



Date: 31 August 2005

Dear

The Agency has now completed the Public Interest Test referred to in my previous letter of 2 August. This letter also confirmed that the Agency does not currently use either 0845 or 0844 telephone numbers.

The Agency does hold the information you requested and I am providing the information that can be disclosed to you. Some of the information cannot be disclosed for the reasons given below.

I will answer your questions in the order you raised them.

1. Do you use 0870 numbers?

Yes.

1.1 And if so, why do you use 0870 numbers?

0870 telephone numbers were introduced to address the imbalance that meant some of our customers benefited from their geographic location to Swansea when other callers paid more for making the same telephone enquiry because of the distance from Swansea.

The Agency also derives a number of technical advantages that are not available when using geographic numbers. Non geographic numbers offer a flexible, cost effective method of routing these calls. The use of these numbers also allows us to move, increase or decrease the lines available at short notice. It is one of a range of facilities that enable us to provide improved customer service.

The use of 0870 numbers generates income for the Agency. Since it now has trading fund status, running costs are in general borne by the motoring public. The majority of calls received by the DVLA are to seek general information or advice that is already provided in documents and forms published by the Agency. It would not be reasonable for the general public to be expected to cover the costs of those who choose to telephone DVLA to seek advice that is already in the public domain.



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In view of these factors we believe that, by using 0870 numbers, this is the most equitable, cost effective and efficient means of providing an enquiry service.

1.2 What are the equivalent geographical numbers?

The information you have requested in respect of the equivalent geographical numbers is being withheld. It falls under the exemption in section 29(1)(b) of the Freedom of Information Act, in that it would be likely to prejudice the financial interest of the DVLA, an executive Agency of a Government Department. It also falls within the exemption in s43(2), in that the commercial interest of the DVLA (including the quality of its customer service) would be likely to be prejudiced. In all the circumstances, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. The attached Annex A sets out the exemption in full and explains why we reached this conclusion about the public interest. It also includes a schedule of the types of documents analysed by the Agency when considering your request.

1.3 What revenue do you receive per minute and in total from the use of 0870 numbers?

The Agency has decided not to disclose the information you requested in respect of the revenue we receive per minute from the use of 0870 numbers. This information is being withheld as it falls under the exemption in section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information Act, in that disclosure would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of a service provider of the DVLA. In applying this exemption we have had to balance the public interest in withholding the information against the public interest in disclosing the information. The attached Annex B sets out the exemption in full and explains why we have concluded that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

However, I can confirm that for the accounting period 2004-2005, we received £1.3 million from phone calls to our 0870 numbers.

1.4 Are you aware of the revenue collected by your telecom provider, from your callers?

DVLA is aware of the amount of money its service providers make from a call.

1.5 Have you considered the revised COI guidelines?

Although our 0870 services pre dates the Central Office of Information's guidance on the use of non-geographic numbers, I can confirm that we have taken into consideration the revised guidelines.

1.5.1 If so, what conclusion did you come to?

The advice offered by COI is not prescriptive and does not take into account that DVLA is offering an advice service.

COI guidance recommends that, when using 0870 numbers, an alternative method of contact should run in parallel. DVLA offers its customers a number of non-telephone options to

access its services, e.g. web, e-mail and letter. DVLA considers that it operates its telephone customer interface in accordance with current COI guidance. Confirmation of this has been received from COI.

Some years ago, DVLA investigated the use of 0800 Freephone numbers and 0845 Local rate telephone numbers. We did not proceed with these telephone routes as DVLA would have had to pay our service provider the difference in call charges that would otherwise have been paid by the caller. To introduce cheap rate calls would significantly increase our running costs and these would then have to be borne by the general motoring public.

An average call to the Agency lasts under four minutes. This generally equates to the cost of a first class stamp and is met by the person using the service rather than the public as a whole.

1.6 Do we realise that all calls (local/national) cost the same?

We do recognise that some service providers now charge the same rate for national and local calls. However this depends on the service provider and the tariff that the customer has chosen.

1.7 Are you aware of the cost implications to your callers, when using 0870 numbers?

The Agency is aware that tariffs can vary depending on the customers' service provider. For example, for calls to an 0870 number, BT normally charges 6.73p per minute in the day + VAT, 3.36p per minute in the evening + VAT and 1.27p per minute at weekends + VAT (current rates). However, some BT customers may be entitled to a different discounted rate for calling standard national numbers. These tariffs would also charge different rates for calling 0870 numbers.

If you are unhappy with the way DVLA has handled your request or with the decisions made in relation to your request you may complain by writing to me. Please see the attached details of the Department for Transport's complaint procedure.

If you have any queries about this e-mail, please contact me quoting the above reference number in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT'S (DfT) COMPLAINT PROCEDURES

You have the right to complain about the way in which your request for information was handled and/or about the decision not to disclose all or part of the information requested. In addition a complaint can be made that DfT has not complied with its FOI publication scheme.

Your complaint will be acknowledged and you will be advised of a target date by which to expect a response. Initially your complaint will be re-considered by the official who dealt with your request for information. If, after careful consideration, that official decides that his/her decision was correct, your complaint will be automatically referred to a senior independent official who will conduct a further review. You will be advised of the outcome of our complaint and if a decision is taken to disclose information originally withheld this will be done as soon as possible.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

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

Annex A

Exemptions in full:

S29(1)(b)

Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice [...] the financial interests of any administration in the United Kingdom, as defined by section 28(2).

S43(2)

Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interest of any person (including the public authority holding it).

<i>Factors for disclosure</i>	<i>Factors for withholding</i>
<p>The need for DVLA users to have convenient phone access.</p> <p>The higher price of 0870 calls.</p>	<p>The information may be passed on to other parties. There is a risk that, ultimately, the 0870 number may fall into disuse. The advantages of using this number would then no longer be available. This would have two series of consequences: financial and technical.</p> <p>The following are illustrations of the advantages that flow from the use of 0870 numbers and of the problem that would come from using alternative arrangements;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The use of 0870 numbers generates income for DVLA. It uses it in furtherance of its statutory functions which are in the public interest. This reduces its need to increase its charges to the rest of its users.- By attaching a call plan to an 0870 number DVLA can control the number of concurrent calls reaching our service, thus ensuring customer service standards can be agreed and met with a degree of confidence. The call plan offers the flexibility to increase or decrease the number of available lines very quickly. If the geographic numbers were revealed and subsequently used by the public, DVLA's call handling

	<p>structure would be compromised resulting in DVLA losing control of its call handling strategy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 0870 numbers allow DVLA to receive real time reports which allow us to ensure that we have the correct resources in place to offer our customers the best possible service at the least cost to the tax payer. - There are other technical advantages to the use of 0870 numbers: freedom in changing delivery points, increasing or reducing the number of lines to a service at short notice, managing peaks and troughs, fully utilising lines, dealing with changes in area codes, savings on line rental and the use of statistical packages used to forecast demand. <p>The inconvenience of the use of 0870 numbers is mitigated by the fact that the average call is short (4 minutes), and that there are other non-telephone options to access DVLA's services, e.g. web, e-mail and letter.</p> <p>0870 numbers ensure that callers pay a national rate charge via their service providers. That means that customers who do not live close to DVLA Swansea, are not disadvantaged by having to pay a higher call charge than local customers.</p>
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Reasons why public interest favours withholding information

It is considered that, if 0870 numbers fell into disuse, the adverse effect that this would have on customer services and revenue (which would, in turn, require the DVLA to make more demand on the public purse and/or increase the charges it makes to other sections of its users) outweighs the inconvenience caused by the use of 0870 numbers to those who use its phone enquiry service.

ANNEX B

Exemption in full:

S43(2)

Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the public authority holding it).

<i>Factors for disclosure</i>	<i>Factors for withholding</i>
<p>By revealing the amount of money earned by DVLA per minute, DVLA could use the competition to its own benefit, if BT's competitors were to provide better rates.</p> <p>There is general public interest in knowing how public funds are managed.</p>	<p>DVLA has a commercial contract with BT with special rates that we have negotiated. If we were to divulge these rates, commercial rivals could gain an advantage over BT in future negotiations with DVLA and other organisations. This disclosure of information, considered as commercially sensitive by BT, could affect the good working relationship DVLA has established with this company.</p> <p>Information on the amount of money earned by DVLA from the use of 0870 numbers has been published in the public domain. The availability of this general information mitigates the fact that the amount of money received per minute per call is withheld.</p>

Reasons why public interest favours withholding information

Companies providing services to DVLA must not be deterred from doing so by fear that information about their revenue and bargaining position could be revealed. It is considered that, although revealing the rates might, in the short term, give the DVLA an advantage, it would, in the long term, be a disadvantage, since it would diminish the confidence potential service providers might have in it. This long term disadvantage is considered serious enough to outweigh the public interest in revealing the information.

Type of Document	Applicable Exemption
COI Guidelines	Section 43(2) – Commercial Interests
E-mail from BT	Section 43(2) – Commercial Interests