



FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST



Request Number: FOI-2022-02863

Keyword: Crime/Incident Statistics Sexual Offences

Subject: Dating App Crime

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

Request

I would like to request that a free text search (or equivalent) of your crime database is carried out. To help improve accuracy, I would be grateful if such a search could be narrowed to reports of the following offences:

- (i) Rape (contrary to the Sexual Offences Act 2003)
- (ii) Sexual Assault (contrary to the Sexual Offences Act 2003)
- (iii) Assault by penetration (contrary to the Sexual Offences Act 2003)
- (iv) Causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent (contrary to the Sexual Offences Act 2003)
- (v) Administering a substance with intent (contrary to the Sexual Offences Act 2003)
- (vi) Harassment (contrary to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997)
- (vii) Stalking (contrary to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997)

For the above specified offences, I would like to request the following free text searches (or equivalent) is carried out of your crime database for the following terms:

- (i) "Tinder"
- (ii) "Bumble"
- (iii) "Hinge"
- (iv) "Grindr"
- (v) "Dating app"

Following a search in the parameters specified, please

- (i) Identify the number of offence records containing the above phrases between January 1 2017 and November 1 2022.
- (ii) Provide a breakdown of the different offences recorded that included the above search terms.
- (iii) Provide a breakdown of the different offences recorded that included the above search terms by calendar year.
- (iv) Provide an outcome for each investigation, broken down by offence and year.

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').

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 have identified that retrieval of information to respond to your request would exceed the FOI legislative cost of 18 hours as set by the Secretary of State. Following a keyword search, to retrieve the requested information would require the manual examination of all relevant crimes during the listed time period.

We note this request refers to legislation for England and Wales, the PSNI alternatively considered similar legislation and crime classifications for Northern Ireland.

The number of crimes recorded during the listed time period (based on the crime classifications of Rape, Sexual Assault, Causing Sexual activity without Consent, Harassment and Stalking), is in excess of 46,200. Each of these incidents would need to be manually examined to retrieve the requested information.

Each record needs to be manually examined as there is no single report on our database that provides all the details of each recorded crime, relevant information is held in a range of fields and documents. To identify crimes where the text ‘app’ and the listed dating apps have been listed, would require a manual search through the documents linked to each recorded incident. Furthermore some of the requested keywords have multiple meanings e.g. ‘app’, which would introduce further inaccuracy if each record was not manually reviewed.

To complete the above task for all relevant records, would grossly exceed the FOI legislative cost of 18 hours, as set by the Secretary of State.

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

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, we have considered how your request may be refined to bring it under the appropriate limit.

Unfortunately, on this occasion as a manual trawl of records would be required for retrieval of any relevant information, it is not possible to offer any refinement to assist your request.

For your own information, please note that keyword searches are an unreliable method of collecting data from PSNI databases, as these searches rely on unstructured data. This means that you cannot automatically determine the context of the term found in the search result and a manual review is always required to decide if the result meets the criteria of the FOI request. Spelling mistakes, abbreviations and aliases can all affect the reliability of a keyword search. In addition, we do not have the ability to search for keywords within external documents stored on our database, therefore the scope with which we can do a keyword search is limited.

To inform you of how statistics are recorded by the PSNI you can access our user guide which is published on the PSNI website using the following link:

<https://www.psnipolice.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/>.

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 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 Corporate Information Manager, Corporate Information Branch, PSNI Headquarters, 65 Knock Road, Belfast, BT5 6LE or by emailing foi@psnipolice.uk.

If, following an Internal Review carried out by an independent decision maker, you remain unhappy about how your request has been handled you have the right to apply in writing to the Information Commissioner, under Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act, at 'Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. There are a number of other platforms you can use to contact the ICO and these can be found on the ICO's website at the following link: [Make a complaint | ICO \(https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/\)](https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/).

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 their 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.