



## **How to make a complaint**

A guide to the police  
complaints system

# Who deals with complaints about the police?

The majority of complaints are dealt with directly by police forces, usually by a specific department within the force – the professional standards department (PSD). If you complain via the IOPC, your complaint will be sent directly to the police force or local policing body involved. They will assess your complaint and contact you about how it will be handled.

This leaflet explains broadly how the police complaints system works. We also produce guidance for police forces about how we expect them to deal with complaints. This is available on our website, along with more detailed information for people using the complaints system.

## What must forces refer to the IOPC?

Police forces must refer certain serious allegations and incidents to us – for example, if someone dies or is seriously injured following contact with the police or if an allegation is made that a person serving with the police has seriously assaulted someone or committed a serious sexual offence.

## What do we expect of forces?

The IOPC expects police forces to take complaints seriously and sort out any issues the person has experienced. The police should learn from complaints to improve the way they do things and make changes to stop the same problem happening again.

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) oversees the police complaints system. We set standards that the police should follow when they handle complaints. We also investigate the most serious matters ourselves, such as those involving a death or serious injury following police contact or abuse of position for sexual purpose.

## How do you make a complaint?

If you're unhappy about something that happened to you that involves the police you can make a complaint. Police forces need to know what's wrong before they can try to make things better.



The best way to make a complaint is to contact the police force involved. Police force websites include information about how to complain. You can complain in writing, by telephoning 101 or visiting any police station.



If you are complaining in person, you can bring someone with you – such as a friend or advocate. If you prefer, someone can make a complaint on your behalf, but you must give your permission in writing for them to do this.



When you make a complaint, you can expect the police force to listen to you, act in a fair and balanced way, and seek to put things right.



A complaint form is available on the IOPC website. Please note if you complain to the IOPC using our form, it is sent directly to the police force involved. We do not keep a copy.

The force handling your complaint should:

- provide good customer service
- consider the individual circumstances of each case
- consider the wider context of the complaint
- make fair and effective decisions

### What can you expect?

Police forces must handle complaints in a reasonable and proportionate way. This means doing what is appropriate in the circumstances, taking into account the facts and the context in which the complaint is raised.

# What happens after you make a complaint?

» If your complaint can be dealt with quickly by giving you some information or explaining what happened, then the police should do this.

If your complaint needs to be looked into further, the PSD or your local policing body should record your complaint and let you know they have done this.



**Certain complaints must be formally recorded. You can also ask for your complaint to be formally recorded if you wish. Once a complaint is recorded, it must be dealt with according to additional rules and guidance.**

## Contacting you

The person dealing with your complaint should contact you to make sure they have all the details about your complaint. They should ask you what you want to happen. For example,

you might want an apology, a problem to be put right, or the police to be held responsible or learn from what went wrong.

The person dealing with your complaint will be able to tell you how they will deal with your complaint, and what is likely to happen as a result. For example, they may provide you with information or an explanation for what happened.

## Keeping you informed during a complaint

You must be kept informed about the progress of your complaint in writing. They should also ask how you would like to be kept informed – this could be by phone, letter, email or in person.



**You must receive an update at least every 28 days and at the end of your complaint.**

# How will the force handle your complaint?

## Handling your complaint without an investigation

The police force will assess your complaint and consider how to deal with your complaint in a reasonable and proportionate way. Some of the actions that could result from the handling of your complaint are:



information and/or an explanation could be provided



an apology could be given on behalf of the force



the force policy or procedures could be changed



an officer could reflect on their performance with their supervisor and take action



a supervisor could offer advice and identify training needs



sometimes it could be reasonable to take no further action

The person dealing with your complaint will let you know the outcome when they have looked into what happened. They may do this in person or on the phone, but they should also write to you.

## Handling your complaint with an investigation

» Most complaints will be handled without an investigation. However, in some circumstances, the police force or PSD will carry out an investigation into your complaint. Certain complaints must be dealt with in this way.

The person dealing with your complaint may set 'terms of reference'. Terms of reference explain what the investigation will look at. If these are produced, you should receive a copy.

Most investigations are carried out by the police force or PSD. The IOPC only investigate the most serious cases, such as those involving a death or serious injury following police contact.

### **When the investigation is complete**

When the investigation is complete, you will be told the outcome of the investigation. You will also be told whether any

action will be taken as a result of your complaint, what the action is and the outcome of that action.

For example, you may receive an apology or a force may change its policies or procedures. If the complaint is about someone serving with the police, they could be asked to reflect on their performance and make changes or they could face a police misconduct hearing. A police misconduct hearing could result in serious disciplinary actions such as a written warning, reduction in rank or dismissal.

You should be given enough information at the end of the

investigation to understand what has happened during the investigation, and what decisions have been reached. In most instances, you will be given a copy of the investigation report.

Regardless of the outcome of your complaint, the information you provide helps the police service and the IOPC to identify broader trends and patterns. It also helps us to identify learning to influence changes in policing.

## What if you are still unhappy?

- » If you are unhappy with the outcome of your complaint, you can apply for a review/appeal. The force you complained to should send you a letter or email that tells you whether you have a right of review/appeal.



If you have this right of review/appeal, the letter or email will also tell you which organisation will handle your review/appeal. This could be the police and crime commissioner, the police force or the IOPC, depending on how the complaint was dealt with. You have 28 days to apply for a review/appeal.

## How to find out more

All the information you need to make a complaint or apply for a review or appeal, is available online. You can visit your local police force website or the IOPC website:

**[www.policeconduct.gov.uk](http://www.policeconduct.gov.uk)**

You can also get information from any police station. Or you can call the IOPC Customer Contact Centre using the number below.

To obtain this leaflet in another language or format, please use the contact details below.



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[enquiries@policeconduct.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@policeconduct.gov.uk)



[www.policeconduct.gov.uk](http://www.policeconduct.gov.uk)



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We welcome calls in Welsh. This document is also available in Welsh.

*Rydym yn croesawu galwadau ffôn yn y Gymraeg.  
Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn y Gymraeg hefyd.*