



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



Request Number: F-2016-00280

Keyword: Operational Policing

Subject: Firearms Officers

Request and Answer:

Question 1

Following the Home Secretary's announcement of extra investment in firearms capacity, do you have plans to increase the number of firearms officers in your force?

Question 2

How much money is being provided by central government to your force to do so?

Question 3

What is the current average deployment time for armed officers in your force area? And what was the average deployment time for each year since 2010?

Question 4

How many armed rapid response vehicles do you have, and are there plans to increase that capacity?

Question 5

How many authorised firearms officers does your force have and how many specialist firearms officers?

Question 6

Does your firearms unit operate with single-shot weapons only?

Question 7

How many armed rapid response vehicles do you have, and are there plans to increase that capacity?

Question 8

Do you cooperate with any neighbouring forces in order to increase/maximise firearms capability? Do you plan to do so in the future?

Answer

Your request for information has now been considered. In respect of Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) I can confirm that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) does hold information to which your request relates. The decision has been taken not to supply some of

the information you have requested and the reasons for this are set out in more detail below.

I have today decided to:

- disclose information in response to questions 1, 2, 3, 4, the first part of question 5 relating to authorised firearms officers and questions 7 and 8 in full;
- fully exempt information in response to the second part of question 5 relating to specialist firearms officers and question 6 pursuant to the provisions of Section 31 of the Act.

Section 17(1) of the FOIA requires the PSNI, 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 as well as the factors the Department considered when deciding where the public interest lies, are listed below:

Section 31 (1) disclosure would, or would be likely to prejudice (a) the prevention or detection of crime - Law Enforcement.

The full text of exemptions can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk and further guidance on how they operate can be located on the Information Commissioners Office website www.ico.org.uk.

Section 31 is a qualified and class-based exemption which means that the legislators have determined that harm in release must be evidenced and also that a public interest test should be conducted.

Harm Test

The release of information in relation to specialist firearms officers and whether only single-shot weapons are used is a highly sensitive area. The release of detailed information relating to police resources in specialist areas such as specialist firearms officers would allow criminals to identify the availability of police officers which can be used with regard to intelligence and they would be likely to see this as an opportunity to commit crimes/disorder, therefore both directly and indirectly impacting on the prevention and detection of crime by the PSNI. The threat level is currently set at Severe in Northern Ireland and with the emerging terrorism threat, such as the recent attacks in Paris it has become increasingly important to protect capability information which could be of use to terrorists.

Public Interest Test

Factors favouring release - Section 31

Release of this information could inform how public money is spent and provide an insight into resources used in law enforcement.

Factors favouring retention - Section 31

Disclosure of the information requested would reveal specialist resource levels and capabilities within the PSNI. Disclosure of officer numbers within this area could compromise law enforcement tactics which could potentially lead to more crime being committed and individuals being placed at risk. The use of this type of information may be of particular concern in light of the nature and extent of the prevailing terrorist threat which is currently set at Severe. It may also be used by criminals/terrorists in combination with other information they have gathered to try and prejudice law enforcement.

Decision

I have determined that whilst there are valid reasons for release of this information, where such release has potential to impact on law enforcement issues, making the role of the police more

difficult, then the information should not be released. The PSNI has a duty to fulfil its law enforcement function and whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of policing activities of how public funds are allocated, the delivery of effective law enforcement is of paramount importance. The PSNI is currently under severe threat from terrorists and disclosure of this level of information has the potential to assist those criminal elements seeking to carry out attacks against police officers. The PSNI will not disclose information that will put officers' lives at risk as the safety of individuals is of paramount importance.

In this case I am satisfied that the exemptions at Sections 31 are applicable to the information requested relating to specialist firearms officers and whether only single-shot weapons are used.

Question 1

Following the Home Secretary's announcement of extra investment in firearms capacity, do you have plans to increase the number of firearms officers in your force?

Answer

This extra investment does not apply to the PSNI.

Question 2

How much money is being provided by central government to your force to do so?

Answer

None.

Question 3

What is the current average deployment time for armed officers in your force area? And what was the average deployment time for each year since 2010?

Answer

All PSNI officers are armed with Personal Protection Weapons and routinely patrol as armed officers.

Question 4

How many armed rapid response vehicles do you have, and are there plans to increase that capacity?

Answer

The PSNI do not use Rapid Response Vehicles.

Question 5

How many authorised firearms officers does your force have?

Answer

The PSNI have 65 authorised firearms officers as armed response officers.

Question 7

How many armed rapid response vehicles do you have, and are there plans to increase that capacity?

Answer

The PSNI do not use armed rapid response vehicles.

Question 8

Do you cooperate with any neighbouring forces in order to increase/maximise firearms capability? Do you plan to do so in the future?

Answer

The PSNI engage in National and Regional groups and structures to ensure capacity and

interoperability. We do share assets but this is on specific mutual aid requests and due to geography.

If you have any queries regarding your request or the decision please do not hesitate to contact me on 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.psnipolice.uk

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