



**Police Service**  
of Northern Ireland



# Use of Force by the Police in Northern Ireland: User Guide

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This document is intended as a User Guide to help users of the statistics form a fuller picture of the data quality and to help users put the data into context. Please contact us via our [website](#) if you require any further information.

## Section 1

### 1.1 Introduction

Use of Force statistics for Northern Ireland are collated and produced by statisticians seconded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) from the Northern Ireland and Statistics Research Agency (NISRA), working to the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#).

Currently the law allows the police to use reasonable force when necessary in order to carry out their role of law enforcement. Police officers may use force in order to defend themselves or another, effect an arrest, carry out a lawful power, secure and preserve evidence or uphold the peace, provided such force is lawful, proportionate and reasonable in the circumstances.

In order to comply with statutory and oversight requirements the PSNI is required to record and report on various types of force used by its officers. Recommendation 21 of the Northern Ireland Policing Board's Human Rights Annual Report (2008) requires the PSNI to "provide the Policing Board with statistics on all categories of uses of force recorded on the PSNI electronic use of force monitoring system and reported on a six monthly basis."

The types of force that must be recorded on the monitoring system are the use of firearms, attenuating energy projectiles (AEPs), conductive energy devices (CEDs), batons, irritant sprays, police dogs, spit and bite guards water cannons, handcuffs, limb restraints and unarmed physical tactics (see Section 3 for further detail).

The Police Service's use of force is scrutinised both internally and externally, internally by supervising officers and at senior officer governance meetings and externally by the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), the NIPB's Human Rights adviser, the Police Ombudsman and other statutory and voluntary bodies.

Data entailing use of force is downloaded from the use of force database, validated and published on a bi-annual basis. These publications can be found at [Statistics on Police Use of Force](#) on the PSNI Statistics webpage. In line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics all publication dates are pre-announced via the [statistics section](#) of the PSNI website and on the [gov.uk publication hub](#) for official statistics.

## **1.2 Uses made of the PSNI's use of force statistics**

Based on our experience, knowledge and awareness of existing uses of the statistics and on the responses to the PSNI's Use of Force Statistics User Surveys, the following examples should provide an insight to the main uses made of these statistics.

### **Internal monitoring**

The statistics are used to inform senior PSNI management of the current levels of force used at various levels across the organisation and identify comparative trends, assisting in the planning of strategic procedures, operational activity and identifying training requirements.

### **External performance monitoring/effectiveness of policing**

The police's use of force are extensively monitored and scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) and the Police Ombudsman. These statistics are used to inform both and are contained within the respective publications.

['Northern Ireland Policing Board's Human Rights Annual Report'](#)

['Analysis of incidents involving the discharge of Tasers by the PSNI'](#)

### **Media related/public interest**

The local media use the PSNI's use of force statistics to inform the public on relevant trends. Some of this information is readily available from the PSNI website within the bi-annual publications, however PSNI Statistics Branch receives a number of FOI requests for information relating to use of force statistics, particularly on under 18 year olds.

### **To facilitate academic research**

PSNI Statistics Branch receives requests for use of force data to assist with academic research projects.

### **In support of local community policing needs**

Local Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) utilise use of force statistics to identify changing or emerging trends in their local area. They will then use this to inform their PCSP representatives so that they are in a position to challenge the local police commander about any relevant issues.

### **Personal interest & solicitors**

We also get requests for use of force statistics from individuals who have a personal interest in this area.

## **1.3 Key user survey feedback**

As part of our commitment to meeting user needs we regularly ask users of all statistics produced in the branch for feedback. The most recent Key User Survey by PSNI Statistics Branch was completed in 2018.

Direct responses to any issues raised in the user survey are published in the Official Statistics section of the website, under [User Feedback](#).

## **Section 2**

### **2.1 Data collection process**

As per the [PSNI Statement of Administrative Sources](#) included in the Statistics section of the PSNI website, information on the police's use of force is collected using the organisation's own administrative and management sources.

Officers are required to make a record of the details of use of force as soon as practicable after the incident as outlined in the PSNI Manual of Policy, Procedure and Guidance on Conflict Management. The means by which this is achieved is by way of the electronic use of force monitoring system which has been in operation since 2008.

Officers are required to record details of each encounter in which force has been used including officer details, incident details, details of the circumstances and type of force used and details of the individual on whom force was used. PSNI officers record these details on a use of force form via an application on a desktop computer, which are then submitted to a central standalone Use of Force database. The use of force IT system is an operational system that provides an administrative dataset that is analysed and reported on by the PSNI's Statistics Branch.

### **2.2 Defining a use of force**

Police officers must record the details of any incident where they deployed force tactics through a 'use of force report'. Where an incident involved more than one person or officer, each officer who used force must complete one use of force report, detailing their own use of force. As such, a singular event or individual may feature in multiple use of force reports.

In the statistics, one 'use of force' refers to one officer's use of force involving one or more persons. As such, the total number of uses reported is not equal to the number of unique incidents/events or people involved in incidents. For example, if one person is restrained by two officers, two use of force reports should be completed.

The purpose of this approach is to reduce the bureaucracy and burden on officers in terms of data collection, albeit it increases the complexities of reporting the information.

### **2.3 Validation process / quality assurance**

As with all administrative systems, statistics are a by-product of the process and are heavily reliant on the information being entered correctly by officers. To address this risk, Statistics Branch has developed a wide range of quality assurance measures and data validation checks to ensure that the statistics are as accurate and meaningful as possible within the given resource and time constraints. Our internal quality assurance and validation procedures are regularly tested, reviewed and updated.

On completion of a use of force monitoring form an officer submits the form to their supervising officer, whose responsibility is to ensure that the information presented on the form accurately reflects the circumstances and application of the officer's use of force. If the supervising officer feels that the details need to be developed or amended to more accurately reflect the full extent of the incident they will 'reject' the form and ask the officer to amend. Once the supervising officer is satisfied with the submission they 'approve' the form,

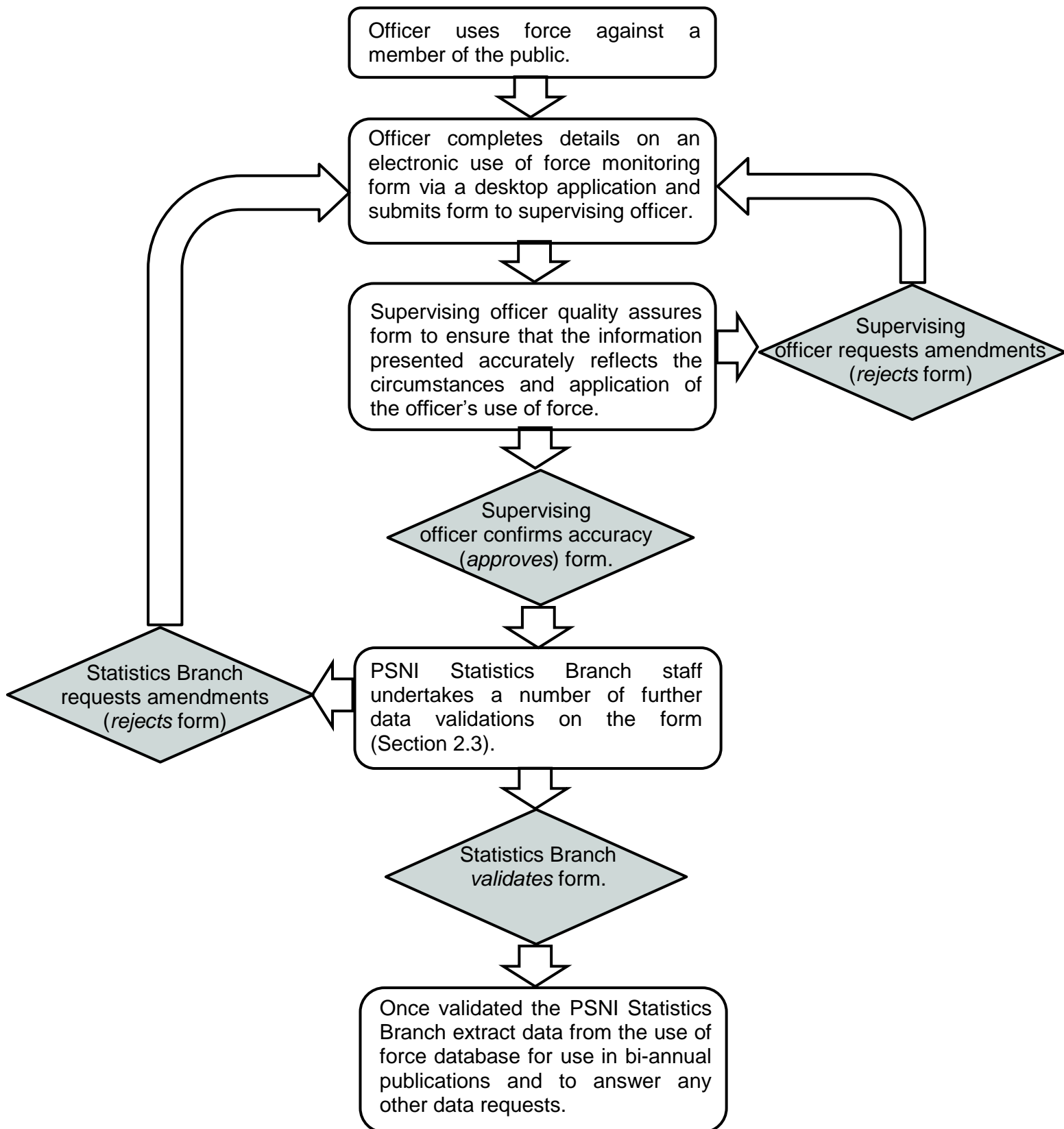
which then allows Statistics Branch to carry out a number of further validation checks on the submitted entry, cross referencing with ControlWorks, an independent IT system which is used to record calls for service. Data quality checks are conducted on a daily basis to identify and correct inconsistencies within the data. Examples of the data quality checks are:

- Ensure correct use of force is recorded.
- Ensure correct details are entered for the incident attended, such as date of incident, policing district, type of duty.
- Validate the number of persons on whom was used.
- Validate age and gender details for the member of the public for certain forces, ages or where a potential error is identified.
- Validate number of rounds fired when firearms/AEPs have been discharged.
- Remove duplicates entries.

Statistics Branch either (1) 'reject' a form, requesting that the officer makes the appropriate amendments and their supervising officer approves these amendments or (2) validate the form, meaning that the data from the form is finalised on the use of force database.

## 2.4 Use of force data process map

The following diagram illustrates the process followed from the point of data collection to statistical reporting as followed by the PSNI for use of force encounters.



## 2.5 Risks to data quality and associated mitigations

Limitations	Implications	Risk/error mitigation
Despite the requirement to do so, there may be some cases where an officer may not record a use of force encounter	Some under-reporting may exist. The number of uses of force may be undercounted in the bi-annual reports.	Officers are made aware of their obligations under the PSNI Manual of Policy, Procedure and Guidance on Conflict Management
Some use of force forms may not be uploaded onto the database in a timely manner	Uses of force that occurred near the end of the financial year may not be recorded on the database until the next year.	Undercount is limited. Lag between end of reporting period and publication date minimises any such risk.

## 2.6 Data management roles and responsibilities

The NISRA statisticians are based within PSNI and are given access to PSNI's internal systems, once they have been appropriately vetted and trained. The source data and any associated data files are held on secure servers within PSNI and access to systems is controlled and auditable to ensure compliance with relevant legislation. Individual staff member's access to these systems is monitored and periodically checked by the PSNI Data Protection Unit. Having the statisticians working alongside the suppliers of the data and having close working relationships with IT colleagues means they are involved in any relevant process/system design or change.

Changes to the PSNI's systems or processes that might affect the quality of the statistics are discussed in advance and managed through the relevant project board. Communication with IT colleagues takes place on a regular basis at many levels and ensures that data quality is maintained. Statistics Branch also has a close working relationship with the Operational Lead for use of force within the organisation allowing any issues to be raised directly with the senior officers who can then communicate to all police any areas of concern regarding the recording of data.

## 2.7 Timeliness

A balance needs to be obtained between the requirement for figures to be as up-to-date as possible and the requirement to publish figures which are of appropriate quality and completeness for use. There is a lag of around eleven weeks between the end of the reporting period and publication of the bi-annual bulletin. This is to allow for the submission of the use of force reports onto the monitoring database and for statisticians to ensure that the information provided is as accurate as possible.

Once the use of force statistics are published at the end of the financial year the figures are considered to be finalised i.e. users can be assured that the figures will not change (subject to the PSNI's revisions policy).



## 2.8 Strengths and Limitations of the data

### Strengths

The use of force data that is extracted from the UoF monitoring system undergoes a number of validation checks and follows a quality assurance process to ensure the data are fit for purpose and published to as high a standard as possible. Where required data quality issues are flagged directly with the officer who recorded the use of force and issues are resolved in a timely manner.

Officers are required to make a record of the details of a use of force as soon as is reasonably practicable as outlined in the Procedure and Guidance on Conflict Management.

The fact that the PSNI is a single force and all officers' work to the same code of practice helps to standardise submissions and improve the quality of the data recorded and therefore reported.

### Limitations

The figures reflect how many times force was recorded by police officers, however it does not tell us how many individual people experienced police use of force. As explained in Section 2.2, if two officers used force on one individual, each officer would submit a use of force report and the person's details would be reported on both.

In some cases, the person's information e.g. age, gender, ethnicity is known or reported by the person. However, on occasions such details are recorded as perceived by the reporting officer therefore should not be considered as reliable as self-reported data.

Whilst every effort is made to ensure that all incidents of use of force by the police are reported on the use of force monitoring system, there is the possibility that some under-reporting exists and this should be borne in mind when using these statistics.

## 2.9 Confidentiality

The PSNI's Statistics Branch complies with the requirements of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics in relation to Principle 5: Confidentiality. Section 3 of the [Official Statistics documentation](#) on the PSNI Statistics branch webpage outlines the data protection and confidentiality considerations and measures. It outlines the arrangements for maintaining confidentiality of statistical data and covers:

- Physical Security
- Technical Security
- Staff Training
- Statistical Disclosure Control
- Sharing of data with a third party

## 2.10 Comparability within the UK

Promoting comparability is an important requirement of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics which aids interpretation for the users of the stop and search statistics. Listed below are useful comparative sources of stop and search statistics.

### England and Wales

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/police-use-of-force-statistics>

## Section 3

### 3.1 Use of force types

Use of force	Further information
Attenuating Energy Projectile (AEP)	<p>The AEP has been designed for use as a less lethal option in situations where officers are faced with individual aggressors whether acting on their own or as part of a group. It discharges less-lethal kinetic energy projectiles (impact rounds) and has two purposes. It can be used by a limited number of specifically trained Tactical Support Group (TSG) or public order trained officers in serious public order situations to fire at selected individuals. Secondly, it can be used by a small number of specifically trained firearms officers as a less-lethal option at firearms incidents or non-public order incidents (e.g. suspect wielding a knife or sword).</p>
Baton	<p>Officers will report any use of batons to their immediate supervisors as soon as practicable and submit an electronic use of force form, making their baton available for inspection. In addition, in circumstances where a baton has been drawn but not used, officers will submit a report (electronic use of force monitoring form) where it is reasonable to expect that a person (or persons) have anticipated a threat of force being used against them.</p>
Irritant spray	<p>Irritant spray is issued to all PSNI officers who have been trained in the Personal Safety Programme and is worn as part of the normal patrol equipment. Service policy states that it is not to be used during serious public order situations as a crowd dispersal tactic.</p> <p>Upon impact the solvent evaporates rapidly leaving irritant particles to gain compliance of the subject. Effects last on average for about 20 minutes. A person who has been sprayed with irritant spray will be classified as 'injured' and police officers will if possible administer aftercare advice. An officer drawing or discharging the device, or once drawn, subsequently points the device at any individual or group, must record this use and any warning given.</p> <p>The PSNI have traditionally used CS irritant spray, while PAVA irritant spray was introduced to PSNI in a limited pilot in January 2016. During this trial PAVA irritant spray was issued to officers that carried Conductive Energy Devices and also some Portal officers. The PSNI approved a change to irritant spray in February 2020, which will see all officers' transition from carrying CS irritant spray to carrying PAVA irritant spray. This transition is currently ongoing.</p>
Firearms	<p>In recognition of the special circumstances prevailing in Northern Ireland, the Chief Constable has given standing authority for all officers, subject to successful training, to be issued with a personal issue handgun. This standing authority is kept under regular review. A police officer is deemed to have used a firearm when it is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Pointed at another person;</li> <li>(ii) Fired at another person in self-defence or in defence of another, whether or not injury or death results;</li> <li>(ii) Discharged in any other operational circumstances.</li> </ul> <p>In addition officers are required to report any instance when they have occasion to draw their personal issue handgun.</p> <p>District Commanders/Heads of Branch ensure that an appropriate number of officers are trained in order to meet locally identified needs, based upon an evaluation of the prevailing security situation and risk assessment. There are also a number of specifically trained firearms officers to deal with pre-planned and spontaneous firearms incidents. These officers deploy with H&amp;K weapons and the Glock personal issue handgun but also have available other less lethal options including CEDs and AEPs.</p>
Police dog	<p>All Police dogs are under the control of Operational Support Department and can be used for a variety of purposes. Use of force only reflects a very small proportion of the overall work that police dogs carry out. The main types of force that are recorded for dog use include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indirect Deployment – where the dog and handler are deployed at the periphery of an incident, with the dog in the police vehicle, providing a visible deterrent and</li> </ul>

	<p>with the handler observing the incident developing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interim Deployment – where the dog and handler are deployed from the vehicle on foot, remaining at a safe distance.</li> <li>• Direct Deployment – these are circumstances where the dog is deployed and is likely to, or instructed to, bite a suspect. At this point a verbal warning should be given by the handler if circumstances allow. This category can be further broken down into dog bites (commanded, provoked, accidental) and non-bites.</li> </ul>
Conductive Energy Device (CED)	<p>The CED is a single shot weapon designed to temporarily incapacitate a subject through the use of an electrical current, which temporarily interferes with the body's neuromuscular system. Use of the CED is one of a number of tactical options available to an officer who is faced with violence or the threat of violence, which may escalate to the point where the use of lethal force would be justified. Its purpose is to temporarily incapacitate an individual in order to control and neutralise the threat that they pose.</p> <p>CEDs were introduced to PSNI on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2008. They were issued to specialist firearms officers and have also been made available to authorised firearms officers attached to Armed Response Vehicles (since 19<sup>th</sup> December 2008) who have completed NPCC approved accredited training in the use of the device.</p> <p>In terms of use of force, the CED can be drawn/aimed, arced, red dotted (at which stage a red dot appears on the subject indicating where the CED would hit) or fired/discharged.</p>
Handcuffs / Limb restraints	<p>Police officers or civilian detention officers do not routinely use handcuffs with every Detained Person (DP), every circumstance is different and officers and staff are required to justify their use of this tactic in terms of proportionality and reasonableness. When officers and staff consider the use of handcuffs on a non-compliant DP, or a DP who it is assessed may offer violence during detention or transport, this can potentially reduce injuries to both police/staff and to the public. By effectively restraining a potentially violent individual officers and staff are also reducing the likelihood of having to resort to the use of other tactical options, escalating the use of force and therefore reducing the risk of injury to the DP.</p> <p>Limb restraints are not designed to be a replacement for rigid handcuffs but rather are designed for use in conjunction with them. The purpose of restraints is to gain control of a violent subject as quickly as possible with the minimum risk of injury to all involved, and subsequently to assist the restrained person into a safe position.</p>
Unarmed physical tactics	<p>The PSNI follow national guidance regarding Personal Safety Manual training, officers and staff are trained to use the following tactics Blocks/Strikes, Take Downs, Pressure Points, Physical Restraints and Other/Improvised. These are stipulated tactics and as such officers are advised of the possible medical ramifications and considerations around vulnerabilities, as they are around all uses of force.</p>
Spit and bite guard	<p>A Spit and Bite Guard is a breathable, mesh material garment that covers the face and head. This prevents the wearer from being able to assault officers, staff and members of the public by means of spitting, thereby reducing the potential of communicable/contagious diseases. A Spit and Bite Guard will not prevent biting but could lessen the degree of injury and contamination.</p> <p>Spit and Bite Guards will be solely issued for the policing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to issue Spit &amp; Bite Guards is reviewed monthly by the Chief Constable. It can only be applied to a person who is spitting, has spat, is preparing to spit or is threatening to spit, is biting, has bitten, is preparing to bite or is threatening to bite.</p> <p>The application of the Spit and Bite Guard on a subject is a use of force and must be recorded as such. Its use should be carefully assessed using the National Decision Model (NDM) and service policy.</p>
Water canon	<p>The PSNI has 6 water cannons at its disposal which are kept at different police locations within Northern Ireland to ensure that they can respond quickly to any incident. Water cannon vehicles are deployed and used only when authorised by appropriate officers in accordance with the NPCC manual of guidance on keeping the peace and public order standards, tactics &amp; training.</p>

## **Section 4**

### **4.1 Publication process and methods**

Use of force statistics for Northern Ireland are published on the Police Service of Northern Ireland website under the Statistics section -

<https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/statistics-on-police-use-of-force/>

Use of force statistics are published twice a year. Finalised financial year data is published in June while a provisional in-year report is published in December and is subject to amendment.

In line with National Statistics guidelines our publication dates are pre-announced and are available on our website under [Publication Schedule](#).

### **4.2 User consultation**

User consultation is an important aspect of our work. It informs our work schedules and statistical planning process. Section 6 of the [Official Statistics documentation](#) on the PSNI Statistics branch webpage outlines highlights our aims and standards for dealing with key users and requests from members of the public.

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