

Keeping People Safe



## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



**Request Number:** F-2021-00009

**Keyword:** Crime

**Subject:** Paedophile Hunters And Online Grooming

### 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) we 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. We have explained to you below that when PSNI estimates whether the appropriate limit is likely to be exceeded, it can include the costs of complying with two or more requests if certain conditions are met. In this case those conditions are met and complying with all of your requests would in our estimation exceed that appropriate limit set out in Regulation. We have explained this further below but also we followed the Information Commissioner’s Office guidance ‘*Requests where the cost of compliance exceeds the appropriate limit*’ in relation to this request, which also provides further detail on the application of section 12 (1) of the FOIA. This guidance is available on the ICO website at the following link:

[https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1199/costs\\_of\\_compliance\\_exceeds\\_appropriate\\_limit.pdf](https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1199/costs_of_compliance_exceeds_appropriate_limit.pdf)

You requested the following information from PSNI:

#### Request 1a

Please provide the number of arrests you made in 2019/20 regarding online sexual offences of any kind related to children?

#### Request 1b

Please provide a breakdown of all the sexual offences associated with these arrests? e.g. section 8 of SOA 2003 [insert number]; section 10 of SOA 2003 [insert number]; section 12 of SOA 2003 [insert number] section 14 of SOA 2003 [insert number]; and section 15 of SOA [insert number]; section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 [insert number].

#### Request 1c

Please specify the number of these arrests that involved at least one child decoy. By 'child decoy' I am referring to an adult who pretends to be a child?

#### Request 2

Please provide the number of arrests you made in 2019/20 in connection with online sexual offences

against children based on evidence acquired by your own officers acting as decoys?

### **Request 3**

Please provide the number of arrests you made in 2019/20 in connection with online sexual offences against children based on evidence provided to you by so-called paedophile hunters?

### **Request 4**

Please provide the names of all so-called paedophile hunting groups who provided information to you that led to the arrest of individuals in connection with sexual offences against children in 2019/20?

### **Answers**

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').

When a public authority is estimating whether the appropriate limit is likely to be exceeded, it can include the costs of complying with two or more requests if the conditions laid out in Regulation 5 of the Fees Regulations can be satisfied. Those conditions require the requests to be:

- made by one person, or by different persons who appear to the public authority to be acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign;
- made for the same or similar information; and
- received by the public authority within any period of 60 consecutive working days.

Regulation 5(2) of the Fees Regulations requires that the requests which are to be aggregated relate "to any extent" to the same or similar information. This is quite a wide test but public authorities should still ensure that the requests meet this requirement.

Enquiries made in relation to your request has identified that retrieval of information would exceed the 18 hour cost limit set by the Secretary Of State under the FOI Act. With regards to Request number 1A and 1B, whilst the information is held electronically on the NICHE database, it cannot be

extracted without a manual trawl of all custody records containing arrests for sexual offences for the time period requested which would be required to identify 'online sexual offences related to children'. For a total of around 820 custody records, a conservative estimate is that it would take 10 minutes per record and therefore putting this over cost (in excess of 137 hours).

In addition PSNI can further advise that the information required to respond to Request number 1A may not be found directly by examining the custody record as this record may provide a link to the original investigation which may have been for a different offence. This further analysis is estimated to take an additional 20 minutes per record if all documents are held electronically, however this estimate would be further increased to an estimated 2 hours per record if the documents are manually held and / or the information has not been recorded.

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.

### **Advice and Assistance**

Under Section 16 of the FOIA PSNI will always try to assist you to refine your request and provide advice where we can. PSNI has considered how your request may be refined to bring it under the appropriate limit however no refinement can be offered.

On review of the information requested PSNI can advise the following:

- Request Numbers 1C and 2 - The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) can Neither Confirm Nor Deny that it holds the information relevant these request numbers as the duty in Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 does not apply by virtue of the following exemptions Section 23(5) Information supplied by or concerning certain security bodies, Section 31(3) Law Enforcement and Section 40(5) Personal Information of FOI Act.
- Request number 3 - PSNI can provide the number of arrests made in 2019/20 based on allegations made by Online Child Abuse Activist Groups OCAGs in relation to attempted sexual communication with a child.
- Request number 4- PSNI would be fully exempting this information by virtue of Section 40(2) Personal Information, as to release this information could reveal the identity of individuals thus breaching the first principle of data protection legislation.

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 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](mailto: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](http://www.psni.police.uk)

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