



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

E-mail:

Ein Cyf/Our ref: ATISN 15537
Eich Cyf/Your ref:
Dyddiad/Date: 21 October 2021

Dear

ATISN 15537 – High Court Case CO/4441/2020

Thank you for your request which I received on 24 September 2021. You asked for:

1. The full transcript of all minutes taken at the oral hearing regarding Heol-y-Cefn Judicial Review (Persimmon).
2. Why did the matter not proceed to a Full Court Hearing on July 5th with the previous Minister Julie James decision quashed.
3. A copy of the Welsh Government's Case and the Persimmon case.
4. Will the Welsh Government appeal, and are there any further of appeal.
5. A timescale with any amended decision, and will the Welsh Government seek further advice.

In regards to part 1 of your request set out above, this information is not held by the Welsh Government. The High Court case did not proceed to an oral hearing, and therefore no transcript of the proceedings are available.

In regards to parts 2 and 3 of your request. The information caught by this part of your request constitutes environmental information so has been considered for disclosure under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 ("EIRs"). I have decided all of the information described in the enclosed list is exempt from disclosure under Regulation 12(5)(b) of the EIRs. The reasons for applying this exemption are set out in full at Annex 1 to this letter.

In regards to part 4 of your request, there is no appeal mechanism open to the Welsh Ministers to appeal the decision of the Court. The Minister's decision on the application has been quashed by the Courts, by Court Order, and the planning appeal will need to be re-determined.

In regards to part 5 of your request, as stated above the Welsh Ministers' decision has been quashed and the matter needs to be reconsidered afresh. Any timescales would be pure conjecture at this stage, however, the redetermination process shall commence as soon as possible.

Next steps

If you are dissatisfied with the Welsh Government's handling of your request, you can ask for an internal review within 40 working days of the date of this response. Requests for an internal review should be addressed to the Welsh Government's Freedom of Information Officer at:

Information Rights Unit,
Welsh Government,
Cathays Park,
Cardiff,
CF10 3NQ

or Email: Freedom.ofinformation@gov.wales

Please remember to quote the ATISN reference number above.

You also have the right to complain to the Information Commissioner. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

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

However, please note that the Commissioner will not normally investigate a complaint until it has been through our own internal review process.

Yours sincerely

Annex 1

In regards to the submissions of Persimmon Homes to the Court as the complainant, I must inform you, it is not a public body and is not bound by the provisions of either the Freedom of Information Act 2000 nor the EIRs.

Regulation 12(5)(b) - Course of justice, fair trial, criminal or disciplinary inquiry

The requested information falls within regulation 12(5)(b) of the EIRs. This provides an exception to the general duty to disclose environmental information where a disclosure would adversely affect the course of justice, the ability of a person to receive a fair trial or the ability of a public authority to conduct an enquiry of a criminal or disciplinary nature.

The course of justice is very wide in its coverage, and the other points may be viewed as subsets of that element. In *Rudd v the Information Commissioner & the Verderers of the New Forest* (EA/2008/0020, 29 September 2008), the Information Tribunal commented that 'the course of justice' does not refer to a specific course of action but is "a more generic concept somewhat akin to 'the smooth running of the wheels of justice'".

This is subject to regulation 12(1)(b) of the EIRs. In determining whether or not to withhold information, public bodies must consider whether, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosure

We recognise that there is a general public interest in openness of information and transparency in the working of Government. The release of advice provided prior to reaching the decision is conducive to the effective conduct of public affairs in providing openness of information and transparency in the planning process.

We believe there is a general public interest in the disclosure of information as greater transparency makes Government more accountable and there is a public interest in being able to assess the quality of information and advice which is used in decision making. We recognise the increased public interest in decisions which impact upon the places in which people live and work.

Finally, we appreciate that in order for the public to be appropriately equipped to challenge the decisions and activities of public authorities and demand greater accountability, they need to be properly informed. The disclosure of information can go a long way to helping promote this empowerment.

In this particular case, it involves a decision taken by a Welsh Minister and subsequent action taken in the High Court against the Minister's decision. An understanding of the legal basis of the assessment process undertaken would allow them to come to their own view as to why the Minister decided to submit to judgment and subsequent quashing of her decision.

Public interest arguments in favour of withholding

There is a strong public interest in the protection of the principle of Legal Professional Privilege ("LPP") which allows Government to consult their lawyers in confidence, to be able to share information fully and frankly and to seek and obtain advice with the knowledge that such advice is privileged. Government needs to take decisions in a fully informed legal context and it is necessary for its lawyers to be able to fully explore the relevant arguments.

To ensure that lawyers, officials and Ministers are free to fully examine the various alternatives, their deliberations, and the legal advice that underpins those deliberations, should be protected.

The public need to have trust that discussions they may have with their legal advisors can be properly protected. Any erosion, therefore, of the principle of confidentiality of LPP, particularly where they relate to ongoing, live, matters, is not in the wider public interest.

Balance of public interest test

Background

Advice subject to LPP falls within that general concept of the “course of justice” and, as such, may be exempt under regulation 12(5)(b), subject to the presumption in favour of disclosure and the public interest test.

For regulation 12(5)(b) to apply to legally privileged information, the public authority must demonstrate that disclosure of the requested information would have an adverse effect on the course of justice.

The Welsh Government believes that release of correspondence between Government Legal Department, Legal Services and Planning Directorate that relates to the seeking and provision of legal advice and, as such, is subject to LPP, should be exempt from disclosure as it would likely result in harm.

First, the Welsh Government is of the firm view that it is highly important to maintain LPP and that, in the absence of at least equally strong countervailing considerations, any attempt to undermine the principle of LPP would result in substantial harm to the ability of the Welsh Government to obtain fulsome advice from its legal advisors.

In the ICO Decision Notice FER0220864 (dated March 31 2010), the Commissioner clearly states:

"Legal professional privilege (LPP) is not defined by the Act or in any other legislation. It is a common law concept shaped by the courts over time. It is intended to provide confidentiality between professional legal advisers and clients to ensure openness between them and safeguard access to fully informed, realistic, candid and frank legal advice, including potential weaknesses and counter arguments. LPP belongs to the client and material protected by LPP cannot ordinarily be revealed without the consent of the client, even to a court".

We also note the case of *Bellamy v the Information Commissioner and the DTI* [EA/2005/0023] in which the Tribunal, on the subject of LPP, said:

"there is a strong element of public interest inbuilt into the privilege itself. At least equally strong countervailing considerations would need to be adduced to override that inbuilt interest....it is important that public authorities be allowed to conduct a free exchange of views as to their legal rights and obligations with those advising them without fear of intrusion, save in the most clear case...".

Conclusions

While we acknowledge the public interest arguments in favour of disclosure as discussed above, we consider that the public interest balance in this case falls on the side of not disclosing the legal advice the Directorate has sought and received.

The disclosure of the information would more likely than not adversely affect the course of justice as it would involve public access to privileged information between Government Ministers and officials. Release would undermine the general principles of LPP and of the administration of justice within government.

Ultimately, proceedings which relate to the re-determination of planning appeal APP/K6920/A/19/3226294 ("the appeal") are ongoing. From the arguments presented above, it is clear any disclosure of information relating to legal advice which the Welsh Government has sought would alter the course of justice, and cause possible harm, particularly in relation to the eventual outcome of planning the appeal. The appeal must be considered afresh and the public disclosure of the specified items could prejudice the fair reconsideration of the appeal and disadvantage one or more parties. As a consequence, the disclosure of the items may prejudice the public interest in good decision-making by public bodies, in upholding standards of integrity, in ensuring justice and fair treatment for all.