



Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland:

Annual Report on the Public Awareness  
of the Police Complaints System in  
Northern Ireland, 2021.

Published: May 2022

## Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Life and Times Survey.....	3
About this Report.....	4
Key Findings.....	6
Survey Findings .....	7
• Awareness of the Police Ombudsman .....	7
• Independence of the Police Ombudsman.....	8
• Impartiality of investigation.....	9
• Fairness of treatment.....	10
• Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing.....	11
Appendix 1: Tables of Results.....	12
Appendix 2: Technical Notes.....	16

## **Introduction**

This statistical report presents the findings from the Police Ombudsman's module in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, 2021. The results from the survey are used to monitor public awareness and confidence in the Police Ombudsman's Office (the Office).

The Office has been monitoring the public's awareness and confidence since 2000. Up to, and including 2017, this was measured through a module in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) Omnibus Survey. Since 2018 it has been measured by a survey module in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) which is jointly conducted by Queens University and the Ulster University.

This is an Official Statistics publication, which means the statistics are produced to a high standard in-line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and are free from political interference.

## **The Life and Times Survey**

This survey was launched by the University of Ulster and Queen's University in the autumn of 1998. Its mission is to monitor the attitudes and behaviour of people in Northern Ireland to provide a time-series and public record of how attitudes and behaviour develop on a wide range of social policy issues. The survey is carried out annually and run on a modular format. It aims to provide a local resource for use by the general public, trusted and independent evidence to inform policy making and a data source for a more theoretical academic and public debate.

The NILT survey is a constituent resource of ARK which is a research, policy and impact hub, based jointly in Queens University and Ulster University. ARK runs a suite of three surveys, including the NILT survey, in order to record the attitudes of people of all ages in Northern Ireland to the key issues affecting their lives. Information on this survey and others, along with detailed technical notes can be found on the ARK website ([ARK Website Link](#)).

## **About this Report**

This report provides information from the Police Ombudsman's module in the 2021 NILT survey. Interviewing was conducted between 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021 and 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a multi-modal approach was used whereby a large scale Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) survey was developed and this was supplemented with Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) (see Appendix 2: Technical notes, page 16 for more details).

The Police Ombudsman's module has five questions and the results for each question have been presented by age group, gender and religion.

Also included in this report is a comparison for the main five questions asked in the survey with the three previous years (2018, 2019 and 2020). Comparisons have not been made for age group, gender or religion with the previous years, however tables of data are included in this report (Appendix 1, Page 12) and in the accompanying excel spreadsheet (Accompanying excel spreadsheet 2018 to 2021) if the reader wishes to carry out further analysis.

It should be noted that a larger proportion of respondent's answer the questions with "don't know" in the NILT survey than would have been seen in the previous Omnibus Surveys. For this reason, the "don't know" answers are excluded from the analysis of the results.

Percentages in the tables may not add to 100% due to rounding. Unweighted base numbers within the tables will vary due to the exclusions of "don't know" responses.

Statistical significance tests have been carried out on the findings and differences are 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.

The results from this year's survey along with the three previous years, have been published in an excel spreadsheet (Accompanying Excel Spreadsheet 2018 to 2021) and the results from the previous Omnibus surveys are available in a different excel spreadsheet (Accompanying Excel Spreadsheet Omnibus Data up to 2017). Both of these spreadsheets are available on the Office website (website details are highlighted on the back page of this report).

Detailed notes have been supplied, which provide an account of the technical aspects of the survey, including the origin of the sample, response rates and its representativeness (see Appendix 2: Technical Notes, page 16).

We are always keen to receive feedback on all our statistical publications. If you have any feedback or comments on this report we would like to hear them. Please contact us by email at: [info@policeombudsman.org](mailto:info@policeombudsman.org) or see our alternative contact details on the back page of this report.

## **Key Findings**

The results from the survey are used by the Office to monitor public awareness and confidence in the Office.

### **Q1. Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?**

- 90% of respondents had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office.

### **Q2. Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is part of the police or Independent of the police?**

- 90% of respondents that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office were aware that it is independent from the police.

### **Q3. How confident are you that the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland deals with complaints against the police in an impartial way?**

- 68% of respondents that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office were confident that complaints are dealt with in an impartial way.

### **Q4. If you were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman, do you think you would be treated fairly?**

- 75% of respondents that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office felt they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint.

### **Q5. Do you think that the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland will help ensure that the police do a good job?**

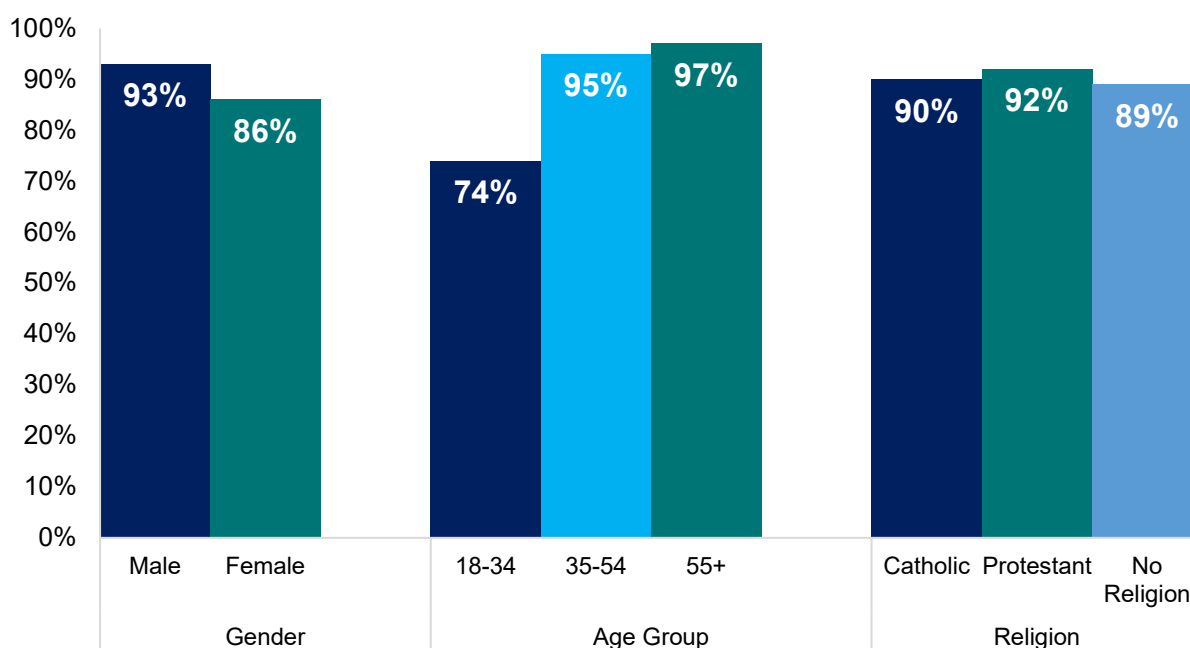
- 75% of respondents that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office felt the Office would help ensure the police do a good job.

## Survey Findings

### Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

In 2021, nine out of ten respondents stated that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. This has decreased from last year when 95% of respondents were aware of the Office, but is higher than the awareness levels reported in 2018 and 2019; 86% awareness reported in each of these years.

**Figure 1: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by Gender, Age and Religion, 2021**



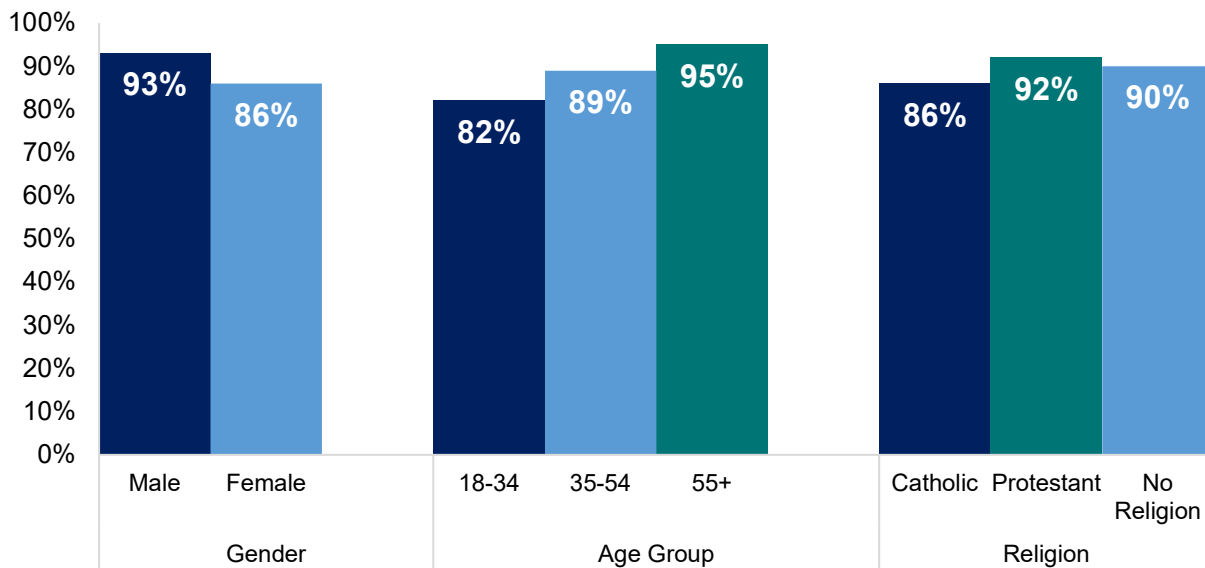
- Male respondents were more likely to be aware of the Office than female respondents.
- Older respondents, i.e. those aged 35 and over, were more likely to be aware of the Office than younger respondents.
- Awareness of the Office was similar between Catholic respondents, Protestant respondents and those who reported to have No Religion.

**NOTE: The following results are based only on respondents that answered 'yes' to the question 'Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?'**

## Independence of the Police Ombudsman

In 2021, of those respondents who had heard of the Office, nine out of ten were aware of its independence from the police. This is similar to the results reported in the previous three years; 92% of respondents were aware of the Office in 2020 and 88% in both 2018 and 2019.

**Figure 2: Perception of independence of the Office by Gender, Age and Religion, 2021**



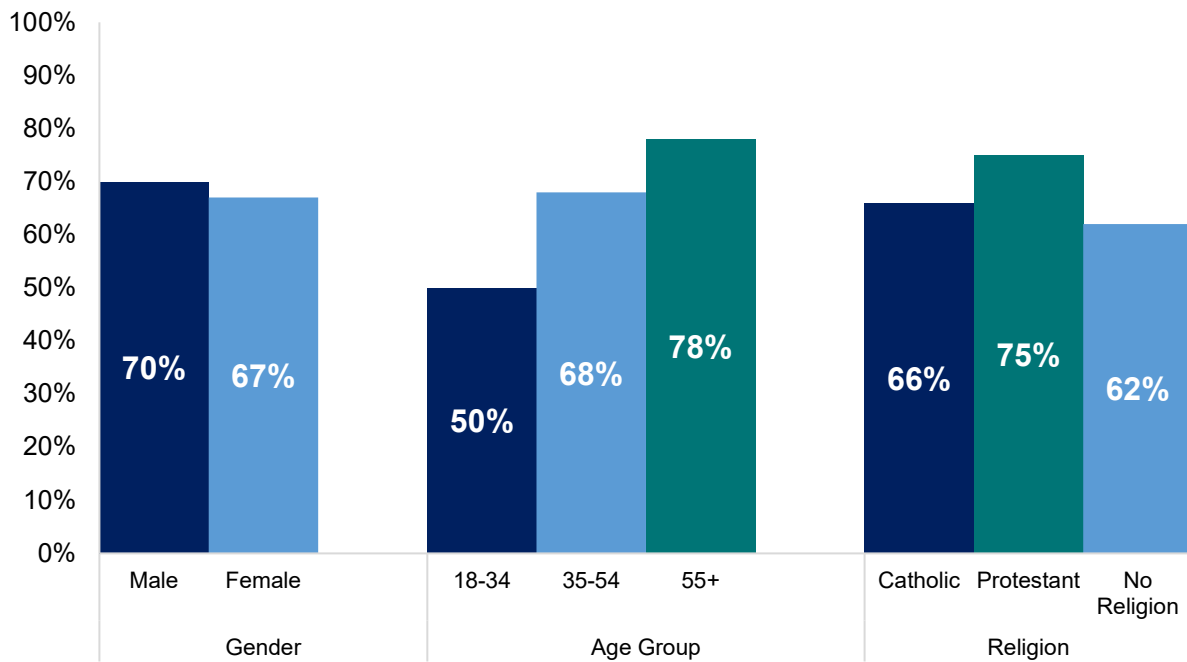
- Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to be aware that the Office is independent from the police.
- Respondents aged 55 and over were more likely to be aware of the Office's independence from the police, when compared with younger respondents.
- Catholic respondents were less likely to be aware of the independence of the Office than Protestant respondents.



## Impartiality of investigation

In 2021, just under seven out of ten respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were confident that complaints were dealt with impartially. This has decreased from 76% in 2020, 85% in 2019 and 80% in 2018.

**Figure 3: Level of confidence that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way by Gender, Age and Religion, 2021**

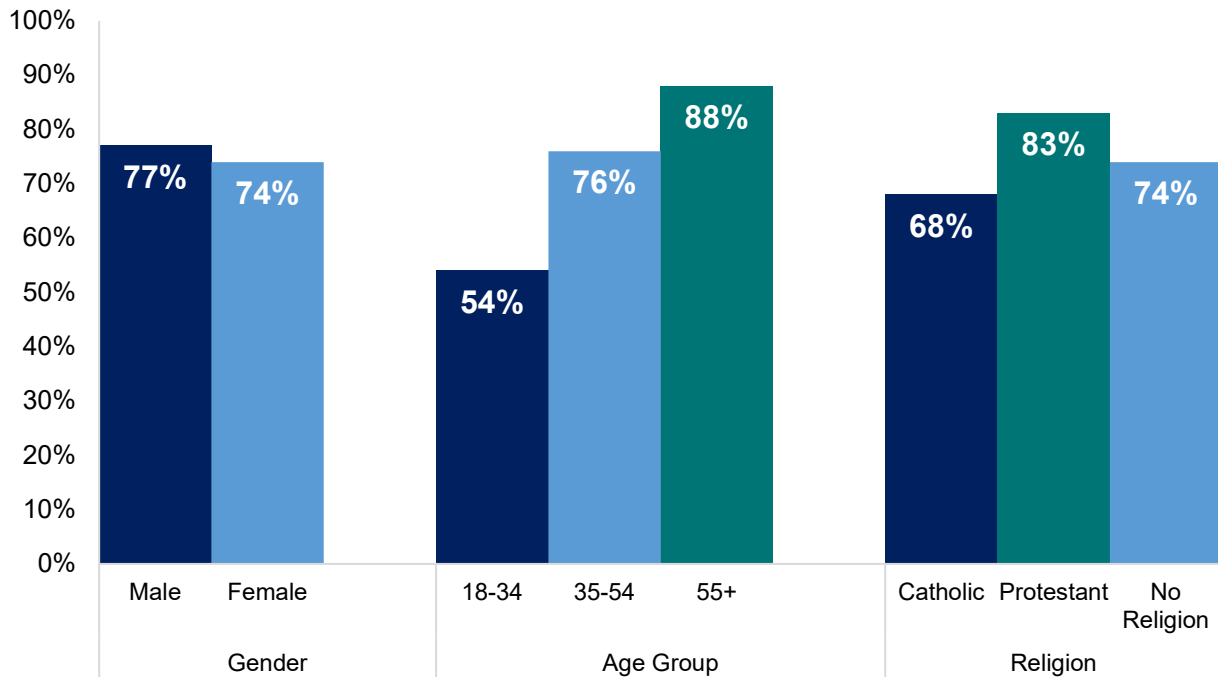


- Similar proportions of male and female respondents were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially.
- Respondents in the younger age groups were less confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially when compared with those aged 55 and over.
- Protestant respondents were more confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially when compared with Catholic respondents and those respondents that reported to have No Religion.

## Fairness of treatment

In 2021, three quarters of respondents thought they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint to the Office. This has decreased from 83% reported last year, 86% in 2019 and 81% in 2018.

**Figure 4: Perception of fair treatment when making a complaint by Gender, Age and Religion, 2021**

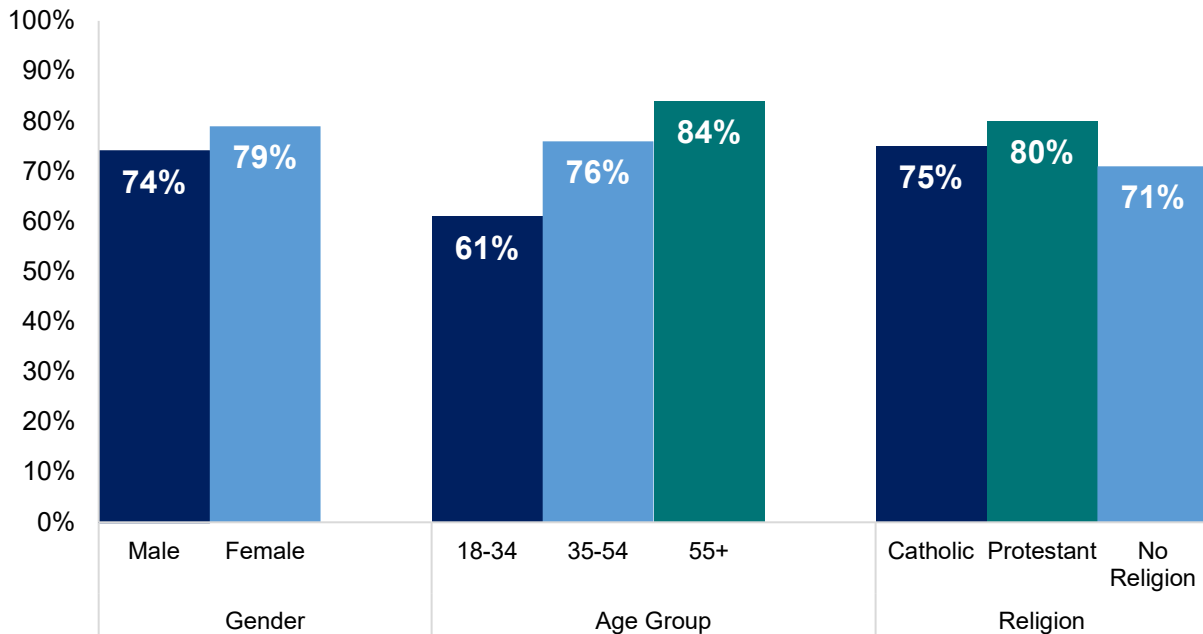


- Similar proportions of male and female respondents were likely to think they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint to the Office.
- Younger respondents (i.e. those aged 54 and under), were less likely to think that they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint to the Office when compared with respondents aged 55 and over.
- Protestant respondents were more likely to think they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint when compared with Catholic respondents and those with No Religion.

## Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

In 2021, three quarters of respondents thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job. This has decreased from 86% last year, 87% in 2019 and 82% in 2018.

**Figure 5: Perception that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job by Gender, Age and Religion, 2021**



- Similar proportions of male and female respondents were likely to think that the Police Ombudsman helps ensure the police do a good job.
- Respondents aged 55 and over were more likely to think that the Police Ombudsman helps ensure the police do a good job when compared with respondents aged 54 and under.
- Protestant respondents were more likely to think the Police Ombudsman would help ensure the police do a good job when compared with those respondents who reported to have No Religion.

## Appendix 1: Tables of Results<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, 2021?**

	% weighted
Aware	89.6%
Not aware	10.4%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1371

**Table 2: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by gender, 2021.**

	% weighted
Male	92.6%
Female	86.4%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1364

**Table 3: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by age group, 2021.**

	% weighted
18-34	74.2%
35-54	95.0%
55+	97.0%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1371

**Table 4: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by religion, 2021.**

	% weighted
Catholic	89.7%
Protestant	92.1%
No Religion	88.9%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1327

**Table 5: Do you think the Police Ombudsman is part of the police or independent, 2021?**

	% weighted
Independent of the police	89.5%
Part of the police	10.5%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1180

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 6: Independence of the Police Ombudsman by gender, 2021.**

	% weighted
Male	93.2%
Female	85.6%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1174

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

<sup>1</sup> These tables along with results from 2018, 2019 and 2020 are available in an excel spreadsheet (accompanying excel spreadsheet 2018 to 2021) on the Police Ombudsman's website.

**Table 7: Independence of the Police Ombudsman by age group, 2021.**

	% weighted
18-34	81.6%
35-54	89.0%
55+	94.8%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1180

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 8: Independence of the Police Ombudsman by religion, 2021.**

	% weighted
Catholic	86.4%
Protestant	92.0%
No Religion	89.9%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1155

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 9: How confident are you that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially, 2021?**

	% weighted
Very confident	11.3%
Confident	56.8%
Total confident	68.0%
Not very confident	23.0%
Not at all confident	8.9%
Total not confident	32.0%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1079

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 10: Confidence the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially by gender, 2021.**

	% weighted
Male	69.9%
Female	66.6%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1073

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 11: Confidence the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially by age group, 2021.**

	% weighted
18-34	49.6%
35-54	68.5%
55+	78.4%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1079

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 12: Confidence the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially by religion, 2021.**

	% weighted
Catholic	65.7%
Protestant	74.7%
No religion	62.3%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	1058

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 13: If you made a complaint do you think you'd be treated fairly, 2021?**

	% weighted
Yes	75.3%
No	24.7%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	841

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 14: Perception of fair treatment by gender, 2021.**

	% weighted
Male	76.9%
Female	74.2%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	836

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 15: Perception of fair treatment by age group, 2021.**

	% weighted
18-34	54.2%
35-54	75.7%
55+	88.5%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	841

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 16: Perception of fair treatment by religion, 2021.**

	% weighted
Catholic	67.6%
Protestant	83.2%
No religion	74.4%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	827

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 17: Do you think the Police Ombudsman will help police do a good job, 2021?**

	% weighted
Yes	75.4%
No	24.6%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	875

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 18: Police Ombudsman will help police do a good job by gender, 2021.**

	% weighted
Male	73.7%
Female	78.6%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	870

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 19: Police Ombudsman will help police do a good job by age group, 2021.**

	% weighted
18-34	61.0%
35-54	76.4%
55+	83.7%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	875

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

**Table 20: Police Ombudsman will help ensure the police do a good job by religion, 2021.**

	% weighted
Catholic	74.5%
Protestant	79.6%
No Religion	71.2%
Total survey respondents (unweighted)	854

**Asked to those who were aware of the Police Ombudsman**

## **Appendix 2: Technical Notes**

The technical information has been provided by ARK and is for the NILT 2021 survey.

The survey involved 1,397 interviews with adults aged 18 years or over. In order to achieve the objectives of the research, while considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a multi-modal approach was used by the researchers. A large scale Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) survey was developed and this was supplemented with Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) and Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI).

All interviews whether online or via the telephone were conducted by Ipsos UK interviewers. The fieldwork was split into two phases; a pilot phase followed by the mainstage fieldwork. The mainstage fieldwork was undertaken during the period 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021 and 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2021.

The sample for the 2021 survey consisted of a systematic random sample of addresses selected from the Postcode Address File (PAF) database of addresses. The PAF is the most widely used sample frame for high quality social surveys in the UK. It is the most up-to-date and complete listing of addresses which is maintained by Royal Mail. Business addresses were removed from the database prior to the sample selection.

Of the 10,000 addresses drawn from the PAF, 9,889 were included in the scope of research (111 addresses no longer existed, were inaccessible or the addressee had gone away). The person to be interviewed was randomly selected using the 'next birthday' rule. Each letter sent to the selected addresses clearly stated that only the person with the next birthday was eligible to complete the survey. This is the person with the next birthday, at the time of the call that is selected for the interviews (of all persons living at the address who were aged 18 or over). A total of 1,397 persons co-operated fully representing a response rate of 14%.

Table 21 (page 17) sets out sampling errors and confidence intervals at the 95% confidence level relating to a Systematic Random Sample design as used in the survey. Note the margin of error for all sample estimates is within the parameters of  $\pm 2.6\%$



**Table 21: Sampling errors and confidence intervals for key variables (unweighted data)**

		%	Margin of Error	95% Confidence limits
Age	18 to 24	4.5	1.1	3.4 to 5.6
	25 to 34	14.0	1.8	12.2 to 15.8
	35 to 44	18.0	2.0	16.0 to 20.0
	45 to 54	20.3	2.1	18.2 to 22.4
	55 to 64	21.3	2.1	19.2 to 23.4
	65 & over	21.8	2.2	19.6 to 24.0
Sex	Male	44.3	2.6	46.9 to 41.7
	Female	55.2	2.6	52.6 to 57.8
Religion	Catholic	30.9	2.4	28.5 to 33.3
	Protestant	38.5	2.5	36.0 to 41.0
	None	26.3	2.3	24.0 to 28.6
	Other	2.0	0.7	1.3 to 2.7
	Refused/Don't Know	2.2	0.8	1.4 to 3.0

The data has been weighted in order to allow for the disproportionate household size.

The religion category in this report includes those respondents who reported to have 'no religion', those who reported a religion that was not Catholic or Protestant (other religion) and those whose religion was not stated.

ARK also publish the survey results. They will be released publically on the internet on the 26 May 2022. The NILT website is the key source of information relating to the survey. This includes background information, datasets, questionnaires, technical notes and publications relating to all survey years. In addition, frequencies for every question and a breakdown by age, gender and religion are also available online. The NILT website can be accessed by selecting the following link: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>.



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This publication and other statistical information about the work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland are also available on the internet at:

Website: [www.policeombudsman.org](http://www.policeombudsman.org)



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