



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

Freedom of Information Team  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London SW1H 0EU

[www.gov.uk/dhsc](http://www.gov.uk/dhsc)

By email to: [REDACTED] [@whatdotheyknow.com](mailto:[REDACTED]@whatdotheyknow.com)

8 September 2022

Dear [REDACTED]

### **Freedom of Information Request Reference FOI-1415574**

Thank you for your request dated 16 August to the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), a copy of which can be found in the accompanying annex.

Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

I have interpreted your request for original documents relating to “Operation Nimbus” to mean Exercise Nimbus. Exercise Nimbus was a ministerial exercise, held in February 2020, to test ministerial-level decision making for the UK’s pandemic preparedness and response within the context of the novel coronavirus outbreak. I have interpreted your request for the Public Health England document to mean products produced as part of the Exercise Nimbus play, as well as planning documents and any actions or issues that were captured.

We have concluded that the products produced as part of exercise are exempt under section 35(1)(a) “formulation of Government policy” of the FOIA.

Section 35 is a qualified exemption and I have considered whether the balance of the public interest favours the release of this material. There is a general public interest in disclosure of information relating to Government decision-making over pandemics and I recognise that openness may increase public trust in and engagement with the Government.

During emergency preparedness exercises such as Exercise Nimbus, participating agencies need the freedom to test plans and identify areas for improvement through engagement with realistic scenarios, including being tested to points of failure at times. They must not risk being influenced by the potential for decisions, made in an exercise environment, to be made public at some point in the future. It is also important that following exercises, ministers and officials have the space to objectively explore lessons identified with complete candour in order to develop effective policies and/or response plans to address these points. Additionally, the exercise referenced in this request discussed scenarios in relation to the ongoing COVID-19 emergency.

Taking into account all the circumstances of this case, I have concluded that the balance of the public interest favours withholding this information.

If you are not satisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to appeal by asking for an internal review. This should be sent to [freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk](mailto:freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk) or to the address at the top of this letter and be submitted within two months of the date of this letter.

Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communication.

If you are not content with the outcome of your internal review, you may complain directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have already appealed our original response and received our internal review decision. You should raise your concerns with the ICO within three months of your last meaningful contact with us.

Guidance on contacting the ICO can be found at <https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us> and information about making a complaint can be found at <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint>.

Yours sincerely,

Freedom of Information Team  
[freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk](mailto:freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk)

## **Annex**

*Dear Department of Health and Social Care,*

*Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 I wish to see the following:*

*A full copy of the 'exercise nimbus' pandemic planning exercise report that was originally produced by Public Health England in 2020.*

*Yours faithfully,*

