

72A/23 – Public Interest TestRequested Information

For the Calendar Years 2021 and 2022:

- 1. How many police officers and staff in your force have been reported for sexual assault*
- 2. How many of these reports resulted in professional disciplinary action of an officer or staff member?*
- 3. How many of these reports resulted in a conviction of an officer or staff member?*
- 4. How many of these reported officers/staff were removed from their job?*
- 5. How many of these reported officers/staff members are still part of your force?*

Applicable exemptions

Section 30(3) - Investigations and proceedings conducted by the public authority
Section 31(3) - Law enforcement
Section 38(2) - Health and safety

Harm

Sexual assault is a serious crime where one person intentionally touches another person sexually without their consent. No-one ever deserves or asks for it to happen, and it can have a lasting impact on the victim or survivor. The Police Service strive to deal with all aspects of it which includes dealing with police officers and staff who commit this type of offending. The College of Policing publish their Authorised Professional Practice on Rape and Sexual Offences which provides guidance to the Police Service when dealing with this offending.

Should officers or staff currently be subject to an investigation for an allegation(s) of sexual assault, it would likely ensue that in some cases formal charges may be made. However, we also need to consider that not all allegations are proven and may not lead to a formal charge. To confirm or deny that information is held would highlight that officers or staff are or are not currently subject to an investigation into offences of sexual offending. Such an awareness would also highlight to suspects that their victims have either reported their offending to the police or not, which either way could lead to further offending against their victims.

Irrespective of whether information is or isn't held, ongoing investigations would also be compromised if the offender were made aware an investigation into their behaviour is ongoing which would enable steps to be taken by them to destroy evidence or put pressure on their victims to drop their allegations.

Section 30 - Factors favouring complying with section 1(1)(a) confirming or denying information is held:

Confirming or denying whether information exists relevant to this request for the latest two calendar years, would lead to a better-informed general public by identifying that West Midlands Police robustly investigate all aspects of criminal offending, including allegations made against their own officers and staff members. This fact alone may encourage individuals to provide intelligence to assist with investigations and promote public trust in providing transparency and demonstrating openness and accountability into where the police are currently focusing their investigations.

Section 30 - Factors favouring not complying with section 1(1)(a) confirming or denying information is held:

Confirmation or denial that information is held for the questions in relation to the latest two calendar years, would suggest West Midlands Police do not take their responsibility to appropriately handle and manage intelligence supplied to them seriously.

Under FOI there is a requirement to comply with s1(1)(a) and confirm what information is held. In some cases, it is that confirmation or not, which could disclose facts which would undermine the investigative process and, in such cases, West Midlands Police takes advantage of its ability under FOI legislation to, where appropriate, neither confirm nor deny that information is or is not held.

Irrespective of what information is or isn't held, any information which could be used to undermine prosecutions or aid offenders to continue with their offending, is not in the public interest.

Section 31 – Factors favouring complying with section 1(1)(a) confirming or denying information is held:

Disclosure would provide transparency in the way police officers and staff are dealt with when suspected of carrying out a criminal offence such as a sexual assault and may improve public debate into the credibility of how West Midlands Police deals with these allegations within force. It would also serve to demonstrate that West Midlands Police is open and accountable.

Section 31 - Factors favouring not complying with section 1(1)(a) confirming or denying information is held:

To confirm or deny that information is held for recent calendar years, would risk undermining the investigative process whilst determining whether any officer or member of staff is responsible for improper conduct; including whether an allegation of this nature leading to police intervention was proportionate under the circumstances.

West Midlands Police has a duty of care to the community at large and public safety is of paramount importance. If a disclosure under FOI revealed information to the world (by citing an exemption or stating no information held) that would undermine an investigation and place the safety of an individual at risk, this could be used to offenders' advantage which would compromise any potential victims and public safety generally. It may also encourage offenders to carry out further crimes as detailed within the harm.

West Midlands Police relies on information being supplied by the public. Irrespective of what information is or isn't held, by applying substantive exemptions would indicate that information is held and there are currently ongoing investigations. Such action would act as a deterrent to the public to provide intelligence to the force which would further undermine public safety, with repercussions that could hinder the prevention or detection of crime.

Section 38 - Factors favouring complying with section 1(1)(a) confirming or denying information is held:

Confirmation of whether information is or isn't held would provide reassurance to the public that West Midlands Police take all allegations seriously. This awareness could be used to improve any public consultations/debates in relation to this subject and also allow the public to take steps to protect themselves.

Section 38 - Factors against complying with s1(1)(a) confirming or denying that information is held:

Confirming or denying that information exists could lead to the loss of public confidence in the Force's ability to protect the wellbeing of the community.

West Midlands Police has a duty of care towards the public and to reveal information via an FOI request which would place the safety of individuals in danger, is not in the public interest.

Balancing Test

The points above highlight the merits of confirming, or denying, whether any information pertinent to the questions exists. The Police Service is charged with enforcing the law, preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve. As part of that policing purpose, various operations may or may not be ongoing. The Police Service will never divulge whether information pertinent to the question does or does not exist, if to do so would place the safety of an individual(s) at risk, compromise an ongoing investigation or undermine the policing purpose in the effective delivery of operational law enforcement.

Whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of policing operations and investigations particularly in relation to our own officers and staff, providing reassurance that the Police Service is appropriately and effectively investigating current allegations of offending against West Midlands Police employees, there is a very strong public interest in safeguarding the health and safety of individuals. As much as there is a public interest in knowing that policing activity into allegations against 'its own' is appropriate and balanced it will only be overridden in exceptional circumstances.

Therefore, at this time, it is my opinion that the factors for confirming, or denying that information is held in relation to the calendar years 2021 and 2022 do not outweigh the factors against and the application of the exemptions is appropriate.

No inference can be taken from this refusal that information does or does not exist.