How do I Make a Complaint Against the Police?

Are there grounds for a complaint?

When someone you care about goes missing your anxiety can be overwhelming, and if you report to the police you may well expect them to deal with the disappearance as an emergency. Once you have made your report the police will carry out an assessment of how at risk they consider the missing person to be, and the time and resources they give to the case will depend on that risk assessment. Read our guidance on What happens after you report someone missing to find out what you can expect from the police.

If the police assess that the person who is missing is at risk of harm, or vulnerable, you can expect them to investigate and keep you informed of the progress of that investigation. However, your local police station may not have a dedicated missing person's team, and you may find that you can't easily get through to someone who knows about your case, or you speak to a different person every time you ring.

It is important that you discuss and agree with the police what they are doing and intend to do, what you can expect from them, and who you can talk to, so that you have realistic expectations as to the progress of the search. If you feel frustrated or angry by what the police are, or are not, doing by way of investigation, or if you feel the police are not keeping you fully informed when they should be, you can talk to us at Missing People. We can help you to deal with the situation, for example, we may suggest that you talk to a senior police officer about your concerns.

If the police assess that the missing person is not at immediate risk they may not be able to give much, or any, time to investigating his or her disappearance. If you think the police should be doing more you could explain to them how you feel and why you think they should investigate. If someone close to you is out of touch, for example, the police may take the view that this is by choice, and they may not be prepared to assess the case as high risk. If you think he or she is at risk or vulnerable you should tell the police why you think so.

Again, if you remain in disagreement with the police regarding what should happen, you can ask us for advice, for example, we may suggest that you try to search in a different way using another organisation to help you.

If you would like information on how missing person investigations should be handled you can access the guidance for police on managing missing persons investigations on the NPIA website (http://www.soca.gov.uk/about-soca/missing-persons-bureau) or you can contact the UK Missing Persons Bureau directly for information on 08450 005 481 or missingpersonsbureau@npia.pnn.police.uk

It is important to be realistic about what the police can do, and consider whether making a formal complaint is appropriate.

Making a formal complaint

If you are not happy with the police investigation you may want to consider making a formal police complaint.

In England and Wales:

- A complaint about the policy or procedure of the police – for example if you wish to complain about how police resources have been used, or about the quality of service you have had from the police (for example how a phone call has been handled) - must be made to the police force concerned.

- A complaint about the conduct or behaviour of a police officer or member of staff should be made to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). A complaint form can be downloaded from their website, www.ipcc.gov.uk or requested on telephone number 08453 002002 or by email: enquiries@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk

In Scotland:

- All complaints are made to the police station concerned

- If you are not happy with the way your complaint is handled, you can apply for this to be reviewed by the Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland (PCCS). A complaint form can be downloaded from their website, www.pcc-scotland.org or requested on telephone number 0808 178 5577 or by email: enquiries@pcc-scotland.org

In Northern Ireland:

- The Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland (PONI) is responsible for investigating all complaints against the police. You can make a complaint either to the relevant police station, which will refer the complaint on to PONI, or you can make a complaint to PONI directly. Their website is www.policeombudsman.org, or you can telephone on 0845 6012931 or 0289082 8600 or email: info@policeombudsman.org

This guidance has been produced with the kind assistance of the Missing Persons Bureau

First Published: December 2011. Updated: May 2012

For further information and guidance on the issues addressed in this guidance sheet, or for support relating to any aspect of someone going missing, call Missing People's free and confidential 24 hour helpline on 116 000 or email 116000@missingpeople.org.uk

Whilst this information has been provided in good faith, it should not be taken as legal advice. For information tailored to your circumstances, please contact your police force, solicitor or an advisory organisation as appropriate to your query.

missing people
Registered Charity No. 1020419