



Headline Statistical Bulletin:

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



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# INTRODUCTION

This Headline Statistical Bulletin presents information on complaints and allegations received by the Office of the Police Ombudsman (the Office) 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 and work alongside Police Ombudsman personnel. It has been produced in accordance with the Code of Practice for Statistics.

## Understanding the information in this bulletin

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

The information provided in this bulletin will provide information on what we believe would be the main questions asked by readers: how many complaints and allegations have we received, who were they about and how were they resolved, for example. Further in depth analysis will be available in the Annual Statistical Bulletin which will be published in September 2021.

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

However, a 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.

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.

## 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. The impact on the limited access to the Office is that not all the data quality checks that are normally carried out before publishing this report have been fully completed this year. The Annual Statistical Bulletin will be published in September 2021 allowing for further data quality checks to be carried out prior to detailed statistics being published.

The purpose of this bulletin is to provide headline information which is required for the Police Ombudsman's Annual Report

All published results are deemed to be of sufficient quality for publication.

The next headline 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.

## **A SUMMARY OF THE KEY TRENDS IN COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE POLICE**

- The number of complaints received by the Police Ombudsman's Office during 2020/21 decreased by 1% from the previous year.
- 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 issue of concern during the investigation.
- On 3 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 AND ALLEGATIONS

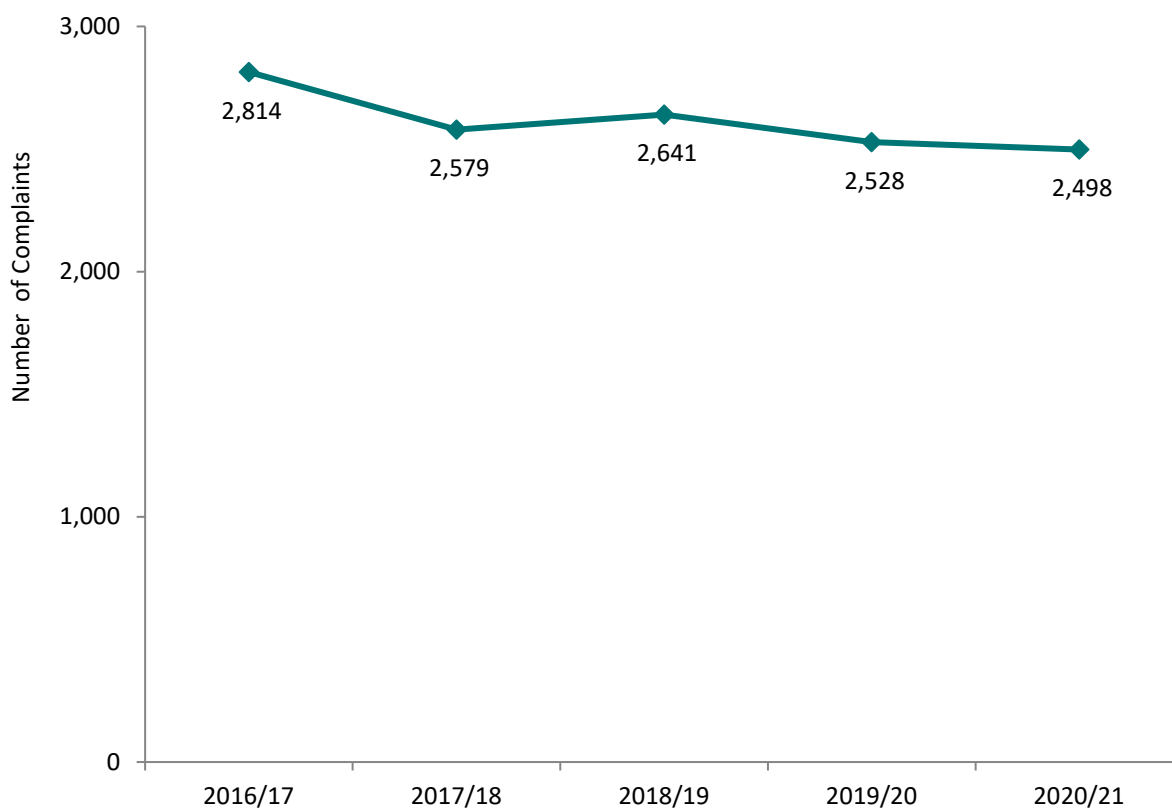
## The volume of complaints and Allegations

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.

The decrease is also a continuation in the downward trend in complaints received over the last number of years.

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 2021/21, the vast majority of complaints (91%) were from members of the public. A further 9% were notifications from police. Less than 1% were matters referred to the

Office for an independent investigation from the PSNI or from another organisation<sup>1</sup> or matters in which the Office exercised its power to initiate investigations. (Table 6).

### 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. More recently, the remit was extended, for serious incidents only, to include certain Home Office officials in 2014/15 and National Crime Agency Officials from 20<sup>th</sup> May 2015.

During 2020/21, the vast majority of complaints received (99%) continue to be about PSNI officers, this includes both police officers and ‘designated civilians’ within the Service (Tables 1 and 7).

Similarly during 2020/21, the majority of allegations received (99%) were made as part of a complaint about the PSNI.

**Table 1: Complaints and Allegations received by organisation, 2020/21**

Organisation	No. of complaints received	No. of Allegations received
Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	2,469	3,638
Harbour Police	1	2
NI Airport Constabulary	1	1
Certain Home Office officials	0	0
Ministry of Defence Police	0	0
National Crime Agency	3	3
Other / Unknown	24	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,498</b>	<b>3,667</b>

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

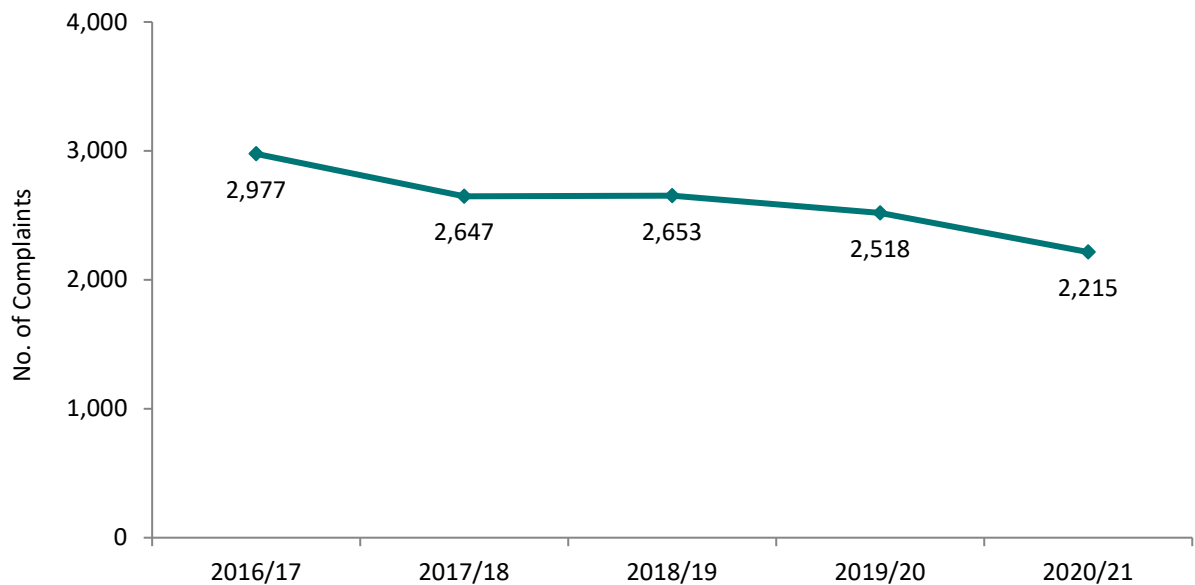


## COMPLAINT CLOSURES

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 more than 2,200 complaints during 2020/21 (Figure 2, Table 8). This is a 12% decrease from the previous year. Some of the decrease will be directly attributable to the partial closure of the Office on three separate occasions during 2020/21 in response to the Government’s advice in reducing the spread of COVID-19.

**Figure 2: Number of complaints closed by year, 2016/17 to 2020/21**



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**

Complaint Closures	2020/21
<b>Total Complaints Closed</b>	<b>2215</b>
<b>Complaints closed following initial assessment</b>	<b>480</b>
Not a matter for the Police Ombudsman	207
Call in/Call out - No Further action or Notification only	218
Other (Initial Assessment)	55
<b>Complaints closed following initial inquiries</b>	<b>686</b>
Complainant did not fully engage	537
Ill-founded	7
Withdrawn	115
Other (Initial Inquiries)	27
<b>Complaints resolved informally</b>	<b>128</b>
Informally Resolved	128
Locally Resolved	0
<b>Complaints closed that relate to the 'Troubles'</b>	<b>3</b>
History Complaint	3
<b>Complaints closed following a full investigation</b>	<b>918</b>
Complaint substantiated or an issue of concern	106
Not substantiated and 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 after 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.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 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 & 9).

**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 9).

The Office made much fewer recommendations to the PPS for no prosecution during 2020/21 than in the four previous years, possibly reflecting on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the office.

## 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). Two fifths (40%) were for a misconduct meeting and over half (52%) 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**

<b>Regulations Introduced in June 2016<sup>2</sup> (Discipline or Performance Actions)</b>	<b>63</b>
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 (Tables 10a and 10b). This has decreased from a high of 249 in 2016/17 to 63 in 2020/21. Although, the number made this year is significantly lower than the previous years.

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. Although, the trends in discipline and performance action are similar with 2018/19.

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<sup>2</sup> The Police (Performance and Attendance) Regulations (NI) 2016 and The Police (Conduct) Regulations (NI) 2016 came into force on 1 June 2016

## **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, 109 complaints reached a successful conclusion through the Informal Resolution process (Table 11) which is over two thirds (69%) of all complaints reaching a conclusion from this process.

## APPENDIX 1: STATISTICAL TABLES

**Table 5: Complaints and allegations received, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

Year	Complaints	Allegations
2016/17	2,814	4,825
2017/18	2,579	4,289
2018/19	2,641	4,147
2019/20	2,528	3,946
2020/21	2,498	3,667

**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	2,270
Matters referred to the Office	23	12	13	1	4
Matters the Police Ombudsman has chosen to investigate	12	10	7	11	7
Other	21	58	115	144	217
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,814</b>	<b>2,579</b>	<b>2,641</b>	<b>2,528</b>	<b>2,498</b>

**Table 7: 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	2,469
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	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,814</b>	<b>2,579</b>	<b>2,641</b>	<b>2,528</b>	<b>2,498</b>

**Table 8: Complaint closures, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

<b>Complaint Closures</b>	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
<b>Total Complaints Closed</b>	<b>2977</b>	<b>2647</b>	<b>2653</b>	<b>2518</b>	<b>2215</b>
<b>Complaints closed following initial assessment</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>423</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>480</b>
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)	31	28	33	42	55
<b>Complaints closed following initial inquiries</b>	<b>1203</b>	<b>1203</b>	<b>988</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>686</b>
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
<b>Complaints resolved informally</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>128</b>
Informally Resolved	182	170	214	191	128
Locally Resolved	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Complaints closed that relate to the 'Troubles'</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>
History Complaint	3	1	26	9	3
<b>Complaints closed following a full investigation</b>	<b>1206</b>	<b>884</b>	<b>1002</b>	<b>1049</b>	<b>918</b>
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

**Table 9: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended prosecution/no prosecution<sup>3</sup> for an officer/staff member, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

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

**Table 10a: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended a discipline or performance action<sup>4</sup> for an officer/staff member, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

<b>Discipline Sanctions (Prior to 2016 Regulations)</b>	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Management Discussion	27	4	0	0	0
Advice & Guidance	98	9	1	0	0
Superintendent's Written Warning	52	8	3	0	0
Formal discipline proceedings	8	2	4	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

**Table 10b: Occasions Police Ombudsman recommended<sup>5</sup> a discipline or performance action for an officer/staff member, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Disciplinary Regulations (pre 6<sup>th</sup> November 2000); a Code of Conduct (6<sup>th</sup> November 2000 to 13<sup>th</sup> March 2003); and a Code of Ethics (since 14<sup>th</sup> March 2003).

<sup>5</sup> 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 11: Outcome of Informal Resolution process, 2016/17 to 2020/21**

<b>IR Resolved</b>	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2017/18</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
Successful	183	170	214	178	109
Failed	99	70	100	66	48
Withdrawn	11	9	8	6	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>322</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>159</b>

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