weakening the mechanisms used to monitor any type of criminal activity, and specifically terrorist activity would place the security of the country at an increased level of danger.

In addition, anything that places that confidence at risk, no matter how generic, would undermine any trust or confidence individuals have in the Police Service. Therefore, at this moment in time, it is our opinion that for these issues the balance test favours non-disclosure.

Next steps

You can ask us to review our response.

If you would like us to carry out a review of our response, please let us know within two months of the date of receipt of this email, review requests should be addressed to:



STAFFORDSHIRE
POLICE

foi@staffordshire.police.uk

Or by Post to:

Central Disclosure Unit
Staffordshire Police HQ
PO Box 3167
Stafford
ST16 9JZ

Please remember to quote the reference number in any future communications.

Freedom of Information
Central Disclosure Unit