



Making Northern Ireland Safer For Everyone Through Professional, Progressive Policing

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



Request Number: F-2009-01959

Keyword: Crime

Subject: FERNS REPORT

Request and Answer:

Question

After the Ferns (Wexford) report in 2005 the PSNI and Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland met to discuss the implications for NI. There was full cooperation from the church in the investigation by the police, looking at allegations of abuse of children in Northern Ireland by RC clergy/religious dating back to the 1960s.

Please supply me with a list of every document supplied by the church to the PSNI has part of this investigation.

We do not request copies of any documents nor sensitive details from said documents.

For each document (or copy document) supplied to the PSNI, please advise; -

- a) The status of the person who wrote it e.g. clergy / religious order member / complainant / complainant friend or relative / police officer / solicitor / other (please specify)
- b) The date the document was originally written.
- c) A brief description of the document e.g. record of verbal complaint taken by clergy / letter of complaint by alleged victim / conclusion of church investigation / update on church investigation / overview of allegation and investigation by church official etc.

Answer

Your request for information has now been considered and the decision has been taken not to supply the information you have requested.

Section 17 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires the Police Service of Northern Ireland, when refusing to provide such information (because the information is exempt) to provide you the applicant with a notice which:

- (a) states that fact,
- (b) specifies the exemption in question and
- (c) states (if not otherwise apparent) why the exemption applies.

The exemption/s, as well as the factors the Department considered when deciding where the public interest lies, are listed below:

Absolute Exemptions

Section 40 (2) Personal Information

Section 41 (1)(a)(b) Information provided in Confidence

Section 44 (1) (a) Information covered by prohibitions on disclosure

Qualified Exemptions

Section 30 (1)(a)(b)(c)(2)(a) Investigations and proceedings conducted by the public authority

Section 38 (1)(a)(b) Health and Safety

Section 42 (1) Legal professional privilege

HARM

The essence of the work undertaken by the PSNI is to protect both individuals and society as a whole.

Section 41 - Information provided in confidence, requires the PSNI to consider the harm if the release of the information requested would constitute an actionable breach of confidence.

As Police investigations are conducted with due regard to the confidentiality and privacy of witnesses, there is an expectation that details provided are to be used only for the purpose for which provided.

Furthermore Legal professional privilege applies to all communications between a professional legal advisor (solicitor/barrister) and their client. Any such communications are exempt by virtue of Sections 41 and 42.

Under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) any information released under FOI is released into the public domain, not just to the individual requesting the information. If any personal details were disclosed there is the possibility that it may endanger the physical or mental health of an individual. The releasing of the names of any individual would contravene the first data protection principle in that it would not be 'fair' processing.

Section 30 - a public authority is exempt from the duty to communicate information where that information has, at any time been held for the purposes of any investigation, which the public authority has a duty to conduct.

Police (NI) Act 2000, which states:

"It shall be the general duty of police officers –

- (a) to protect life and property
- (b) to preserve order
- (c) to prevent the commission of offences
- (d) where an offence has been committed, to take measures to bring the offender to justice".

The European Convention of Human Rights states under Article 8 that each person has the right to respect for private family life. Section 38 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 also protects an individual's physical health and mental wellbeing whether the harm is real or perceived. Therefore the PSNI consider that by releasing any information you have requested relating to the investigation may have the potential to identify different person/s and would not be in keeping with the Act.

Where an application for information is made by someone other than the 'data subject' disclosure of that information will often constitute a breach of the Data Protection Act and consequently the public authority will usually be exempt from its duties under the Act as a result of Section 40 (2).

Public Interest Test

The public interest test relevant is as follows: -

Favouring Disclosure

Accountability

The actions of the Police Service, particularly in relation to crime require appropriate application of legislation. This information would go some way towards reassuring those factors.

Public Participation

Where disclosure would enhance informed debate and decision making by the service.

Justice to an Individual

The public interest may be served by providing individuals with information of particular reference to them and their situation, e.g. information that would assist the applicant to understand the steps taken by the service in dealing with their request, information which would assist them to assess whether to pursue a legal remedy or otherwise.

Public Debate

Where the release of information would contribute to the quality and accuracy of public debate.

Considerations Favouring Non-Disclosure

Efficient and effective conduct of the service.

It would not be in the public interest to release information that may prevent or hinder current and future police investigations and regulatory enforcement.

Human Rights

The rights of the individual in this case cannot be under estimated. The Human Rights of other individuals who may potentially be identified also need to be protected.

Investigations

It is the Association of Chief Police Officers approach that information relating to an investigation will rarely be disclosed under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. Whilst such information may be released if it provides a tangible community benefit, for example to prevent or detect crime or to protect life or property, it is hard to see how the information here will do so.

Interests of Third Parties

Where third party interests might be jeopardised by release of information that relates to personal affairs of individuals and/or sensitive commercial information held about business, financial, contractual or operational issues. See also Data Protection issues.

Although the request does not ask for personal data the interests of third parties, i.e. other persons involved, could still be jeopardised by the release of information that could lead to their identification.

Fair treatment of an individual

There can be public interest in non-disclosure of information that adversely affects the reputation of an individual. e.g. where they have been the subject of police investigations.

Flow of Information to the Service

The lack of confidentiality would deter the public from providing information to the PSNI.

Tort in Law

In circumstances where the service is under a legal obligation to maintain confidences, it would not be in the public interest to release the information if the grounds for this duty can be shown to be valid.

Balancing Test

PSNI consider that the benefit, which would result from, the release of the information requested does not outweigh disclosing information relating to the above exemptions.

If you have any queries regarding your request or the decision please do not hesitate to contact 028 9070 0164. When contacting the Freedom of Information Team, please quote the reference number listed at the beginning of this letter.

If you are dissatisfied in any way with the handling of your request, you have the right to request a review. You should do this as soon as possible, or in any case within two months of the date of issue of this letter. In the event that you require a review to be undertaken, you can do so by writing to the Head of Freedom of Information, PSNI Headquarters, 65 Knock Road, Belfast, BT5 6LE or by emailing foi@psni.pnn.police.uk.

If following an internal review, carried out by an independent decision maker, you were to remain dissatisfied in any way with the handling of the request you may make a complaint, under Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act, to the Information Commissioner's Office and ask that they investigate whether the PSNI has complied with the terms of the Freedom of Information Act. You can write to the Information Commissioner at Information Commissioner's Office,

Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. In most circumstances the Information Commissioner will not investigate a complaint unless an internal review procedure has been carried out, however the Commissioner has the option to investigate the matter at his discretion.

Please be advised that PSNI replies under Freedom of Information may be released into the public domain via our website @ www.psni.police.uk

Personal details in respect of your request have, where applicable, been removed to protect confidentiality.