

Keeping People Safe



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



Request Number: F-2021-00138

Keyword: Human Resources

Subject: Covid Contracted by Police Officers

Request and Answer:

Your request for information has now been considered. In respect of Section 1(1)(a) of the Act we can confirm that the Police Service of Northern Ireland does hold some information to which your request relates and this is being provided to you. In relation to Request 1, recent figures are being withheld pursuant to Section 31 of the FOIA. We have detailed our rationale as to why this exemption applies and also provided you with links to guidance issued by the Information Commissioner's Office which we have followed in responding to your request.

Request 1

How many police officers have contracted COVID-19 since March 1st 2020? I would like this information broken down by month from March 1st 2020, up to and including today's date. If data has not been included up to and including today's date, please provide me with data starting from March 1st 2020, to the latest date where data is available.

Please see the table below detailing a monthly breakdown of the number of officers who contracted Covid 19 for the period March 2020 – November 2020.

Month	Total Number
March 2020	0
April 2020	14
May 2020	2
June 2020	0
July 2020	0
August 2020	11
September 2020	18
October 2020	80
November 2020	67

Please note: Figures are subject to change if reason for absence is amended.

As previously mentioned, figures from December 2020 onwards are withheld by virtue of Section 31

of the FOIA and the following explanation is provided.

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

Section 31(1)(a)(b) - Law Enforcement – Information would be likely to prejudice (a) the prevention or detection of crime (b) the apprehension or prosecution of offenders.

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 prejudice based qualified exemption which means that the legislators have identified that the harm (prejudice) in disclosure as well as the public interest considerations need to be evidenced and articulated to the applicant.

Harm

The provision of up to date, recent figures could better inform criminals of police resources assisting criminal activity or enabling attacks on police. This information could be used to the advantage of terrorists or criminal organisations, compromising the law enforcement role of police and hindering the prevention or detection of crime.

The Police Service is currently under severe threat of terrorism and any information that will give criminals the upper hand in the fight against terrorism will detrimentally impact the police service. Disclosure of the requested information would allow those with criminal or terrorist intent to gauge police resources and maximise opportunities to commit crime, leaving the Service vulnerable.

Factors Favouring Disclosure – Section 31

Disclosure of the information would inform public debate on the issue of policing and contribute to the accuracy of that debate while illustrating to the public how funds are being spent.

Factors Favouring Retention – Section 31

The law enforcement role of the Service may be compromised by the release of the requested information. A clear link exists between knowledge available to criminals and the way they operate, with the resultant impact to the Service. Disclosure of information could assist criminal elements, for example, criminals have previously carried out crime at times when they believe officers to be on meal breaks or when there are likely to be fewer police on duty.

Decision

It is acknowledged that wherever possible policing procedures must be transparent and accountable. However, police need to make balanced judgements which justify why some information needs to remain exempt and unpublished. The Police Service is under severe threat from terrorism and any information identifying police resources could be used to the advantage of terrorists or criminal organisations.

Once information is disclosed by FOI there is no control or limits as to who or how the information is shared with other individuals, therefore a release under FOI is considered a release to the world in general, not just to the individual requesting the information.

The Police Service is charged with enforcing the law, preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve. Whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of policing and providing assurance that the Police Service is appropriately and effectively engaging with the threat of criminals there is also a very strong public interest in safeguarding the law enforcement role of police.

Whilst PSNI would always wish to be transparent and accountable, I have determined that the release of this information, into the public domain would not be in the public interest.

Request 2

Of the number of police officers that have contracted COVID-19 since March 1st 2020, how many of them had to take a period of sick leave that lasted over 14 days as a result?

Answer

A total of 164 Regular Police Officers have had absences of 15 days or more with COVID-19 confirmed.

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 Corporate Information Branch, 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 Corporate Information Branch, 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.