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RUC criticised over refusal to probe Omagh cash claims

(Barry McCaffrey, [Irish News](#))

The Police Ombudsman has strongly criticised the RUC for refusing to investigate allegations that £170,000 may have gone missing after a series of high-profile football matches in aid of the Omagh bomb victims.

In 1999 Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool took part in games in aid of the families of those killed in the Real IRA attack in the Co Tyrone town centre the previous year.

The sell-out matches attracted huge media attention and reportedly raised more than £200,000.

However, shortly afterwards allegations emerged that tens of thousands of pounds may have gone missing, with the Omagh fund reported to have received just £30,000.

In February 2001 families of the Omagh victims asked police to investigate if money had been misappropriated.

However, Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was killed in the atrocity, claimed police told him they could not investigate his complaint as he was "not an interested party".

In 2005 Mr Gallagher made a complaint to the ombudsman.

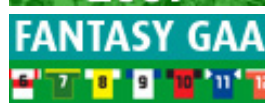
Delivering the ombudsman's findings yesterday (Thursday), acting senior director of investigations John Larkin said the decision was "clearly flawed".

"By not conducting even a preliminary inquiry the police decision prevented the potential to secure and preserve evidence that could have established the facts," he said.

"The concerns which were being raised were of a serious nature and there was an issue of public interest that required investigation.

"By insisting that the Omagh Support and Self Help Group was not an 'interested party' the police were ruling out an investigation into allegations which had gripped the town and the media and become the subject of two major television

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documentaries.

"Clearly such an investigation, particularly given the background of the awful events of August 15 1998, was in the public interest."

PSNI Detective Chief Superintendent Norman Baxter said: "I have overseen a police investigation into allegations about the misappropriation of funds raised by the memorial football match played in Omagh in 1999.

"The investigation has found no evidence to support allegations that people misappropriated funds for personal gain.

"Investigators have concluded that no crime has been committed."

However, Mr Gallagher last night questioned the PSNI's handling of the families' concerns.

"It's highly dubious that on the day the ombudsman criticises the RUC's treatment of the Omagh victims the PSNI chooses to release a statement saying there was no theft," he said.

"For two years we have heard little or nothing from this investigation.

"The allegations of missing money could have been resolved in 2001 but the RUC refused to act.

"It's just another example of how the Omagh families have been totally let down by the system."

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