



Statistical Bulletin:

The Office of the Police Ombudsman for
Northern Ireland, 2020/21



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INTRODUCTION

This Statistical Bulletin presents information on complaints and allegations received by the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland in 2020/21, as well as showing trend information for the last five years.

It was produced independently by Statisticians from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) who are seconded to the Police Ombudsman's Office (the Office) and work alongside Police Ombudsman personnel. It has been produced in accordance with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Why publish statistics?

The information presented in this bulletin has been produced to meet the needs of a variety of individuals and organisations who have a particular interest in the issue of police complaints.

The Police Ombudsman's Office uses these statistics to monitor trends in complaints and allegations received and how they were dealt with. It also uses this information to monitor performance against key performance indicators.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has an interest in knowing about the trends and patterns in complaints made about their officers and use this information to help identify and address particular problems.

The Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) use this material in developing an understanding of what aspects of police conduct are attracting public concern and whether these concerns are of substance.

The Police and Community Partnerships (PCSPs) also use the data to monitor police performance in their areas and to identify any particular concerns.

The general public have a right to know how both their police service and their police complaints service are performing.

Understanding the information in this bulletin

We hope this report will provide readers with a clear understanding of the trends and patterns in complaints and allegations received by the Police Ombudsman's Office over the last five years.

We have provided information on what we believe would be the main questions asked by readers: how many complaints and allegations have we received, what were they about and how were they resolved, for example.

Commentary has been provided throughout, which aims to provide some context and explanation or interpretation of the emerging trends.

However, a concise document like this can only ever provide part of that context. Other factors may be at play which cannot be reflected in this bulletin. Readers may also want to consider issues as varied as the levels of the police budget and the service it can provide, as well as the level of awareness of the police complaints system itself.

Similarly, making comparisons across geographical areas may not always be straightforward. Areas have different levels of population. Even that distinction can have further categories. Whether people travel to an area during normal office hours for their work or move into it in the evening to socialise can have an effect on the number of complaints we receive.

It is also difficult to make valid comparisons between the number of complaints and allegations received across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, and Scotland as each area operates a different system.

Terminology

For those with less knowledge of the Police Ombudsman's Office, we have provided an explanation of the police complaints process in the appendices of this bulletin. We have tried to keep the terminology used in this bulletin 'jargon' free, but where this has not been possible we have provided a glossary with an explanation of those terms.

Could we improve this bulletin?

From the wealth of detailed information within the Police Ombudsman's Office, we have tried to produce a bulletin that focuses on the key issues, which we believe, would be of interest to the public and the police. We have also tried to make that information as clear and easily understood as possible. Have we succeeded? We would be keen to hear any views you have on this bulletin.

If you wish to provide any feedback or comments on this publication, please see our contact details on the back page or email us via info@policeombudsman.org.

Conventions

Percentages in the tables and text are rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not always add up to 100.

Covid-19 Impact

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Office closed in mid-March 2020 to all but essential work, in line with Government advice. This was followed by two further partial closures of the office in October 2020 and January 2021. Following the publication of the Headline Statistical Bulletin in June 2021 further data quality checks have been carried out to allow this detailed Statistical Bulletin to be published. All published results are deemed to be of sufficient quality for publication.

A SUMMARY OF THE KEY TRENDS IN COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE POLICE

- The number of complaints received by the Police Ombudsman's Office during 2020/21 decreased by 1% from the previous year. Some of this decrease will be a direct impact of the lockdown restrictions placed on the country during March 2020.
- Criminal Investigation was the most common situation which gave rise to complaints, as it was in each of the last five years.
- Complaints have decreased in 4 of the 11 police districts and have increased in 6 of the 11 police districts. The largest decrease was in Fermanagh & Omagh district (G District) where they decreased by 26%. While, the largest increase was in Derry City & Strabane district (H District) where complaints increased by 11%.
- The most frequent allegations received during the year were allegations of Failure in Duty, of Oppressive Behaviour, and of Incivility.
- More than two fifths (41%) of complaints dealt with by the Police Ombudsman's Office were subject to a full investigation. In 12% of these complaints, the Office found evidence to substantiate all or part of the complaint or identified another concern during the investigation.
- On three occasions during the year, the Police Ombudsman recommended that the Director of Public Prosecutions should prosecute an officer.
- The Police Ombudsman recommended on 63 occasions that a police officer should receive a discipline or a performance action.

COMPLAINTS

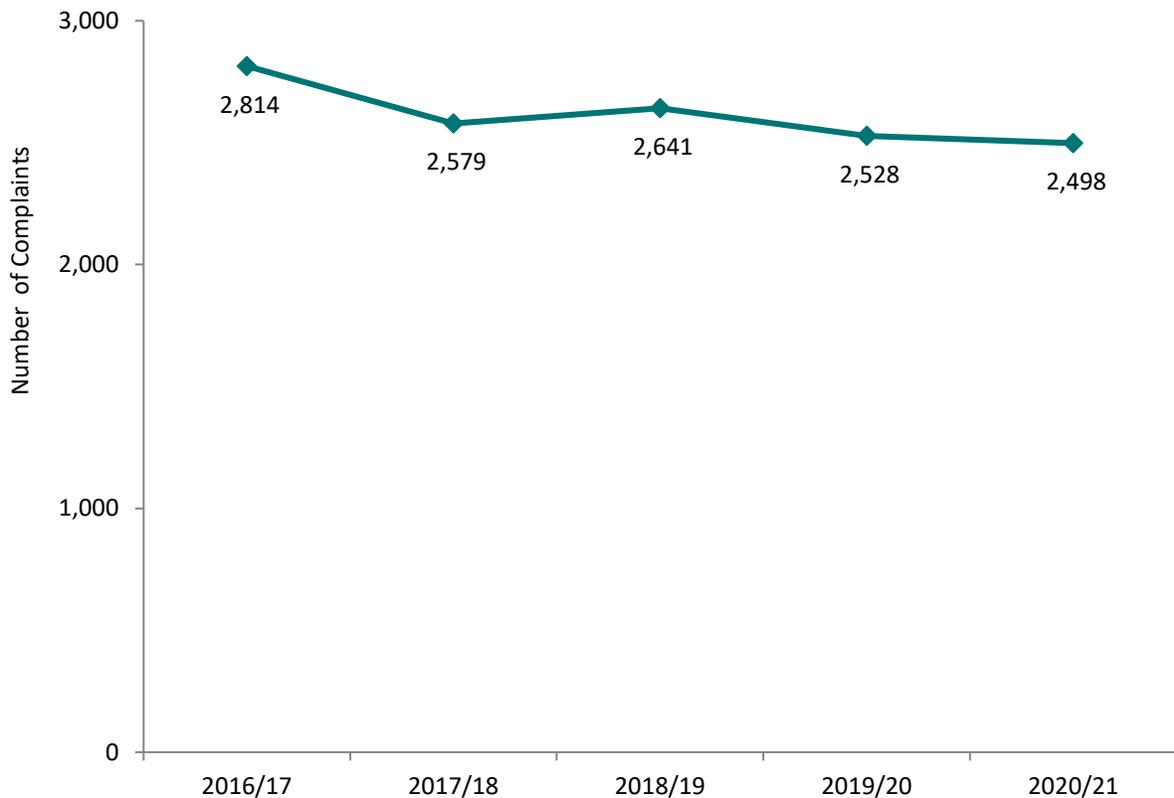
The volume of complaints and matters received

The number of complaints received and matters referred for independent investigations by the Police Ombudsman’s Office during 2020/21 was 2,498 (Figure 1, Table 5). This is a 1% decrease from the previous year, 2019/20. Some of this decrease will be a direct impact of the introduction of the ‘lockdown’ enforced by the Government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following a large drop in complaints in 2017/18 the number of complaints received now appears to be reaching a steady level.

For the purpose of clarity of reporting, this statistical bulletin will refer to all its incoming work by the term ‘complaints’.

Figure 1: Number of complaints received, 2016/17 to 2020/21



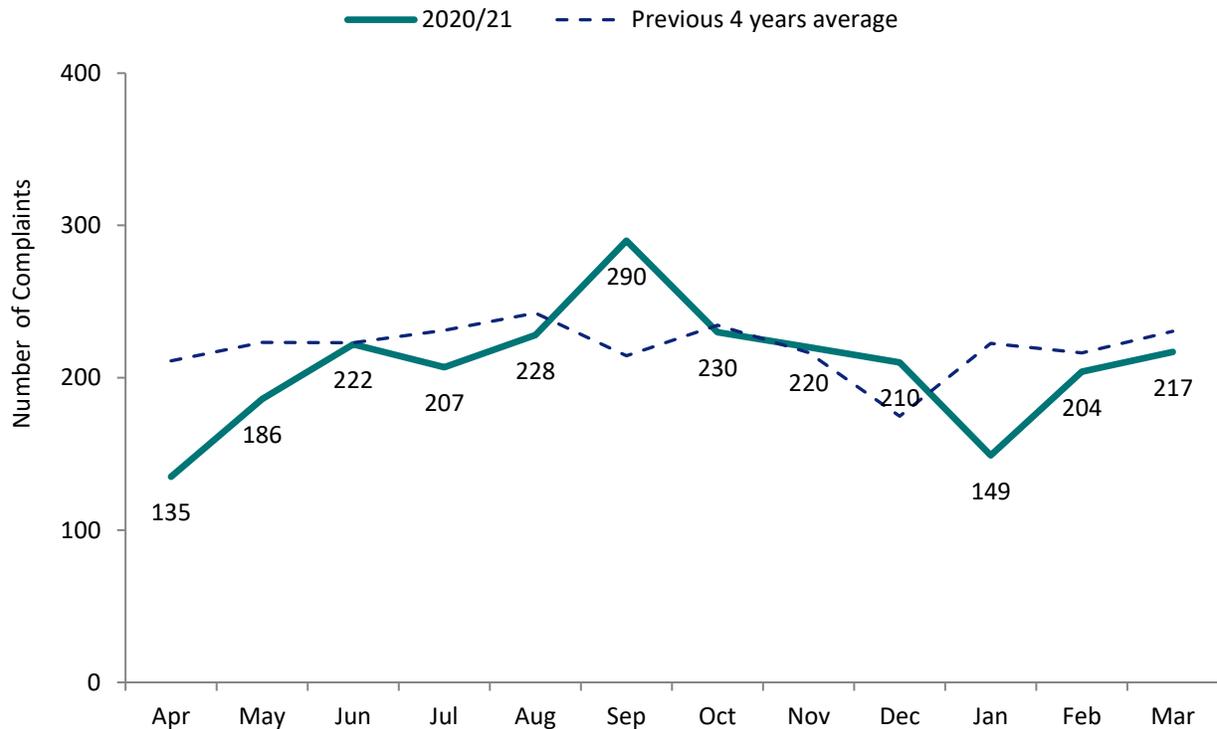
During 2020/21, the vast majority of complaints (92%) were from members of the public. A further 7% were notifications from police which did not result in an investigation. Less than 1%

were matters referred to the Office for an independent investigation from the PSNI or from another organisation¹ or matters in which the Police Ombudsman has initiated an own motion investigation (Table 6).

Complaints received each month

During 2020/21, the Office received between 135 and 290 complaints each month. For all months except September, November and December the number of complaints received was fewer than the monthly average for the previous four years. The seasonality trend that the Office typically receives more complaints in the summer months than in the winter months is not as evident this year, the Office received 38 more complaints over the summer period than the winter period (Figure 2, Table 7).

Figure 2: Number of complaints received by month, 2016/17 to 2020/21



¹ Public Prosecution Service (PPS), Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) or the Department of Justice (DOJ).

Who people were complaining about

The Police Ombudsman's Office has the remit to investigate complaints about officials from a number of bodies. These include police officers within the PSNI and police officers with the Northern Ireland Airport Constabulary and Belfast Harbour Police. The remit was extended, for serious incidents only, to include certain Home Office officials in 2014/15 and National Crime Agency Officials from 20th May 2015.

During 2020/21, the vast majority of complaints received (99%) were about the PSNI, this includes both police officers and 'designated civilians' within the Service (Tables 1 and 8).

Table 1: Complaints received by organisation, 2020/21

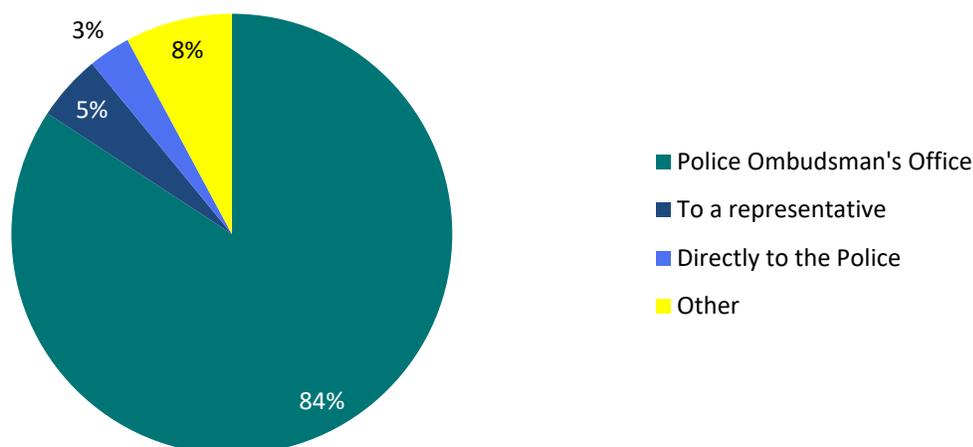
Organisation	No. of complaints received
PSNI	2,467
Harbour Police	1
NI Airport Constabulary	1
Certain Home Office officials	0
Ministry of Defence Police	0
National Crime Agency	3
Other / Unknown	26
Total	2,498

Where people initially made their complaints

Although the Police Ombudsman's Office is the only body which can by law deal with complaints about the conduct of police officers, people do not always make their complaints directly to the Office. Sometimes their complaint is made in the first instance to the PSNI itself or to someone such as a solicitor or a political representative.

More than four fifths (84%) of the complaints received during 2020/21 were made directly to the Office without the use of an intermediary (Figure 3, Table 9).

Figure 3: Where people initially made their complaint, 2020/21



Over the last five years, the proportion of complaints made directly to the Office has increased, from 75% in 2016/17 to 84% in 2020/21. Whilst the proportion received via a representative and via the police decreased. The decrease in the proportion of complaints made via a representative has more than halved in last two years, decreasing from 12% in 2018/19 to 5% in 2020/21.

Situations that gave rise to complaints

In order to try and get a better understanding of what sorts of interactions might give rise to complaints about the police or police conduct, the Police Ombudsman's Office collect information on the background or context to the complaint.

Criminal investigations were the most common situations giving rise to complaints during 2020/21, followed by arrests, traffic related incidents, police searches and domestic incidents (Figure 4, Table 10).

Figure 4: Complaints arising, 2016/17 to 2020/21
Complaints Arising from Criminal Investigation, Arrests, Traffic Related Incidents & Police Searches



During 2020/21, the Office received 555 complaints arising from a criminal investigation. This accounts for 22% of all complaints received. The number of complaints made following a criminal investigation has decreased this year, having remained fairly stable in the previous three years.

There were 439 complaints arising from arrests during 2020/21. The number of complaints made following an arrest increased by 28% from 2019/20.

There were 184 complaints made following a traffic related incident during 2020/21. The number of complaints made following a traffic related offence has decreased this year, having remained fairly steady over the previous four years.

During 2020/21, 179 complaints were received following a police search. This is an increase by almost one quarter (23%) from the previous year.

152 complaints arising from domestic incidents (such as neighbourhood disputes) were received during 2020/21. They have increased by 35% since the previous year. The number of complaints following domestic incidents had also been decreasing steadily over the previous four years.

The number of complaints made to the Office connected to events during the period known as 'the Troubles' and which required consideration by its Historical Investigations Directorate has decreased for the fourth consecutive year. These complaints have decreased from 76 during 2016/17 to 19 during 2020/21.

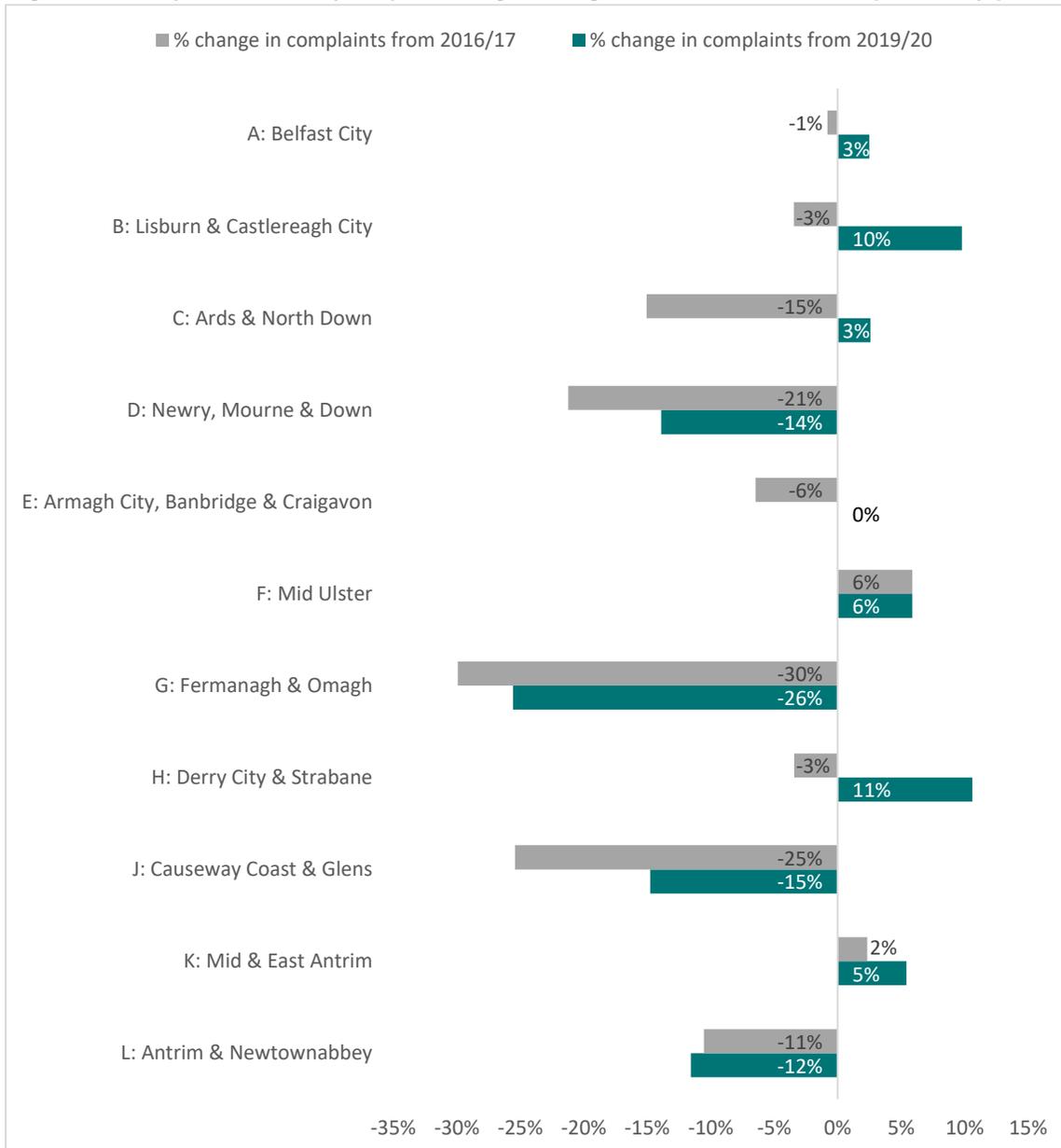
During 2020/21, there were 22 complaints arising from how the police dealt with domestic violence incidents. This is almost half the number of complaints in the previous year.

Complaints arising from parades or demonstrations fluctuate year on year. During 2020/21, there were 40 complaints, around 25 of these complaints were in relation to the policing of the Black Lives Matters protests.

Complaints received by police district^{2,3}

Four of the 11 policing districts in Northern Ireland had a decrease in complaints during this year, when compared with 2019/20. In six of the remaining seven districts the numbers increased from the previous year. (Figure 5, Table 11).

Figure 5: One-year and five-year percentage change in the number of complaints by police district



² This is only for complaints made about the PSNI and does not include any other organisations.

³ This is the location where the incident complained about occurred which may be different from the district that the officer is assigned to.

The above chart shows that complaints at police district level in general have been decreasing over the last five years, as more of the grey bars are pointing left than right (showing decreases). However, this trend is not consistent across all districts as two police districts have had an increase in complaints since 2016/17. The paragraphs below examine each police district in more detail, they are in alphabetical order of the police district name (i.e. A district to L district).

We would remind the reader that making comparisons between policing districts is something to be done with caution. Policing districts are not identical and differ on issues such as population numbers, policing numbers, the level of public interaction with police and even issues such as whether they have a vibrant night-time economy.

Belfast City District (A District) received the largest number of complaints, 736 during 2020/21. It accounts for more than one quarter (29%) of all complaints received by the Office. Complaints from this district increased by 3% from last year and have decreased by 1% from 2016/17.

Complaints in Lisburn & Castlereagh City (B District) have increased by 10% from last year to 112 complaints. This is a 3% decrease from 2016/17 figures.

In Ards & North Down (C District) complaints increased by 3% to 158 complaints. This is still a 15% decrease from 2016/17 figures.

Complaints from Newry, Mourne & Down (D District) decreased by 14% during 2020/21 to 130 complaints. This is also a 21% decrease since 2016/17.

The number of complaints from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (E District) remained unchanged from 2019/20 (203 complaints). They have decreased by 6% over the last five years.

In Mid Ulster (F District) complaints have increased by 6% since both 2016/17 and 2019/20 (from 119 to 126 complaints).

Complaints from Fermanagh & Omagh (G District) have decreased by 26% from the previous year. During 2020/21 they had 96 complaints. This district received the least number of complaints in 2020/21.

In Derry City & Strabane (H District) complaints have increased by 11% this year but have decreased by 3% since 2016/17.

Complaints from Causeway Coast & Glens (J District) have decreased by 15% from last year.

In Mid & East Antrim (K District) complaints have increased by 5% this year. Complaints from this police district have fluctuated over the last five years.

Complaints for Antrim & Newtownabbey (L District) have decreased by 12% from last year. During 2020/21, it received around 150 complaints.

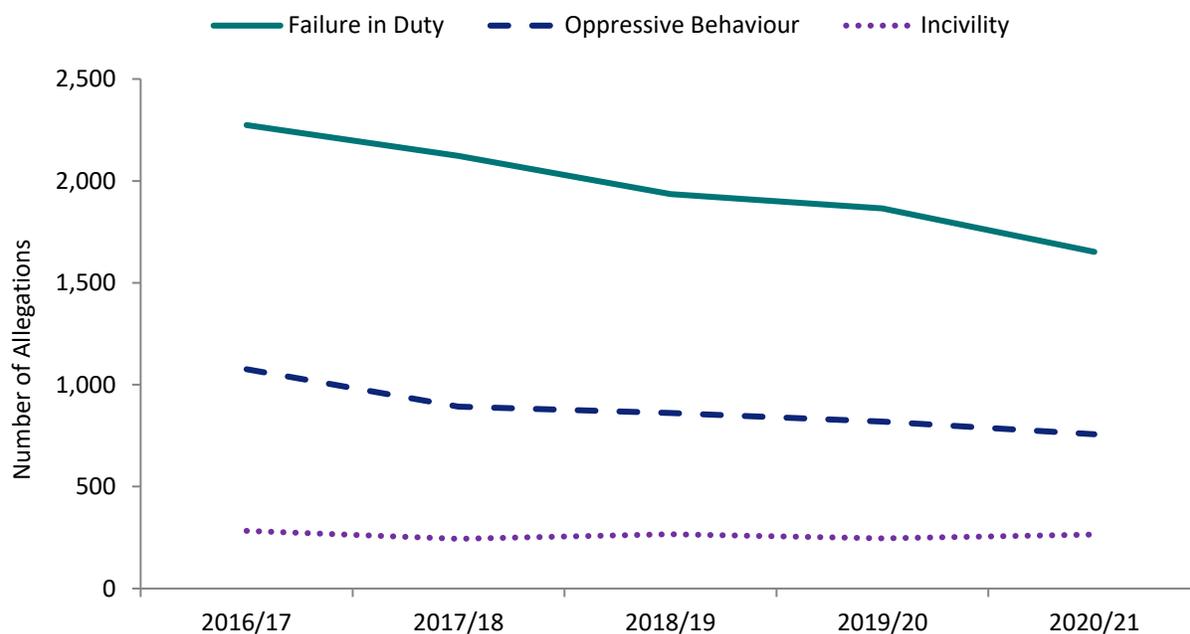
ALLEGATIONS

A person who makes a complaint may express a number of different concerns about the exchange they have had with a police officer. The Police Ombudsman’s Office will record this as one complaint broken down into a number of ‘allegations’.

During 2020/21, the Police Ombudsman’s Office received 3,667 allegations (Table 12).

The most frequent allegations received during the year were allegations of a Failure in Duty, of Oppressive Behaviour, and of Incivility (Figure 6, Table 13).

Figure 6: Types of allegations received, 2016/17 to 2020/21



Failure in Duty allegations

During 2020/21, over 1,650 allegations received by the Police Ombudsman’s Office alleged a Failure in Duty by a police officer. This was a decrease of 11% on the number of allegations received in the previous year.

More than half (52%) of the Failure in Duty allegations received in 2020/21 related to the conduct of police investigations or police response to incidents (Table 14). This is the same trend as in each of the last five years.

The second most frequently reported Failure in Duty allegations were about failures in contact; such as failing to provide updates, failing to return telephone calls and failing to reply to correspondence. These allegations account for 11% of all the Failure in Duty allegations.

Oppressive Behaviour allegations

There were 757 Oppressive Behaviour allegations received during 2020/21. This is an 8% decrease in the number received during 2019/20 and it is the fourth consecutive year that they have been below 1,000 allegations.

Almost half (47%) of the Oppressive Behaviour allegations received during 2020/21 alleged oppressive conduct by an officer/s not involving an assault.

Allegations of serious non sexual assaults and sexual assaults accounted for 4% of all the Oppressive Behaviour allegations received (Table 15).

Incivility allegations

During 2020/21, there were 265 Incivility allegations received. This was an 8% increase from the previous year.

One in four Incivility allegations was about an officer being uncivil whilst on the telephone (25%) or whilst being at a domestic residence (25%) (Table 16).

Other allegations⁴

In addition to Failure in Duty and Oppressive Behaviour allegations decreasing to their lowest levels in the last five years, allegations relating to being Unlawfully or Unnecessarily Arrested or Detained and allegations about Discriminatory Behaviour, Mishandling of Property and Traffic are also all at their lowest levels in the last five years (Table 13).

⁴ A further breakdown of allegations is available on the Police Ombudsman's website in the accompanying Excel tables.

Allegations regarding the use of police equipment

Allegations about the use of police equipment accounted for 4% of all the allegations received during 2020/21 (Table 17). This is higher than in previous years. It should be noted that a contributing factor to this increase is the number of automatic referrals around the use of Spit and Bite Guards. These were introduced in March 2020 and automatically referred by PSNI as part of the Police Ombudsman's review around their use.

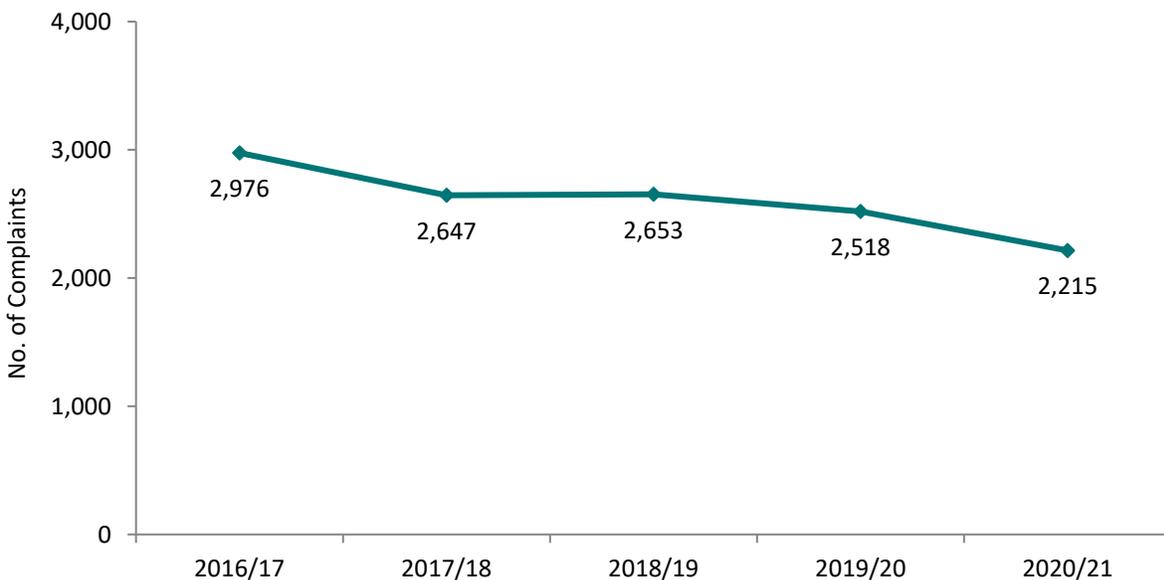
During 2020/21, allegations about the use of TASERS and CS Spray accounted for 25% of all allegations concerning police equipment.

COMPLAINTS CLOSURES

The Police Ombudsman’s Office closes complaints once it has reached a view on the matter involved, when the complainant and the police officer have reached a level of agreement on the contested matter or when the person who made the complaint no longer wishes to engage with the process.

The Office closed 2,215 complaints during 2020/21 (Figure 7, Table 18). This is a 12% decrease from the previous year. Some of the decrease will be directly attributable to the partial closures of the Office during the 2020/21 financial year in response to the Government’s advice in reducing the spread of Covid-19.

Figure 7: Number of complaints closed by year, 2016/17 to 2020/21



Generally the number of complaints being closed by the Office has decreased over the last five years. This reflects the decrease in the number of complaints received over the same time period.

Types of complaint closures

There are four main stages as to when complaints will be closed (Table 2).

Table 2: Complaint closures, 2020/21

Complaints Closed	2,215
Complaints closed following initial assessment	480
Complaint was not a matter for the Police Ombudsman	207
Notifications from PSNI	218
Other	55
Complaints closed following initial inquiries	686
Complainant did not fully engage with the police complaints system	537
Ill-founded	7
Withdrawn	115
Other	27
Complaints resolved informally	128
Complaints closed that relate to the 'Troubles'	3
Complaints fully investigated	918
Complaint substantiated or an issue of concern identified	106
Complaint not substantiated or no issue of concern identified	812

Just over two in ten (22%) complaints closed during 2020/21 were closed after the initial assessment. These complaints tend to be closed fairly quickly, and often involve issues which were either not a matter for the Police Ombudsman's Office or they were notifications from the PSNI which did not meet the threshold for a full investigation.

A larger proportion of complaints (31%) were closed following initial inquiries. Initial inquiries involves getting more information from the complainant, looking for evidence regarding the matter complained about or making initial contact with the police officer(s) involved. Complaints closed at this stage are normally those where the complainant ceases to engage with the Office.

Complaints that were informally resolved accounted for 6% of all complaints closed. This is an alternative way to resolve less serious complaints such as those alleging rudeness or incivility.

More than two in five (41%) complaints closed were fully investigated. This is when a Police Ombudsman's Investigator or Complaint's Officer reaches a conclusion on at least one of the allegations in the complaint. The Office found evidence to substantiate all or part of the

complaint or identified another concern during the investigation in 12% of these fully investigated complaints during 2020/21.

Trends in the types of complaint closures

The proportion of complaints being closed within each of the four stages have remained fairly stable over the last five years with only a few notable changes (Table 18).

There has been a decrease in the proportion of complaints being closed as ill-founded and an increase in the proportion of complaints being closed as not substantiated since 2017/18. This is due to a change within the Office on how complaints are processed.

Note: Following representation from key stakeholders and in order to make the reporting clearer, it has been decided to report our closures at complaint level. To do this, each of the closures within a complaint have been ranked, and the closure with the highest ranking used as the most representative of the overall complaint closure.

The highest ranking closure is also used to determine at which stage in the complaints process the complaint was closed: after initial assessment, initial inquiries, informal resolution, or following a full investigation. While this method will provide a clear and largely accurate picture in the majority of cases, there will be a few instances when this will not be the case. These discrepancies will only occur between initial assessment and initial inquiries stages.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PPS AND POLICE

Public Prosecution Service (PPS)

Where the Police Ombudsman investigates a matter and identifies that a criminal offence may have been committed, legislation requires that the matter is reported to the PPS. A file will be sent to the PPS that sets out the information that has been established and makes a recommendation as to whether or not the police officer(s) should face a criminal charge. Irrespective of the Police Ombudsman's recommendation, it will be for the PPS to decide if an officer should be prosecuted.

During 2020/21, the Office sent 57 recommendations to the PPS. The Police Ombudsman recommended that the Director of Public Prosecutions should prosecute an officer or staff member on 3 occasions (Tables 3 & 19).

Table 3: Number of prosecution and no prosecution recommendations made by the Police Ombudsman for an officer/staff member to the PPS, 2020/21

Prosecution for an officer/staff member	2020/21
Recommended	3
Not Recommended	54

Over the last five years, the number of recommendations made to the PPS for prosecution has fluctuated, ranging from 3 recommendations in 2020/21 to 24 during 2016/17 (Table 19). The numbers made this year are more similar to 2017/18 and 2018/19.

The Office made fewer recommendations to the PPS for no prosecution during 2020/21 than in any of the four previous years.

Recommendations made to the Chief Constable or Chief Officer

Following the conclusion of any criminal proceedings or investigations that relate to misconduct matters, the Police Ombudsman may make a recommendation to the Chief Constable or the Chief Officer, who will consider whether action should be taken against the police officers who were the subject of the complaint.

During 2020/21, the Police Ombudsman's Office made 63 recommendations that an officer or staff member should receive either a discipline or a performance action (Table 4). More than 50% were for performance action.

Table 4: Number of recommendations made by the Police Ombudsman for an officer/staff member to receive a discipline or performance action, 2020/21

Regulations Introduced in June 2016⁵ (Discipline or Performance Actions)	63
Performance	33
Misconduct Meeting	25
Misconduct Hearing	5

The number of recommendations for a discipline or performance action the Police Ombudsman has made for an officer/staff member has in general decreased over the last five years (Table 20a and 20b). This has decreased from a high of 249 in 2016/17 to 63 in 2020/21.

Due to a change in the regulations for discipline in June 2016 it is difficult to make a five year comparison on the types of disciplines recommended over the last five years.

⁵ The Police (Performance and Attendance) Regulations (NI) 2016 and The Police (Conduct) Regulations (NI) 2016 came into force on 1 June 2016

Policy recommendations made to the PSNI

During 2020/21, the Police Ombudsman's Office made seven policy recommendations to police arising from issues which have been identified during the course of investigations.

One of these recommendations, which related to the booking on process for officers starting shift, was returned as 'No longer Applicable' as alternative arrangements were already in place. One recommendation on the search of individuals was returned as 'Already in Place' and one recommendation on the transfer of electronic documents was not implemented as it was not technically possible.

A response is awaited in respect of four of the recommendations, which relate to such matters as current procedures and training in respect of dealing with European Arrest Warrants; the recommendation to review the processes associated with the timely provision of Body Worn Video to the Police Ombudsman and the recommendation to provide training and arrange for any necessary process/guidance amendment in respect of a particular police process.

INFORMAL RESOLUTION

Complaints made that are of a less serious nature, usually about incivility or certain types of failure in duties, may be considered for Informal Resolution. This involves an officer/staff member speaking to both the officer(s)/staff member(s) complained about and the complainant with a view of reaching a satisfactory resolution. Prior to proceeding with this process the consent of the complainant must be obtained.

During 2020/21, 11% of complaints received were considered to be suitable for Informal Resolution and of these 55% of the persons making the complaint agreed for it to be dealt with through Informal Resolution (Table 22).

During 2020/21, 97 complaints reached a successful conclusion through the informal resolution process (Table 23) which is just over three quarters (76%) of all complaints reaching a conclusion from this process. This is the highest success rate for the informal resolution process in the last five years.

PSNI OFFICERS

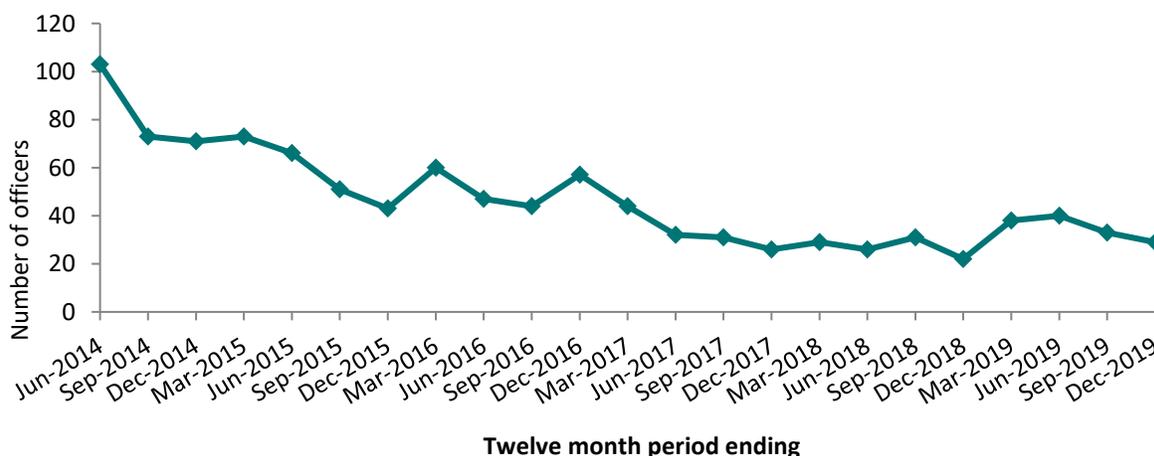
The information on the number of officers with multiple complaints is produced from quarterly snapshots of the CHS system. During 2020/21 these quarterly snapshots were not produced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result this information has not been updated for 2020/21.

More than half (53%) of the complaints recorded by the Police Ombudsman’s Office have an identified officer associated with them. The other complaints which do not identify an officer tend to be those which have been closed at an early stage, such as those which were not a matter for the Police Ombudsman to investigate and those where the complainant did not fully engage.

Most of the officers (83%) identified within complaints were constables, while fewer complaints were received about officers of higher ranks (Table 24). This is a similar profile to that of the composition of officers within the police service.

Information on officers identified within a complaint is shared with the Legacy & Justice Department within the PSNI. The PSNI initiate management intervention when an officer receives three or more complaints that were either formally investigated or dealt with by way of Informal Resolution in the previous 12 months.

Figure 8: Officers that received three or more complaints, 2014/15 to 2019/20
Complaints that were formally investigated or dealt with by way of Informal or Local Resolution



Note: During the course of an investigation, officers associated with the complaint can vary; as evidence is gathered more officers can be linked to the complaint and some may be removed. For this reason, to allow direct comparison across time, the information that was reported at the end of each quarter is not updated.

APPENDIX 1: STATISTICAL TABLES

Table 5: Complaints received, 2016/17 to 2021/21

Year	Complaints
2016/17	2,814
2017/18	2,579
2018/19	2,641
2019/20	2,528
2020/21	2,498

Table 6: Complaints and matters, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Complaints/Other Matters	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Complaints from members of the public	2,758	2,499	2,506	2,372	2,302
Matters referred to the Office	25	14	14	2	4
Matters the Police Ombudsman has chosen to investigate	12	10	7	11	6
Other	19	56	114	143	186
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 7: Complaints received by month, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Month Complaint Received	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
April	247	177	205	215	135
May	259	226	213	195	186
June	266	225	226	175	222
July	236	210	243	236	207
August	223	269	226	252	228
September	264	215	187	192	290
October	219	233	252	234	230
November	226	225	230	185	220
December	182	185	169	163	210
January	194	223	243	230	149
February	215	183	208	259	204
March	283	208	239	192	217
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 8: Complaints received by organisation, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Organisation	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	2,755	2,524	2,612	2,496	2,467
Designated Civilian	37	39	0	0	0
Harbour Police	2	2	6	0	1
Northern Ireland Airport Constabulary	2	1	0	2	1
Certain Home Office Officials	1	0	1	0	0
National Crime Agency	0	1	3	1	3
Ministry of Defence Police	0	1	0	0	0
Other/Unknown	17	11	19	29	26
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 9: Complaints received by where the initial complaint was made, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Source of Complaints	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Directly with Police Ombudsman's Office	2,103	2,014	2,042	2,085	2,104
Via Representative	433	315	313	183	121
Directly with the Police	222	170	151	104	77
Other (includes referrals)	56	80	135	156	196
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 10: Main situations giving rise to complaints, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Main Situation	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Criminal Investigation	853	762	756	745	555
Arrest	411	400	422	342	439
Traffic incident	239	210	239	216	184
Search	224	174	191	146	179
Domestic Incident	156	136	125	113	152
Police Enquiries	105	102	151	160	146
Complaints relating to the 'Troubles'	76	48	26	22	19
Domestic Violence	54	42	32	39	22
Parade/Demonstrations	21	32	13	31	40
Police enforcing COVID19 restrictions	0	0	0	1	44
Other	521	526	549	588	583
Unknown	154	147	137	125	135
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 11: Complaints received by police district, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Police District	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
A: Belfast City	742	634	737	718	736
B: Lisburn & Castlereagh City	116	111	119	102	112
C: Ards & North Down	186	157	169	154	158
D: Newry, Mourne & Down	165	151	142	151	130
E: Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	217	229	219	203	203
F: Mid Ulster	119	89	108	119	126
G: Fermanagh & Omagh	137	120	112	129	96
H: Derry City & Strabane	205	165	186	179	198
J: Causeway Coast & Glens	240	244	201	210	179
K: Mid & East Antrim	171	143	165	166	175
L: Antrim & Newtownabbey	171	183	149	173	153
Other organisation / Unknown	345	353	334	224	232
Total	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498

Table 12: Number of allegations received, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Year	Allegations
2016/17	4,825
2017/18	4,289
2018/19	4,147
2019/20	3,946
2020/21	3,667

Table 13: Types of allegations⁶, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Types of Allegations	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Failure in Duty	2,274	2,122	1,935	1,865	1,652
Oppressive Behaviour	1,076	892	862	819	757
Incivility	283	244	267	246	265
Police Searches	241	212	207	160	170
Unlawful/Unnecessary Arrest/Detention	204	175	208	159	103
Mishandling of Property	99	106	97	98	78
Allegations relating to the 'Troubles'	77	44	25	21	18
Malpractice	76	53	41	41	57
Traffic	61	31	49	39	29
Discriminatory Behaviour	54	40	46	37	33
Section 55 Referral	35	26	23	12	9
Other	345	344	387	449	496
Total	4,825	4,289	4,147	3,946	3,667

⁶ A full breakdown of allegation sub types is available in the accompanying Excel spreadsheet

Table 14: Failure in Duty allegations, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Failure in Duty Allegations	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Conduct of police investigations / incident response	1,240	1,161	1,072	1,000	852
Failure in contact	314	297	272	263	174
Failure in record management	175	167	146	173	125
Conduct in custody suite	123	119	101	97	124
Failure to act impartially	82	67	57	66	60
Failure in duty of care	45	43	57	92	126
Other failure in duty	295	268	230	174	191
Total	2,274	2,122	1,935	1,865	1,652

Table 15: Oppressive Behaviour allegations, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Oppressive Behaviour Allegations	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Oppressive Conduct (OC Not Involving Assault)	509	414	386	436	356
Other Assault	419	332	328	254	246
Harassment (Series of Like Incidents)	111	104	102	76	123
Sexual Assault	25	27	29	29	20
Serious non-sexual assault	12	15	17	24	12
Total	1,076	892	862	819	757

Table 16: Incivility allegations, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Incivility Allegations	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Incivility At Domestic Residence	87	53	67	65	66
Incivility By Officer On The Telephone	63	55	65	67	67
Incivility At Police Station	31	33	26	24	25
Incivility When Stopped For A Traffic Offence	28	21	28	25	32
Incivility To Person Under 18 Years	1	2	5	4	4
Other incivility	73	80	76	61	71
Total	283	244	267	246	265

Table 17: Allegations regarding the use of police equipment, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Police equipment	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Handcuffs	82	58	57	37	10
CS Spray	20	16	22	17	17
Baton	19	10	14	5	9
Taser	10	11	15	24	23
Misuse/Discharge Firearm	4	2	5	6	3
AEP/Baton Round/Riot Gun	0	0	2	4	5
Spit and bite guards ⁷	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	89
Other	3	2	1	2	6
No weapon used	4,687	4,190	4,031	3,851	3,505
Total	4,825	4,289	4,147	3,946	3,667

Table 18: Complaint closures, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Complaint Closures	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Complaints Closed	2,976	2,647	2,653	2,518	2,215
Complaints closed following initial assessment	382	389	423	496	480
Not a matter for the Police Ombudsman	335	318	282	307	207
Call in/Call out - No Further action or Notification only	17	43	108	147	218
Other (Initial Assessment)	30	28	33	42	55
Complaints closed following initial inquiries	1,203	1,203	988	773	686
Complainant did not fully engage	753	726	667	654	537
Ill-founded	338	382	217	19	7
Withdrawn	103	81	92	80	115
Other (Initial Inquiries)	9	14	12	20	27
Complaints resolved informally	182	170	214	191	128
Complaints closed that relate to the 'Troubles'	3	1	26	9	3
Complaints closed following a full investigation	1,206	884	1,002	1,049	918
Complaint substantiated or an issue of concern	268	211	210	135	106
Not substantiated and no issue of concern identified	938	673	792	914	812

⁷ The number of Spit and Bite Guards were as a result of the automatic referrals by the PSNI as part of the Ombudsman's review of their introduction.

Table 19: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended prosecution/no prosecution⁸ for an officer/staff, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Recommendations to PPS	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Criminal Charges	24	6	8	20	3
No Criminal Charges	202	189	202	192	54
Total	226	195	210	212	57

Table 20a: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended a discipline or performance action⁹ for an officer/staff, 2016/17 to 2018/19

Discipline Sanctions (Prior to 2016 Regulations)	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Management Discussion	27	4	0
Advice & Guidance	98	9	1
Superintendent's Written Warning	52	8	3
Formal discipline proceedings	8	2	4
Total	185	23	8

Table 20b: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended¹⁰ a discipline or performance action for an officer/staff, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Regulations Introduced June 2016)	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Performance	7	54	55	57	33
Misconduct Meeting	57	115	71	87	25
Misconduct Hearing	0	3	1	8	5
Total	64	172	127	152	63

⁸ This is the number of times a file was sent to the PPS recommending that either an officer or staff member should be prosecuted or not prosecuted. If multiple complaints are received about the same incident the recommendation will only be counted once.

⁹ Disciplinary Regulations (pre 6th November 2000); a Code of Conduct (6th November 2000 to 13th March 2003); and a Code of Ethics (since 14th March 2003).

¹⁰ This is the number of times a discipline or performance recommendations was sent to the PSNI or another organisation for an officer or staff member. Where more than one complaint was received about the same incident the recommendation is only counted once.

Table 21¹¹: Outcome of policy recommendations made, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Policy recommendations made to PSNI	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Fully accepted & being implemented	14	7	0	7	0
Partially accepted & being implemented	0	1	0	0	0
Not accepted	4	3	3	0	1
Already in place	2	1	0	1	1
No longer applicable	0	0	0	0	1
Still under consideration	27	28	8	16	4
Total	47	40	11	24	7

¹¹ Only the information in the most recent year is updated in this table. The previous year's information is accurate at the time of the publication for that year.

Table 22: Complaints suitable for Informal Resolution (IR) with consent obtained, 2016/17 to 2020/21

IR Complaints Received	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of Complaints	2,814	2,579	2,641	2,528	2,498
Complaints Suitable for IR	447	414	469	384	283
Consent for IR obtained	284	266	320	265	156
Consent for IR not obtained	163	148	149	119	127

Table 23: Outcome of Informally Resolution process, 2016/17 to 2020/21

IR Resolved	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Successful	178	172	212	182	97
Failed	94	76	92	65	28
Withdrawn	8	4	8	2	2
Total	280	252	312	249	127

Table 24: Rank of officer in the PSNI complained about, 2016/17 to 2020/21

Rank	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Designated Civilian	N/A	9	79	43	17
Constable	2,044	1,733	1,738	1,461	1,220
Sergeant	320	280	232	226	153
Inspector and Above	84	47	52	47	49

Table 25: Number of officers with three or more complaints that were formally investigated or dealt with by way of Informal Resolution, 2016/17 to 2019/20¹²

Twelve-month period ending	Number of officers
June 2016	47
September 2016	44
December 2016	57
March 2017	44
June 2017	32
September 2017	31
December 2017	26
March 2018	29
June 2018	26
September 2018	31
December 2018	22
March 2019	38
June 2019	40
September 2019	33
December 2019	29

¹² The information from March 2020 to March 2021 is not available. This is due to the Office partially closing on three separate occasions as part of the 'lockdown' restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Information for June 2021 is available in the Quarterly Statistical Bulletin (Q1), 2021/22.

APPENDIX 2: UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLAINTS PROCESS

To help understand the information in this report, we have provided this short summary of the police complaints service in Northern Ireland and how it works.

What we do

The Police Ombudsman's Office provides for the independent and impartial investigation of complaints about the police in Northern Ireland. The Police Ombudsman is committed to providing a police complaints service in the way they think best suited to secure the confidence of the public and the police. The Police Ombudsman believes that for such confidence to be forthcoming, it is essential that people are informed about the nature of the work the office carries out.

The Police Ombudsman has the remit to investigate the conduct of officers within the following organisations which operate in Northern Ireland:

- Police Service of Northern Ireland including Designated Civilians
- Belfast Harbour Police
- Belfast International Airport Police
- National Crime Agency (NCA) officers in Northern Ireland
- Certain Home Office staff using police functions in Northern Ireland
- Ministry of Defence Police in Northern Ireland

The Office deals primarily with complaints made by members of the public about the conduct of police officers. It also deals with matters referred to it by the PSNI Chief Constable. The following are incidents that the Chief Constable is required to refer to the Police Ombudsman:

- Any fatal road traffic collisions involving police officers
- Any death which may have occurred as a result of the actions of a police officer
- Any other serious allegation

It also deals with matters referred to it by the NIPB, the DoJ and the PPS.

The Police Ombudsman also has the power to initiate an investigation without a complaint having been made if it appears to him to be desirable and in the public interest.

In most circumstances the Police Ombudsman can only investigate incidents which have occurred in the previous 12 months. However, there is no time limit on the investigation of grave matters, or where exceptional circumstances exist. Many of the investigations the Office is undertaking into incidents which happened between 1968 and 1998 (the period known as the Troubles) are matters the Police Ombudsman viewed as grave or exceptional.

The Police Ombudsman does not investigate complaints about officers whose conduct has been the subject of disciplinary or criminal proceedings; or complaints about off-duty police officers, unless the fact that he or she is a police officer is relevant to the complaint. The Office also does not investigate matters relating to the direction and control of the police service by the Chief Constable.

How we deal with complaints

All complaints are recorded on our Case Handling System, even where they are later determined to be outside the remit of the Office.

A complaint from a member of the public will invariably include a number of allegations. For example, if a person alleges a police officer pushed them *and* was rude to them, it would be recorded as one complaint with two allegations on the system.

Once a complaint has been received, it will become subject of an initial assessment. This will involve logging it onto our system and making an assessment as to whether the matter is something the Police Ombudsman's Office can deal with and if so, how best to do so.

If the complaint is something we deal with, the Office will consider if the matter can be resolved informally rather than being sent straight for investigation. Before we decide to take the Informal Resolution approach, the person who made the complaint must agree. If this proves unsuccessful, the Police Ombudsman will refer the complaint for investigation.

When a matter is suitable for investigation, a complaints officer or an investigation officer will set about making the initial inquiries necessary before an investigation commences. This will involve getting more information from the complainant, such as an official statement of complaint.

When a formal investigation has been completed, if the evidence indicates that police officers may have committed a criminal offence or breached the police Code of Ethics, the Police Ombudsman can recommend that they are prosecuted and/or disciplined.

Where the Police Ombudsman considers that a criminal offence may have been committed by a member of the police, he must send a copy of the investigation report to the PPS, making appropriate recommendations. The PPS then decides whether or not to prosecute the police officer under investigation.

If the Police Ombudsman decides that no criminal offence has been committed, he is required to consider whether it is appropriate to recommend disciplinary proceedings. If the Chief Constable is unwilling administer the recommended discipline, the Police Ombudsman may, direct him to do so.

APPENDIX 3: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This glossary has been designed to assist users of our statistical information to understand the terms which we use to describe data contained in the statistical bulletin. The terms are listed in alphabetical order.

Advice and Guidance

This is an informal discipline sanction for officers.

Allegation

Each complaint can be broken down into one or more allegations. These are all the individual behaviours or issues being complained about. For example, if a person alleges a police officer pushed them *and* was rude to them, it would be recorded as one complaint with two allegations on the system.

Call in/Call out (no further action)

These are situations where the Police Ombudsman's Office is 'called in' to consider an incident but determines at an early stage that there is no requirement for any further investigation.

Conduct in custody suite

This is a Failure in Duty allegation category. It includes incidents where the complainant was denied access to legal advice or medical attention while they were detained in custody. In addition it covers instances where it is alleged the officer did not inform the detained person of their rights and entitlements, or the officer did not keep accurate custody records.

Conduct of police investigations / incident response

This is a Failure in Duty allegation category and includes allegations where the complainant has alleged that the unsatisfactory conduct of either ongoing or completed police investigations, including the inappropriate disclosure of information. Also included would be allegations that the police failed to carry out any investigation into an incident or were excessively slow to respond to an incident.

Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by or on behalf of a member of the public about a member of the police service or an officer of another service over which the Office has jurisdiction.

For the purpose of clarity of reporting, the term complaints refer to complaints made by members of the public, matters referred to the Office from other organisation, and matters that the Police Ombudsman has decided to investigate.

Failure in contact

This is a Failure in Duty allegation. It includes incidents where the complainant has alleged a police officer; failed to keep arranged appointments, return telephone calls, or reply to correspondence. It also includes incidents when an officer failed to keep the complainant updated with progress of an investigation or police enquiries.

Failure in duty of care

This is a Failure in Duty allegation. Where it is alleged that the police officer failed to take appropriate action to ensure the safety or well-being of the complainant or third party for whom they have responsibility.

Failure in record management

This is a Failure in Duty allegation. It involves a failure of police to keep accurate, complete or up to date police records. It also includes the failure of officers to provide information or documentation relating to the complainant or a third party.

Failure to act impartially

This is a Failure in Duty allegation. The complainant alleges an officer failed to adopt an independent approach and/or failed to act in a fair and impartial manner.

Historical Investigation

This is an investigation (potentially criminal and /or misconduct) into the actions of police where the allegation(s) made are considered Grave or Exceptional, "Troubles" related (1969-1998) and predates the establishment of the Good Friday Agreement, 10 April 1998.

Ill-founded

This is a type of complaint closure. These are cases where it became clear during initial inquiries that an allegation was without bases or foundation.

Incivility

This is a category within allegations. It refers to allegations such as the police officer being rude, showing a lack of respect, being abrupt or displaying a general lack of sensitivity.

Informally resolved (Informal Resolution)

This is a process offered to complainants who have made less serious allegations, e.g. rudeness or incivility. It involves a senior police officer speaking to both the officer(s) involved and the complainant with a view to reaching a satisfactory resolution of the complaint. It requires that a record of the outcome has been obtained from police confirming that the matter has been resolved.

Malpractice

These allegations can include any allegation in relation to perjury, other allegations of falsehood, any allegation that evidence was obtained in an irregular manner or under duress and allegations of concealment or tampering with evidence.

Management Discussion:

Management Discussion is an informal discipline sanction. It involves a discussion between the officer concerned and a more senior officer regarding the allegation.

Misconduct Hearing

This is a discipline action under the Police (Conduct) Regulations (NI) 2016 and came into force on 1 June 2016. It is a meeting where the officer may be dealt with by a disciplinary action up to and including a final written warning.

Misconduct Meeting

This is a discipline action under the Police (Conduct) Regulations (NI) 2016 and came into force on 1 June 2016. It is a hearing where the officer may be dealt with by a disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.

Mishandling of property

This allegation category includes any allegation involving theft or loss of property (including money), unreasonable retention of property, damage to property, failure to account for money or property and improper disposal of property.

Oppressive Behaviour

This is an allegation type and includes situations where the complainant alleged that the officer has behaved in an oppressive manner. They can include allegations of oppressive conduct, harassment, and assault, including sexual assault.

Performance

A recommendation to initiate unsatisfactory performance procedures for an officer.

Residual matters

A small number of residual matters are included in the number of allegations (usually 1-2% of allegations each year). A residual matter is one identified by the Office's Investigator, which has not been previously complained of by the complainant. Examples include failure to complete notebook records, anomalies in custody record, and failure to supervise situations adequately.

Section 55 referral

Not all matters the Police Ombudsman deals with come to us as complaints from members of the public. Certain public bodies, including the PSNI, the Policing Board, the Department of Justice and the Public prosecution Service can refer matters to us for consideration. This is done under section 55 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998.

Superintendent's Written Warning

This is a formal written warning from a police officer's Superintendent.

APPENDIX 4: DATA AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY

Statistical information on complaints and allegations is derived from the CHS, an integrated and comprehensive ICT system that covers all key aspects of receiving and processing a complaint. It captures data about the complainant, the complained against parties, the incident and allegations made. Data can be downloaded and exported to a number of commonly used software packages for analysis (Excel, Access, SPSS¹³). In addition the Office uses the DI Diver reporting tool and the CHS has a number of management reports run directly from a menu on the system.

The data used for this publication was extracted from the CHS on the 9th April 2021, and thus includes all information recorded on the system up to the 8th April 2021.

Changes made to the CHS during 2018/19

Two changes were made to the CHS during 2018/19 that may affect some of the results and comparisons provided in this report.

Firstly, the Office improved the recording practices of notifications from the PSNI. These are incidents that police officers have notified the On-Call team about but they do not meet the threshold for the Chief Constable to refer the incident for an independent investigation or the threshold for the Police Ombudsman to use their power to Call themselves into the incident and complete an investigation.

Secondly, is how information about ‘designated civilians’ within the police are recorded on the CHS. In previous, years they had a separate category and were not considered to be complaints about the PSNI and thus in the details neither the complaints nor allegations were assigned to a Police District. Since the beginning of 2018/19, complaints about ‘designated civilians’ were recorded as a complaint about the PSNI and thus both complaints and allegations received will be assigned against a Police District. This may also impact upon some of the discipline recommendations made to the PSNI. This change was made to reflect the change in employment terms of the ‘designated civilian’, on the 7th September 2017 they became direct employees of the PSNI while, previously they were employed via a contract provider.

Data quality

CHS data quality is considered to be high. The system has been designed to limit the incidence of inaccurate data through the use of measures such as logical validation checks, drop down menus for data input and a minimum of free text input. The Police Ombudsman has a dedicated team who assure the quality of CHS content. All data input is completely auditable and allows for an effective quality control procedure to review and,

¹³ SPSS is a statistical software package developed for use by social scientists.

where necessary, amend key data for the purposes of accurate reporting. When considered necessary, focused data cleansing exercises of key fields are also conducted. Additionally, complete audits of fields with small numbers associated are conducted.

As stated above, substantial validation and quality control procedures are in place to ensure that the data derived from CHS are of high quality. However, there is still the possibility of a small number of errors arising from data input, missing data, failure to update data and errors in communication. The Police Ombudsman estimates that the level of this error is so small that it has no impact on the quality of statistical reporting. However, where errors are identified, corrections are made to reports as soon as practicable. Further details are set out in the Police Ombudsman statement of revision and errors strategy .

Revisions

The statistics included in this bulletin are taken from a live system and may be subject to future revisions. This means that total number of complaints and allegations may change slightly between those published in previous bulletins.

Revisions can be made for a number of reasons but are mainly due to more information coming to light during the natural course of the Office's work, and the system being updated accordingly. This includes the identification of residual matters; allegations identified by the Investigator that were not previously complained about by the member of the public, such as, the failure of a police officer to complete their notebook, anomalies in custody records or failure to supervise adequately. They typically account for fewer than 2% of all allegations (approximately between 60 to 100 residual allegations annually).

The tables below shows the scale of revisions made between statistics in this bulletin and those in the previous bulletin in June 2020. It demonstrates that the revisions have little impact on the overall trends presented in this bulletin.

Table 26: Revisions made to the number of complaints received between this publication and the previous publication in June 2020.

Financial Year	Previously Published Figures (June 20)	Current Published Figures (June 21)	Scale of Revision (number)	Scale of Revision (%)
2016/17	2,814	2,814	0	0%
2017/18	2,579	2,579	0	0%
2018/19	2,641	2,641	0	0%
2019/20	2,522	2,528	+6	0.24%

Table 27: Revisions made to the number of allegations received between this publication and the previous publication in June 2020.

Financial Year	Previously Published Figures (June 20)	Current Published Figures (June 21)	Scale of Revision (number)	Scale of Revision (%)
2016/17	4,825	4,825	0	0%
2017/18	4,288	4,289	0	0%
2018/19	4,147	4,147	0	0%
2019/20	3,900	3,946	+46	1.18%

The Office's full strategy for revisions and errors can be found within the publications section of the [Office's website](#).

Data limitations

Because of the nature of some of the highly sensitive material handled by the Police Ombudsman in the investigation of cases, a small proportion of cases will have only limited information available on the CHS. On balance, the Police Ombudsman considers that the assurance of the privacy of the information and individuals associated with this small number of sensitive cases outweighs the need for full access to the data. In practice, the number of cases is so small that the restriction has no impact on the quality of statistical reporting.

Publication

This is an annual statistical bulletin, and publishes information in accordance with the obligation for the Police Ombudsman's Office to report performance on a financial year basis.

As the statistics were taken from a 'live' case handling system, the figures in this bulletin supersede those previously published.

The next annual statistical report is due to be published in June 2022. The exact date will be announced on the website at least four weeks prior to publication.

In addition to the annual bulletin, quarterly updates are published throughout the year. They provide top level information on the number of complaints and allegations received; they are published on the 4th Thursday in the month following the end of the quarter.

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Website: www.policeombudsman.org

