

Date: 06/06/2025
Our ref: 01/FOI/25/014735/U

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST REFERENCE NO: 01/FOI/25/014735/U

I write in connection with your request for information dated 09/05/2025, received by Greater Manchester Police (GMP) for the following information:

I am writing to request the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, in relation to your force's Digital Forensics Unit.

1. Device Submissions and Backlog

- a. The number of devices currently awaiting examination.*
- b. As of the present day, the number of devices that have been awaiting examination for under 30 days, 30 days - 3 months, 3 – 6 months, 6 months – 1 year and 2 – 3 years, 3 – 4 years, 4 years +.*
- c. Your force's target turnaround time for completing forensic investigations.*

2. Staffing and Capacity

- a. The number of full-time equivalent staff currently working in the DFU, broken down by role if possible.*
- b. Any vacancies or staffing shortfalls affecting the DFU in the last 12 months.*

3. Accreditation and Quality

- a. Whether your DFU is accredited to ISO/IEC 17025, and if so, for which types of digital forensic activity.*

4. Efficiency Measures

- a. Whether your DFU uses triage processes or tools to prioritise devices or speed up examination.*
- b. Whether your force uses any form of AI or automation to support digital forensic work.*
- c. Whether any part of your digital forensic workload is outsourced to external providers, and if so, approximately what percentage.*

d. Please disclose any regional or national forensic units you've collaborated with within the past year.

Result of Searches

Following receipt of your request searches were conducted within Greater Manchester Police (GMP) to locate the requested information and I can confirm the information requested is held by GMP.

However, I am not obliged to supply you with all the information held as exemption applies.

Section 17 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires Greater Manchester Police, when refusing to provide such information (because this information is exempt) to provide you, the applicant, with a notice which: (a) states that fact, (b) specifies the exemption in question and (c) states (if that would not otherwise be apparent) why the exemption applies.

Parts of questions 2 (Staffing roles and any shortfalls) are exempt from disclosure by virtue of the following exemption: **Section 31(1)(a)(b) – Law Enforcement.**

Section 31 is a qualified and prejudice-based exemption and as such, subject to a harm and public interest test.

Harm

Freedom of Information Act request is not a private transaction. Both the request itself and any information disclosed, are considered suitable for open publication. This is because under the Act, any information disclosed is released into the wider public domain, effectively to the world, not just to an individual.

Whilst not questioning the motives of the applicant, providing any further information relating to the specific number of staffing levels roles and any potential shortfalls within Greater Manchester Police would reveal our operational capability, which would be of intelligence value to criminals.

Disclosure of resources at the police's disposal, including resources aimed at tackling digital forensics will mean that those members of the public who are intent on malicious activities such as hacking, or organised criminals could tailor their activities to exploit those gaps. Examples of this could be launching excessive cyber-attacks if it was found GMP had any shortfalls in the prevention of this.

There is always a duty of care to the general public and the Police Service has a clear responsibility to ensure the prevention or detection of crime, and the apprehension or prosecution of offenders is always delivered. There are several tactics available to the Police Service to ensure the effective delivery of operational law enforcement. In this case, specialist policing activity is required to undertake fair investigations where it may be necessary to progress a range of reasonable lines of enquiry.

As such, the disclosure of any further information which could hinder the forces law enforcement functions cannot be in the public interest.

Factors favouring disclosure for S31 - Where public funds are being spent, there is a public interest in accountability and justifying the use of public money. Disclosure of the requested information would enable the public to assess whether the force has appropriately taken steps to help reduce and detect crime.

Furthermore, release would enhance public debate as to whether the force is appropriately and effectively engaging with the threat posed by criminals.

Factors against disclosure for S31 – Releasing information into the public domain that may identify any roles which may have staffing shortfalls such as evidence examiners, malware analysts etc could encourage those wishing to commit offences to use specific technologies to undermine investigations

or cause delay to investigators. This could lead to public confidence weakening if criminals are able to exploit this area of crime.

Disclosure of the number of staff per role could endanger the safety of individuals working in these sensitive forensic roles.

To release information relating to operational capacity for certain roles and capability utilised for preventing crime, gathering intelligence would have a detrimental effect on our policing capabilities. Therefore, to mitigate any risks, disclosure of this information needs to be protected, to ensure that those with intent to do so cannot manipulate it or undermine its purpose in any way.

Any disclosure of information which would compromise law enforcement tactics and thus lead to more crime being committed by reducing the opportunity for the prevention and detection of crime, would therefore increase the risk to public safety, which is not in the public interest.

Balance Test

Law enforcement is of paramount importance and the Police service will not disclose information if to do so would undermine its purpose and place the safety of individual(s) at risk. Whilst there is a public interest in the transparency of using public money in policing appropriately and effectively engaging with the threat posed by criminals, there is a very strong public interest in safeguarding the integrity of police investigations and operations in this area.

As much as there is public interest in knowing that policing activity is appropriate and balanced in matters of law enforcement, this will only be overridden in exceptional circumstances. Any disclosure which hinders our capability and assists criminals cannot be in the public interest.

It is for these reasons that I have determined that the balance test favours non-disclosure of the requested information.

Please see the remaining information which can be disclosed.

Question 1.

- A. 1349
- B. Under 30 Days = 408, 30 Days – 3 Months = 580, 3 – 6 months = 314, 6 months – 1 year = 47.
- C. Turnaround times vary depending on the stage at which the investigation is at and the priority the case in question. A case by case adoption is used.

Question 2.

- A. 75.5 overall staff - See exemption above for the remainder.
- B. See exemption above.

Question 3.

GMP Forensic Services on behalf of The Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police is a UKAS accredited testing and inspection body No. 4470. The Full Scope of the unit's accreditation can be found on the UKAS website.

Question 4.

- A. Yes, all. Both triage processes and tools are utilised but not only speed up examinations but to manage the risk.
- B. Yes.
- C. No.
- D. We regular collaborate with regional and national forensic units such as at quarterly/annual.