



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



Request Number: F-2018-02285

Keyword: Operational Policing

Subject: Police Referrals For Social Media Account Closures

Request and Answer:

Your request for information below 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 does hold the information you have requested however it is estimated that the cost of complying with your request for information would exceed the “appropriate costs limit” under Section 12(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Request 1

My request relates to referrals for social media account closures made by police to social networking companies over links to child sex offences. This information is to get a picture of the scale and nature of takedown requests of social media accounts, requested by police, for child sex offences across the UK.

Please provide me with the following information. I have provided an answer table below, so that your response can be easily recorded with responses from other forces. I have included hypothetical information in red.

How many referrals have been made for social media account closures for the following offences between April 1st 2017 and March 31st 2018?

- 21 (sexual activity involving a child under 13)
- 22B (sexual activity involving a child under 16)
- 88A (sexual grooming)
- 71/17 Sexual Communication with a Child
- 086/02 Take, permit to be taken or to make, distribute or publish indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of children

Request 2

Of the results of question 1, I would like this information for each offence broken down by which social networks were contacted, and how many of those led to confirmed closures.

Answer

Section 17(5) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires the Police Service of Northern Ireland, when refusing to provide such information (because the cost of compliance exceeds the appropriate limit) to provide you the applicant with a notice which states that fact.

It is estimated that the cost of complying with your request for information would exceed the “appropriate costs limit” under Section 12(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Section 12 of FOIA allows a public authority to refuse to deal with a request where it estimates that it would exceed the appropriate limit to either comply with the request in its entirety or confirm or deny whether the requested information is held. The estimate must be reasonable in the circumstances of the case. The ‘appropriate limit’ is currently £600 for central government and £450 for all other public authorities including PSNI. The relevant Regulations which define the appropriate limit for section 12 purposes are The Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulation 2004 SI 2004 No 3244. These are known as the ‘Fees Regulations’ for brevity.

Regulation 4(3) of the Fees Regulations states that a public authority can take into account the costs it reasonably expects to incur in carrying out the following permitted activities in complying with the request:

- (i) determining whether the information is held;
- (ii) locating the information, or a document containing it;
- (iii) retrieving the information, or a document containing it; and
- (iv) extracting the information from a document containing it.

Under those regulations PSNI can calculate the time spent on each of these permitted activities at £25 per hour (thus if the activity(s) takes more than 18 hours PSNI will be in excess of the ‘appropriate limit’).

The PSNI Telecom Liaison Unit (TLU) has advised they hold around 346 referrals that relate to social media covering the requested time period. These requests are for numerous reasons, they range from taking down posts that are menacing, threatening, obscene, grossly offensive to the complete account, if it is being used to target individuals for blackmail, be that to provide sexual material or money. TLU estimate it would take 5 – 10 minutes on average to manually trawl each of these 346 requests to retrieve information to answer the requests above. This would grossly exceed the appropriate limit.

In accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, this letter should be considered as a Refusal Notice, and the request has therefore been closed.

You may wish to submit a refined request in order that the cost of complying with your request may be facilitated within the ‘appropriate limit’. In compliance with Section 16 of the Act, I have considered how your request may be refined to bring it under the appropriate limit. TLU has advised they may be in a position to provide the number of times a take-down request was made as a total involving all **criminal offences** within cost.

Submission of a refined request would be treated as a new request, and considered in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, including consideration of relevant Part II exemptions.

If you have any queries regarding your request or this 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.