



KEY FACTS

AN INSPECTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE POLICE OMBUDSMAN FOR NORTHERN IRELAND'S INVESTIGATION OF ABUSE OF POSITION CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS

MARCH 2025



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WHAT ARE ABUSE OF POSITION CONCERNS OR COMPLAINTS?

Abuse of position (AoP) occurs when a Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) serving Police Officer or staff member abuses their powers, position or authority for an improper purpose.

AoP includes a range of offences and behaviours from misuse of a police computer, police records or phone to abusing their powers or position for sexual purposes or financial gain.

AoP undermines public confidence in policing and presents a reputational risk for the PSNI.

WHO DID WE INSPECT?

This inspection focussed on the role and work of the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (Police Ombudsman's Office) in investigating AoP concerns and complaints against Police Officers and staff.

We looked at how the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) engaged and co-operated with the Police Ombudsman's Office.

We also considered at the relationship between the Police Ombudsman's Office and the Department of Justice (DoJ).

WHAT DID WE LOOK AT?

We looked at how AoP concerns and complaints were initially assessed, investigated and progressed by the Police Ombudsman's Office. We also looked at the decision-making and determination process it applied.

Inspectors reviewed how the staff resources were structured and how staff worked to meet the needs and expectations of everyone linked to AoP investigations.





KEY FACTS



WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND?

- AoP cases were not specifically identified when they were referred to the Police Ombudsman's Office for investigation, making it difficult to obtain data or monitor these cases or assess outcomes.
- Police Ombudsman's Office staff were responsive to the individual needs of victims when these were made known and internal quality assurance arrangements were positive.
- Discrepancies existed between the data held by the PSNI's Professional Standards Department (PSD) and the Police Ombudsman's Office around the number of abuse of position for sexual purposes cases referred for investigation. This needs to be addressed.
- It took on average 129 days for the PPS to take a 'no prosecution' decision on AoP cases. Decisions to prosecute or offer diversion took an average of 366 days.
- It took on average almost one year for the PSNI's PSD to hold a misconduct meeting or hearing after receiving a file from the Police Ombudsman's Office for AoP and other cases.
- The Police Ombudsman's Office and the DoJ needed to improve their partnership working to achieve better outcomes.
- The PPS Policy on the Director of Public Prosecution's ability to refer cases to the Police Ombudsman's Office required updating.



KEY FACTS

WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED?

Inspectors made five strategic and six operational recommendations for improvement.

At a strategic (leadership) level:

- The Police Ombudsman's Office needs to develop a definition of AoP and an AoP Strategy that includes an approach for monitoring outcomes.
- The DoJ and the Police Ombudsman's Office should work together to improve their relationship and finalise a Partnership Agreement to ensure effective corporate governance arrangements are in place and there is mutual understanding of their respective aims, objectives and roles.
- The Office needs to develop a Workforce Strategy and Learning and Development Strategy to ensure future staffing requirements are understood and staff within the Police Ombudsman's Office have access to training and support to deliver a high-quality service.
- The PSNI needs to review and align its guidance to Police Officers and staff on maintaining professional boundaries with members of the public with the United Kingdom position. It should also review abuse of position for sexual purpose cases identified by the Police Ombudsman's Office to identify if any training needs exist and monitor the recording and referral of AoP for sexual purpose cases.
- The Police Ombudsman's Office needs to monitor the effectiveness of its policy recommendations in improving the PSNI's service delivery. The PSNI in turn, needs to monitor its performance after policy recommendations are implemented.

At an operational (on the ground) level:

- The DoJ needs to progress a legislative amendment to Section 59(3) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 to facilitate 'fast track' hearings where there is evidence of gross misconduct by a serving Police Officer.
- The DoJ, in partnership with the Police Ombudsman's Office, needs to review the Northern Ireland Victim Charter rights and obligations to ensure its entitlements are guaranteed for all victims of crime, including victims who report an alleged crime to the Police Ombudsman.
- The Police Ombudsman's Office needs to improve the effectiveness of its support to victims by producing an Action Plan which includes guidance and information on needs assessment and engagement with specialist support services when needed.
- The PPS needs to issue up-to-date guidance to Prosecutors regarding the Director of Public Prosecution's power of referral to the Police Ombudsman's Office and develop guidance for Prosecutors in respect of AoP for sexual purposes.
- The Police Ombudsman's Office and the PPS need to finalise and sign their working Protocol.
- The PSNI's need to develop and submit a business case for the resources needed to address delays in internal disciplinary proceedings.



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WHAT NEXT?

Inspectors want to see action by the Police Ombudsman's Office, the PSNI, the PPS and the DoJ to implement the inspection recommendations, build public and PSNI confidence in the effectiveness and timeliness of the handling of AoP allegations, concerns and complaints and learn lessons to improve policing in our community.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

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