

Annual Report on Complainant Satisfaction with services provided by the Police Ombudsman's Office in Northern Ireland 2011/12

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Executive Summary

The Complainant Satisfaction Survey allows complainants to the Police Ombudsman's Office to express their views on services provided by the Office. This annual report presents the data from questionnaires issued to complainants who had complaints closed from April 2011 to March 2012 and also presents trend data for key questions, where information is available, from 2002/03. Results for other questions are presented for the last five years. Key results from the satisfaction survey have already been published in the 2011/12 Annual Report.

The main findings are given below:

- Overall complainant satisfaction levels have fallen from 65% in 2009/10 to 52% in 2011/12.
- Complainants were most likely to be satisfied with the following aspects of the complaints process: ease of understanding of any correspondence and the length of time taken to reply after the incident was first reported to the Office. They were least likely to be satisfied with the outcome of the complaint. Satisfaction levels have fallen over recent years with most aspects of service.
- The proportion of respondents who said they had been treated fairly has decreased since 2009/10.
- The proportion of respondents who said they would use the system again has been consistently high since 2004/05, although this has decreased since 2009/10.
- The majority of complainants had positive views of Ombudsman staff.

Introduction

The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland was set up by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 in order to provide an independent system for investigating complaints against the police in Northern Ireland. The Police Ombudsman is committed to providing an independent and impartial investigation process of the highest quality, which is timely and secures the confidence of both the public and police.

The Complainant Satisfaction Survey allows complainants to express their views on services provided by the Office. Up until September 2005 complainant satisfaction surveys were based on samples of complainants however from September 2005 the Office began surveying all complainants who had a complaint closed¹.

This report presents the findings from the tenth annual Complainant Satisfaction Survey and includes information collected from complainants whose complaint was closed between April 2011 and March 2012. It also presents trend data for key questions, where information is available, from 2002/03. Results for other questions are presented for the last five years.

Previous reports can be found on the Police Ombudsman's website (http://www.policeombudsman.org).

¹ See Appendix 2, Data Limitations.

Findings

Levels of satisfaction with service received

Respondents were asked – 'Overall taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received from the Police Ombudsman's Office?'

In 2011/12, 52% of respondents stated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received from the Ombudsman's Office. The overall satisfaction level has decreased since 2009/10 when 65% of complainants were satisfied with the service provided. The proportion of complainants who were satisfied with the service provided was higher in 2003/04 and 2009/10 than in other years (Figure 1).

The overall reduction in complainant satisfaction levels with aspects of the complaints process, as reflected in 2011/12, may have been influenced, at least to some extent, by the adverse publicity surrounding the Office during this time.

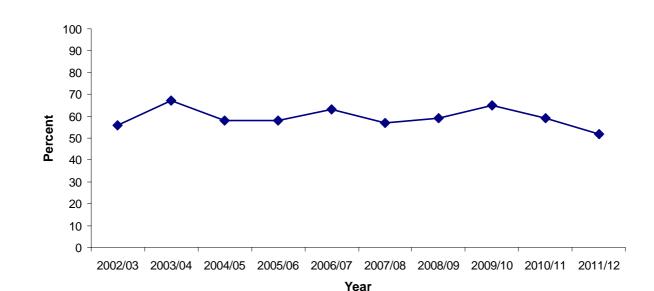


Figure 1: Overall satisfaction levels with the service provided, 2002/03 - 2011/12

Fairness of treatment

When complainants were asked if they felt they were treated fairly by the Office, 66% of them responded positively during 2011/12. This proportion has decreased since 2009/10 when 75% of respondents felt that they were treated fairly (Figure 2).

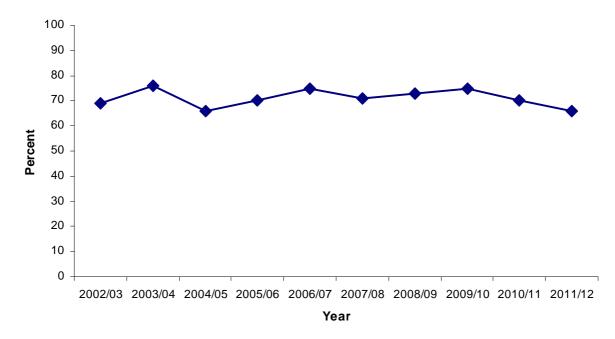


Figure 2: Fairness of treatment, 2002/03 - 2011/12

In some instances complainants stated that they felt they were not treated fairly. Those respondents were asked to say why this was.

A number of respondents replied that they felt the Ombudsman's Office showed bias towards the police:

"The Office of the Police Ombudsman appears to be more interested in protecting the actions of the police officers than the offences they perpetrate unjustly against individuals not wearing a uniform."

"The staff member took the view that a police officers word was better than mine."

"I believe that this Office treats police better than the ones who complain about them. I was hurt by the police and apparently they got away with it. Not good." Some complainants also commented on the perceived lack of investigation and the outcome of the investigation:

"I do not believe the matter was investigated properly. I only had to provide my own statement and never had sight of what had been said by those who I complained against. The distress that I suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the action perpetrated by the PSNI has just been ignored."

"Because I don't think my complaint was looked into properly. I don't think you take complaints about the police seriously."

"I have made a few complaints against the police and I have not received a satisfactory outcome, not once."

Other complainants felt that the Office failed to provide information regarding the complaints process and failed to provide updates:

"I was not informed of what was happening about my case...in effect this was not the way to treat me."

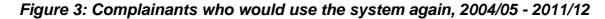
"The process was confusing. I missed my opportunity to complain due to lack of clarity."

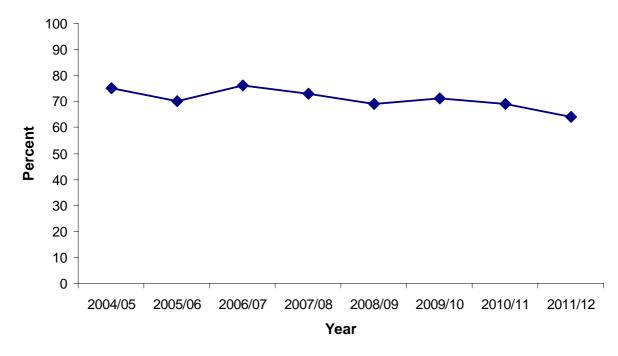
"I never heard the final result."

Would complainants use the system again?

Respondents were also asked – 'If you had a new complaint about the police, would you use the complaints system again?'

In 2011/12, 64% of complainants said that they would use the complaints system again. The proportion of complainants who said they would use the system again has been consistently high since 2004/05 although the proportion has dropped since 2009/10 (Figure 3).





Levels of complainant satisfaction with Ombudsman staff

The majority of complainants said that they had spoken to a member of staff. These respondents were asked how staff had appeared to them in relation to a number of positive and negative characteristics. In 2011/12, the majority of respondents had a positive view of staff with around nine out of ten respondents saying that they thought staff were polite, friendly, easy to understand, patient or professional. A minority of respondents had negative views of staff (Figure 4).

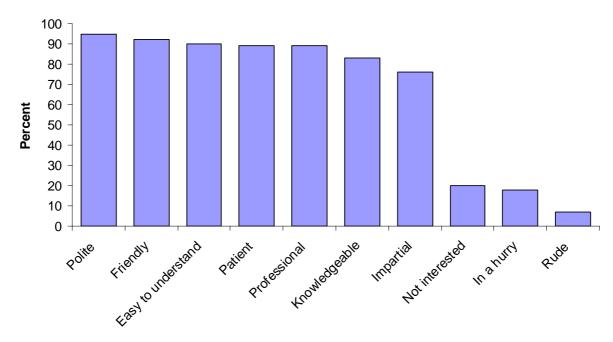


Figure 4: Complainant perception of Ombudsman staff, 2011/12

Since 2007/08, complainant's perceptions of Ombudsman staff have generally been positive (Figure 5).

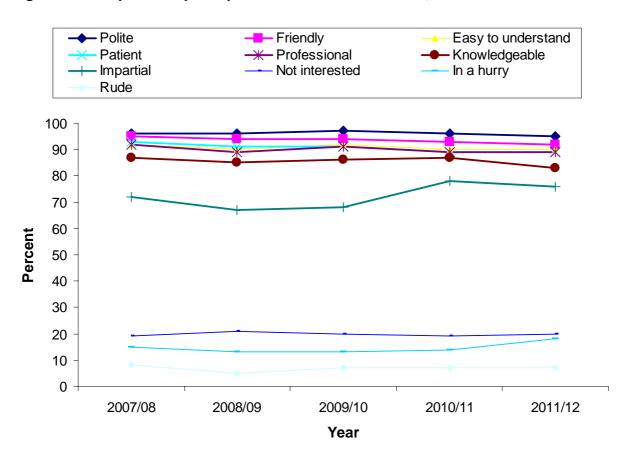
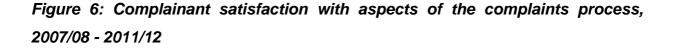


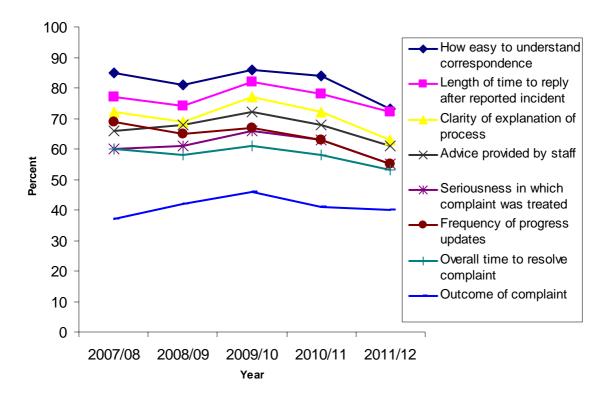
Figure 5: Complainant perception of Ombudsman staff, 2007/08 - 2011/12

The majority of complainants thought staff were impartial, although results were not as positive as for other areas. However, over the last two years, the proportion of respondents who thought staff were impartial has increased from 67% in 2008/09 to 76% in 2011/12.

Level of satisfaction with aspects of the complaints process

Complainants were asked to comment on how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with aspects of the complaints process. Figure 6 shows the results since 2007/08. Complainants were most likely to be satisfied with the following aspects: how easy the correspondence was to understand and the length of time taken to respond after the incident was reported to the Office.





In 2011/12, 73% of respondents were satisfied with how easy the correspondence was to understand. Correspondence includes such things as, update letters, closure letters, Informal Resolution forms and Complaint forms. The current level of satisfaction is the lowest it has been in the last five years and has dropped from 84% in 2010/11.

In 2011/12, 72% of complainants were satisfied with the length of time it took to reply after the incident was reported. This proportion has dropped from 82% in 2009/10.

In 2011/12, 63% of respondents were satisfied with how clearly the complaints process was explained to them by staff from the Office. This proportion has decreased from 77% in 2009/10.

Sixty-one percent of complainants were satisfied or very satisfied with the advice provided to them by staff from the Office in 2011/12. This level of satisfaction is the lowest it has been since 2007/08 and has dropped from 72% in 2009/10.

In 2011/12, 55% of complainants were satisfied with how serious the Office treated their complaint. This level of satisfaction has decreased since 2009/10.

Complainant satisfaction with the frequency of progress updates has currently reached a five year low (55% in 2011/12).

The level of satisfaction expressed with the overall time taken to resolve the complaint in 2011/12 (53%) has decreased compared with the level reported in 2009/10 (61%).

The Office is committed to providing good customer service to both complainants and police officers. As a result of this commitment, the Office sets various 'service commitment' targets, a number of which relate to responsiveness, prompt service and timely processes. Two of these targets state that '85% of complainants to be updated every 6 weeks' and '90% of complaints, not subject of investigation or Informal Resolution, to be dealt with within 40 working days'. In 2011/12, the Office met both of these targets, 88% and 98% respectively; despite results from this survey showing that satisfaction with these aspects of the complaints process remains lower than for other aspects.

In 2011/12, 40% of complainants were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint. This level of satisfaction has been consistent since 2007/08. Although satisfaction with this aspect is starting to show a downward trend, satisfaction levels have not fallen to the same degree as other aspects.

When considering the level of satisfaction with outcome the reader should consider the types of recommendations arising from allegations. When OPONI staff complete the investigation of an allegation made by a complainant they can make a number of recommendations for allegation closure. In 2011/12, the largest proportion of recommendations made was to close the allegation as 'not substantiated' (41%) due to insufficient evidence to support the allegation. Five percent recommended some form of action, for example that the police officer receive advice and guidance regarding the allegation made by the complainant.

Appendix 3, Table 7 shows the types of recommendations arising from allegations closed in 2011/12.

Measures to improve service

Respondents were asked if there were any measures that the Office of the Police Ombudsman could take to improve its service to the public.

Around 37 complainants made positive comments or indicated that in their opinion there were not any measures that the Office of the Police Ombudsman needed to take to improve service:

"Certainly on this occasion, the Ombudsman's Office was excellent...truly professional and certainly listened with due concern. Good job."

"No, everything was explained in a way I fully understood and I was satisfied with the way my complaint was dealt with."

"No, satisfied and happy with the service."

A further 210 comments were made by complainants.

Almost one fifth of these comments concerned the perceived lack of impartiality and bias towards the PSNI shown by the Office:

"Could seriously serve the public instead of being puppets to the PSNI."

"Instead of being an arm of the police, they might consider being independent and open to investigating malpractice."

"The Ombudsman has to be transparent and take both sides of the story equally instead of siding with the PSNI. I feel they have no clout and treat cases in favour of the PSNI." Other complainants felt that a thorough investigation was not carried out and that the Office was a waste of time and money:

"Take more time to investigate and be ready to listen to the public."

"Carry out thorough investigations and not superficial investigations."

"Disband the Ombudsman and save the taxpayer money or get staff who can conduct investigations based on the evidence given."

While others felt that the Office failed to provide enough information:

"The timescale in which a complaint can be made could have been better explained. In my case I had made it clear to my solicitor from an early stage of my intention to make an official complaint. However having waited for my case to conclude....much to my disappointment I was told that the time had expired in which I may have made a complaint."

"In my case, although the complaint was upheld, I was not given a reason why the police acted as they did which is quite frustrating."

A small number of complainants commented on the lack of personal contact made by the Office:

"I would have preferred a telephone call telling me the outcome of my complaint as well as letters I have received as a call is more personal – one to one."

"Make arrangements to meet in person and discuss issues of complaints instead of over the phone conversations."

Appendix 1: Methodology and respondent profile

Methodology:

Up until September 2005 complainant satisfaction surveys were based on samples of complainants who had their complaint closed. From September 2005, the Office began surveying all complainants who had a complaint closed.

Complainant satisfaction forms are issued by the Research and Performance Directorate of the Office to complainants following closure of a complaint and within seven days from the start of the month (Appendix 4). Once a form is returned to the Research and Performance Directorate of the Office, it is date stamped and the information is input into an SPSS² document and saved.

In 2011/12, 2,929 questionnaires were issued to complainants who had a complaint closed between April 2011 and March 2012 and a total of 502 questionnaires were returned. This represents a response rate of 17%.

Details of previous surveys can be accessed at http://www.policeombudsman.org.

Figures provided in the tables may not add up to 100% due to the effect of rounding. Figures may also be subject to minor revision and these will be notified in accordance with our revisions policy. The revisions policy can be accessed at http://www.policeombudsman.org.

Statistical significance tests have been carried out on the findings and differences are only reported where they have been found to be statistically significant at the 5% (p<0.05) level of probability (two tailed). This means that for any observed result that is found to be statistically significant one can be 95% confident that this has not happened by chance.

² SPSS is a statistical software package developed for use by social scientists.

Respondent Profile³:

Age and Gender profile: In 2011/12, 38% of respondents to the satisfaction survey were female (62% male), while 29% of overall complainants were female. This would suggest that females were over-represented among those who responded to the satisfaction survey.

In 2011/12, 35% of respondents were aged 16-34, 44% were aged 35-54 and 21% were aged 55+. Overall, 9% of complainants to the Office were aged 55+. This would suggest that older respondents were over-represented among those who responded to the survey.

Outcome of complaints: The Case Handling System (CHS) does not record closure types at complaint level but records recommendations for closure made at allegation level and at 'Complained Against Person' (CAP - police officer) level. Thus, the number of recommendations for closure made is a lot greater than the number of complaints closed by the Office. The number of recommendations is also greater than the number of allegations closed, as there can be multiple recommendations made against each allegation for example in cases where there are a number of officers associated with the allegation. This accurately reflects the likelihood that a complaint will have a range of outcomes across each allegation and CAP within the complaint. In 2011/12, 8,877 recommendations for closure were made against 6,074 allegations closed (3,334 complaints closed in 2011/12).

Appendix 3 Table 7 shows recommendations arising from complaints closed during 2011/12 and recommendations arising from complaints made by respondents to the satisfaction survey. As might be expected, respondents to the complainant satisfaction survey were less likely to have a complaints closed due to 'non co-operation' than overall complainants who had a complaint closed during the time period.

³ See Annual Report, 2011/12, Equality Monitoring

Appendix 2: Notes to reader

Official Statistics:

This is an Official Statistics publication. Official Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. They undergo regular validation checks to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.

Data use:

The data collected are used by the Office to monitor and evaluate the service provided to complainants who have made a complaint to the Ombudsman's Office and identify any issues that arise in a timely manner. Due to the decreasing satisfaction levels and response rates, an action plan was devised during 2012 with the aim of improving the overall response rates and identifying areas that complainants are least satisfied with. As a result of this, staff within the Investigation Directorate are to be encouraged to make more personal contact with the complainant by way of updates and at the closure stage. The data are also used by this Office to comply with the key performance indicators whereby the Office aims to maintain:

'a level of 60% complainants being satisfied or very satisfied with service received.' –

In 2011/12, 52% of complainants were satisfied or very satisfied with the service provided by the Office.

'a level of at least 75% of complainants willing to use the service again.' – In 2011/12, 64% of respondents were willing to use service again.

The data may also be used to answer enquiries from the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Department of Justice, Parliament and the public.

Data quality:

OPONI staff carry out regular quality assurance reviews of all data input into the CHS (Case Handling System). One aspect is to ensure that the appropriate complaint closure details are recorded on the system correctly.

The survey forms are issued by the Research and Performance Directorate of the Office following closure of a complaint. Once the information from the forms has been transferred to an electronic file approximately 10% of the data entries are validated by a Supervisor on a regular basis.

Data limitations:

Questionnaires are normally issued to all complainants when their complaint is closed. However, in some cases forms are not issued, for example when it is impossible to identify the complainant (i.e. the Complaints Officer has recorded the complainant as anonymous), because the complainant's address is not recorded or if only an email address is available. Forms are also not issued in the following circumstances:

- Case has been closed 'Duplicate or Repetitive',
- Complaints made by or on behalf of juveniles⁴,
- Complaints where it is known the complainant has died,
- Section 55 referrals or OPONI call ins (non complaint matters),
- Correspondence made via email or where there is no contact address and
- Complaints made by or on behalf of organisations.

In other cases the complainant contacts the Office to ask to be excluded from future surveys. Whilst Office staff aim to persuade the complainant by explaining the background to the survey in some cases the complainant still wishes to be excluded from all future surveys.

⁴ From April 2012, juveniles were issued with a combined Equality Monitoring/Complainant Satisfaction form.

Improvements:

The response rate to the survey is continually monitored throughout the year and by September the rate had fallen to 14%. In an effort to increase the overall return rate, second and third reminders were sent to complainants who had not responded along with a slightly amended covering letter urging them to complete the satisfaction form. In addition to this, complainants who had not returned a form and whose complaints were closed between November 2011 and February 2012, were contacted by phone and asked three key questions – 'Overall do you think you were treated fairly by the Office?', 'If you had a new complaint about the police, would you use the complaints system again?' and 'Overall taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received from the Police Ombudsman's Office?. All of these measures played a part in increasing the response rate from 14% to 17% at the end of the year. As a result of this low response rate and the falling satisfaction levels, a working group has been established with the aim of improving both the response rate and the overall satisfaction rate during 2012/13.

Further information

For further information contact:

By Letter: Research and Performance Directorate Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland New Cathedral Buildings 11 Church Street Belfast BT1 1PG

By Phone: 028 90569905

By Email: research@policeombudsman.org

Appendix 3: Results

Table 1: Overall satisfaction with service provided 2002/03 - 2011/12

Year	% satisfied
2002/03	56%
2003/04	67%
2004/05	58%
2005/06	58%
2006/07	63%
2007/08	57%
2008/09	59%
2009/10	65%
2010/11	59%
2011/12	52%

Table 2: Overall satisfaction with service provided, 2002/03 - 2011/12

	Very		Neither Satisfied or		Very
Year	Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
2002/03	32%	24%	10%	10%	24%
2003/04	37%	30%	9%	4%	20%
2004/05	31%	28%	11%	8%	22%
2005/06	29%	29%	14%	8%	20%
2006/07	32%	31%	15%	6%	17%
2007/08	28%	30%	16%	7%	20%
2008/09	31%	28%	11%	7%	23%
2009/10	36%	29%	8%	9%	18%
2010/11	30%	29%	10%	10%	22%
2011/12	23%	29%	12%	14%	23%

Table 3: Fairness of treatment, 2002/03 - 2011/12

Year	% treated fairly
2002/03	69%
2003/04	76%
2004/05	66%
2005/06	70%
2006/07	75%
2007/08	71%
2008/09	73%
2009/10	75%
2010/11	70%
2011/12	66%

Table 4: Would you use the complaints system again, 2004/05 - 2011/12

Year	% would use system again
2004/05	75%
2005/06	70%
2006/07	76%
2007/08	73%
2008/09	69%
2009/10	71%
2010/11	69%
2011/12	64%

Table 5: Complainant perception of Ombudsman staff, 2007/08 - 2011/12

Complainant perception	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Polite	96%	96%	97%	96%	95%
Friendly	95%	94%	94%	93%	92%
Easy to understand	92%	90%	92%	90%	90%
Patient	93%	91%	91%	89%	89%
Professional	92%	89%	91%	89%	89%
Knowledgeable	87%	85%	86%	87%	83%
Impartial	72%	67%	68%	78%	76%
Not interested	19%	21%	20%	19%	20%
In a hurry	15%	13%	13%	14%	18%
Rude	8%	5%	7%	7%	7%

Table 6: Complainant satisfaction with aspects of the complaints process, 2007/08 - 2011/12

Aspect	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
How easy to understand					
correspondence	85%	81%	86%	84%	73%
Length of time to reply					
after reported incident	77%	74%	82%	78%	72%
Clarity of explanation of					
process	72%	69%	77%	72%	63%
Advice provided by staff	66%	68%	72%	68%	61%
Seriousness in which					
complaint was treated	60%	61%	66%	63%	55%
Frequency of progress					
updates	69%	65%	67%	63%	55%
Overall time to resolve					
complaint	60%	58%	61%	58%	53%
Outcome of complaint	37%	42%	46%	41%	40%

Table 7: Recommendations arising from complaint closures, 2011/12

Type of recommendation	Recommendations arising from all complaints	Recommendations relating to survey respondents
Not Substantiated	41%	44%
Non co-operation by complainant	22%	12%
To PPS no Criminal Charges recommended	10%	7%
Informally/Locally Resolved	5%	8%
Recommended action	5%	7%
Substantiated - no action recommended	1%	0%
Other Recommendations	17%	23%

Appendix 4: Questionnaire

COMPLAINANT SATISFACTION FORM

IN CONFIDENCE

You made a complaint about the police to the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. We are interested in how well you think the Office dealt with your complaint, and would be grateful if you could take a few minutes to complete this form.

	1. DID YOU AT ANY TIME SPEAK TO THE STAFF FROM THE POLICE OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE?
	Please tick the appropriate box.
	Yes (Please go to Question 2) No (Please go to Question 3)
	2a. IF YOU DID SPEAK TO STAFF FROM THE OFFICE, HOW DID THEY SEEM TO YOU?
	Please tick the appropriate box. Yes No
	The staff were polite
	The staff were friendly
	The staff were knowledgeable
	The staff were patient
	The staff were easy to understand
	The staff were professional
	The staff were impartial
	2b. HOW DID THE STAFF SEEM TO YOU?
	The staff were not interested
	The staff were rude
	The staff were in a hurry or rushed
	3. OVERALL, DO YOU THINK YOU WERE TREATED FAIRLY BY THE OFFICE?
	Please tick the appropriate box.
	Yes (Please go to Question 5) No (Please go to Question 4)
	4. IF YOU THINK YOU WERE NOT TREATED FAIRLY BY THE OFFICE PLEASE SAY WHY.
PL	EASE TURN OVER
	100100



5. HOW SATISFIED OR DISSATISFIED WERE YOU WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS?

Please tick the appropriate box on each row.

Please tick the appropriate box on each row.	NEITHER VERY SATISFIED NOR VERY COMPLAINT SATISFIED SATISFIED DISSATISFIED DISSATISFIED ONGOING
If you made your complaint directly to the Office the advice given to you at this time	
The length of time it took for the Office to reply to you after you first reported the incident	
The seriousness with which the Office treated your complaint	
How clearly the complaint process was explained to you by staff	
How often you were told about the progress of your complaint	
How easy it was to understand letters written to you	
The outcome of your complaint	
The overall time it took to resolve your complain	t 📄 📄 📄
WOULD YOU USE THE COMPLAINTS SYSTEM Please tick the appropriate box. Yes No	M AGAIN?
7. OVERALL, TAKING EVERYTHING INTO ACCO Please tick the appropriate box. How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received from the Police Ombudsman's Office?	OUNT VERY NEITHER SATISFIED VERY SATISFIED SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED DISSATISFIED DISSATISFIED
8 IN YOUR OPINION ARE THERE ANY MEASI	JRES THE OFFICE OF THE POLICE OMBUDSMAN COULD
TAKE TO IMPROVE ITS SERVICE TO THE PL	

Thank you for completing this form



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Website: www.policeombudsman.org