

Public Interest Test – 349A/22**Applicable exemptions:**

Section 31(1)(a)(b) – Law enforcement

Q2:What is your constabularies policy when dealing with potential paedophile hunter groups (Online Child Abuse Activist Groups)? What guidance is provided to attending officers of 'stings'?

Q3:Has your constabulary conducted any pro-active work with any paedophile hunter groups (Online Child Abuse Activist Groups)? Such as provide training on statements, legal guidelines etc?

Q4: Have you mapped paedophile hunter groups (Online Child Abuse Activist Groups) in the area you police? Do you know how many there are?

Harm

West Midlands Police (WMP) are charged with enforcing the law, preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve. To release the requested information causes a significant risk to future law enforcement capability of the force.

WMP has a duty to prevent crime, apprehend and prosecute offenders and carry out the administration of justice.

Factors Favouring Disclosure

WMP are accountable to the public for the efficient responses and attendance to calls for service, in this case calls to / and how we respond to paedophile hunter groups. The public need to be content that our force is fulfilling its responsibility to protect and serve our communities. It is in the public interest to know how the force reacts to reports in relation to paedophile hunter groups.

We recognise that the public interest in being open and transparent is of great importance to all and release of information may assist the public in being more aware of the work that the police are carrying out. Therefore, a better awareness may in turn lead to more information being provided by the public to West Midlands Police as they would be more conscious of suspicious activities.

Factors Favouring non-Disclosure

The disclosure of this information could compromise law enforcement tactics; the more information disclosed over time will give a more detailed account of the tactical infrastructure of not only a force area but also the country as a whole. Releasing this information into the public domain could allow offenders to map the operational capabilities of forces in regard to Prevent, which may encourage and enable them to change their tactics to avoid detection and prosecution.

West Midlands Police would not wish to reveal tactics that may or may not have been used as this would clearly undermine the law enforcement and investigative process. This would have a negative impact on police resources, encouraging more crime to be committed which would result in individuals being placed at risk.

This would compromise the current and future law enforcement role of the Police Service and where current or future law enforcement capabilities of the force may be compromised by the release of information, it is unlikely to be in the interest of the public.

If West Midlands Police were to reveal guidance / training on how officers deal with paedophile hunter groups and sexual offenders then it may result in an offender changing their behaviour to avoid detection. Similarly, if we were to reveal how we respond to a call from a paedophile hunter group then this may also change the way they behave and this may then compromise a potential investigation.

In relation to mapped online child abuse groups, again if this information were revealed then it could then lead to such groups being aware that they may or may not have been mapped / associations which in turn could alter how we enforce the law in such circumstances.

Balancing Test

For a public interest test, issues that favour disclosure need to be measured against issues that favour non-disclosure. The public interest is not what interests the public, or a particular individual, but what will serve the greater good, if released, to the community as a whole. Where information does not impact on any future possible investigation, or where the detriment is not large, there is a public interest in providing information to ensure greater transparency. This is significant as it would help increase public confidence in the force, and may encourage more victims and witnesses to come forward to report crimes or suspected crimes to the police. However, the police service is responsible for enforcing the law, preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve, and the release of the requested information may have a negative impact on operational law enforcement and may put communities and individuals at risk.

As part of the policing purpose, information is gathered which can be highly sensitive relating to high profile investigative activity. Police forces work in conjunction with other agencies and on a daily basis information is freely shared in line with information sharing protocols. Modern day policing is intelligence led and this is particularly pertinent with regard to law enforcement. Weakening the mechanisms used to monitor any type of criminal activity, would place the security of the country at an increased level of danger.

Having considered the arguments for and against release, the public interest test favours non-release of material which directly impacts on any on-going or future investigations. The greater public interest is served in maintaining the integrity of the justice process, and this in turn favours maintaining the exemption in relation to the withheld material. West Midlands Police will not disclose information that could compromise the future law enforcement role of the force.