

21 August 2025

FOI Ref 21719

Request - You asked us the following:

Please provide the information and data described below for the period 10 August 2020 to 10 August 2025 (inclusive).

Definitions for the purposes of this request:

- “Paedophile-hunter(s)” or “paedophile hunting groups” means non-police civilian organisations, groups or individuals who pose online or in person to identify, investigate, or arrange the meeting of persons suspected of intending to commit sexual offences against children and who then report those persons to the police (sometimes publicised on social media). If your records use a different term (for example “online vigilante”, “citizen sting”, “community watch”), please include those in the search and state which search terms you used.
- “NFA” means “no further action”.
- “Release pending investigation” means a reported suspect was released pending further enquiries.
- “Outcome” refers to the police/CPS/charging/final court outcome associated with the police investigation prompted by the report.

Please provide:

1. Annual counts (broken down by calendar year) of reports to your force by paedophile-hunter groups (or equivalent civilians) where the report alleged a sexual-related offence. For each year, include the total number of reported incidents.
2. For those reported incidents, provide the following aggregate breakdowns (tables) by year and ethnicity (as recorded in your records) of the alleged suspect(s):

Number of reports per ethnicity per year.

For each ethnicity × year cell, provide counts of outcome categories: NFA, released pending investigation, charged (CPS charged), convicted, acquitted / found not guilty, and other final outcomes. If multiple outcomes occurred (e.g. initially NFA then reopened), list the most recent final outcome and also provide a count of changes of outcome.

3. For each conviction counted in (2), please also provide the average custodial sentence length in months (mean and median), broken down by year and ethnicity. Where available, provide the individual sentence lengths (anonymised) so that averages can be independently calculated.

4. For the same set of reported incidents, provide counts by year for whether the initial contact involved a real child at the point of contact (Yes / No / Unknown). For those where “Yes”, provide the outcome categories as in (2) and sentencing length data as in (3) for convictions.

5. Provide counts by year of incidents where it was later found (after police investigation) that a real child was involved (i.e., child victim confirmed after investigation), and the outcomes (NFA, charged, convicted, acquitted, other). Provide sentencing length data as in (3) for convictions.

6. Provide counts and details of occasions where the paedophile-hunter team or individual who made the report was the subject of a police investigation as a result of their conduct (e.g., allegations of criminality, harassment, entrapment, misconduct). For these investigator-on-hunter cases, for each year provide:

Number of investigations opened into hunting teams/individuals.

Outcome of those investigations: NFA, charged, convicted, acquitted / found not guilty, internal discipline, or other. If prosecutions occurred, please provide offence codes, final court outcome, and sentencing length data as in (3) for convictions.

7. For all of the above items, where possible, provide the data as anonymised, machine-readable records (CSV or Excel) where each row corresponds to a single reported incident and contains the following columns (leave personal identifiers blank/redacted but keep categorical data):

Year (YYYY)

Reporting source type (e.g., named paedophile-hunter group; “unknown civilian group”; “member of public via social media”)

Suspect age group (e.g., <18, 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45+) as recorded

Suspect ethnicity (as recorded)

Whether initial contact involved an actual child at point of contact (Yes/No/Unknown)

Whether, after investigation, a child victim was confirmed (Yes/No/Unknown)

Initial police outcome (NFA / released pending investigation / charged / other)

Final outcome (NFA / charged / convicted / acquitted / other)

CPS decision (if applicable)

Whether the reporting hunting team/individual was investigated by police (Yes/No)

Outcome of any investigation into the hunting team/individual (NFA / charged / convicted / acquitted / disciplinary / other)

Offence codes and short description (as recorded)

Custodial sentence length in months (if convicted)

Any public-interest redactions applied (and the legal basis for withholding, if data is withheld)

8. If any part of this request is refused or withheld under an exemption, please:

identify the specific exemption(s) you are relying on,

state why the exemption applies in this case, and

provide the public interest test balancing that led to the decision.

9. If you consider any part of this request ambiguous, please provide the records you do hold that are closest to the request and explain briefly how you interpreted the ambiguous terms. If searching for “paedophile hunters” requires particular search terms or manual review, please supply the search terms used and an estimate of records that might require manual handling (and confirm if you will charge fees for that part).

10. Please supply the summary tables requested in (1)–(6) as CSV or Excel and the anonymised incident rows as a separate CSV/Excel attachment.

We received your request on 11/08/2025 and have processed this under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Staffordshire Police's response to your enquiry is as follows:

In accordance with Section 17(1) of the Freedom of Information Act, this letter represents a refusal notice for this particular request.

The following exemption has been applied:

- Section 12(1) where the cost of compliance exceeds the appropriate limit.
- Section 12(1) does not oblige a public authority to comply with a request for information if the authority estimates that the cost of complying with the request would exceed the prescribed limit'.

The above information has been withheld for the following reasons:

There is no method by which we can readily retrieve information from our systems to answer this request. For the time period requested, there have been in excess of 10,600 occurrences of child sex offences recorded. In order to ascertain whether the investigation for each occurrence involved input from a 'paedophile hunter group', the record for each offence would require lengthy manual review. Additionally, each offence would also have to be checked for any further information requested. To extract this data would therefore require a very labour-intensive manual trawl through each record.

From dip sampling, it has been estimated that it would take approximately 5 minutes to review each record to answer this request, this would equate to over 883 hours. To achieve this task would therefore exceed the 18-hour time and cost threshold of the Freedom of Information Act by some considerable margin.

Advice and assistance

Section 16 of the Act places an obligation upon the Authority to provide advice and assistance, in order to comply with this obligation please see below.

In order to refine your request a free text word search can be carried out on our occurrence management database for all child sex offences where the terms 'paedophile hunter/s' and 'paedophile hunting group/s' have been mentioned in the MO in the time period requested. Data can also be provided for suspect ethnicity, outcomes, whether the offence involved a real child and whether the hunting group were later investigated if this has been recorded. Please be advised that further exemptions may be applied.

Please note: The accuracy and reliability of these searches cannot be guaranteed as only the MO / summary field of the report is searched. If this term is mentioned elsewhere (i.e. within the call log, crime report, statements etc) these will not be returned in the results. Additionally, if the term is misspelt or different terminology has been used within the MO / summary field, this will not be returned. To provide accurate results would require manually interrogating each crime within the specified timeframe to establish its relevance to your request.



STAFFORDSHIRE
POLICE

Staffordshire Police do not hold conviction data. We would advise that you approach the Government HM Courts & Tribunals service website.

Please find below links to previously disclosed HMCTS data and details upon how to submit a further Freedom of Information request to the Government HM Courts and Tribunals Service for this information.

Make an FOI request - [how to make a request](#).

Check [our previous releases](#) to see if we've already answered your question - [our previous releases](#)

Make a new request by using the details below.

FOI requests

Disclosure Team

Postal Point 10.38, Floor 10

102 Petty France

London

SW1H 9AJ

United Kingdom

Email

data.access@justice.gov.uk

Please be advised that all Freedom of Information request responses are published on the Staffordshire Police website although personal details are not included.

Freedom of Information Request Appeals Procedure

1. Who Can Ask for a Review

Any person who has requested information from Staffordshire Police, which has been dealt with under the Freedom of Information Act, is entitled to complain and request an internal review, if they are dissatisfied with the response they received.

2. How to Request a Review

Requests for review of a Freedom of Information request must be made in writing within two months of the date of receipt of this email, and should be addressed to:

foi@staffordshire.police.uk

Or by Post to:

Central Disclosure Unit

Staffordshire Police HQ

PO Box 3167

Stafford

ST16 9JZ

The reference number, date of the request and details of why the review is being requested must be included. Requests for review should be brought to the attention of the Central Disclosure Unit within two months of the Force's response to the original FOI request.

3. Review Procedure

Receipt of a request for review will be acknowledged in writing. The review will be conducted by another Decision Maker who is independent from the original Decision Maker. The Central Disclosure Unit will set a target date for a response. The response will be made as soon as is practicable with the intention to complete the review within 20 working days. In more complex cases the review may take up to 40 working days.

The independent Decision Maker will conduct a review of the handling of the request for information and of decisions taken, including decisions taken about where the public interest lies in respect of exempt information where applicable. The review enables a re-evaluation of the case, taking into account the matters raised by the complaint.

4. Conclusion of the Appeal

On completion of the review the Independent Decision maker will reply to the complainant with the result of the review. If the complainant is still dissatisfied following the review they should contact the Information Commissioner to make an appeal. The Information Commissioner can be contacted via the following details:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

ICO Website for complaints link: <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/foi-and-eir-complaints/foi-and-eir-complaints/>

Freedom of Information
Central Disclosure Unit