

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 00.01 ON FRIDAY 3 JULY 2026**



# **The Police Service of Northern Ireland**

**An inspection of police effectiveness,  
efficiency and legitimacy**

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# Overall summary

## Our judgments

Our inspection assessed how good the Police Service of Northern Ireland is in two areas of policing. We make graded judgments as follows:

Area	Grade
Attracting, developing and retaining the workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace	Adequate
Using powers fairly, appropriately and with justification	Adequate

We set out our detailed findings about things the service is doing well and where it should improve in the rest of this report.

## PEEL 2025–2027

In 2014, we introduced our police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections, which assess the performance of all 43 police forces in England and Wales. Since then, we have been continuously adapting our approach.

We assess forces against the [characteristics of good](#) performance, set out in the [PEEL assessment framework 2025–2027](#), and we more clearly link our judgments to [causes of concern](#) and [areas for improvement](#).

It isn't possible to make direct comparisons between the grades awarded in this PEEL inspection and those from previous inspections. This is because we have increased our focus on making sure forces are achieving appropriate outcomes for the public. We have also changed the aspects of policing we inspect and added new areas.

## Our commission

[Section 41\(2\) of the Police \(Northern Ireland\) Act 1998](#) requires us to inspect and report to the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) on the efficiency and effectiveness of the Police Service of Northern Ireland each year.

In 2025, the Minister of Justice for Northern Ireland commissioned us to inspect the service in accordance with the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998. They asked us to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the service in relation to:

- attracting, developing and retaining the workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace; and
- using its powers fairly, appropriately and with justification.

## **The Police Service of Northern Ireland**

The Police Service of Northern Ireland differs from English and Welsh forces due to the political and social context in which it operates. There is still a significant divide between communities in Northern Ireland, most often based on political opinion and religious belief. Service [personnel](#) continue to be under threat from terrorist groups. The service is continuing to try and build trust, although there are still some communities where people are unwilling to work with the service for fear of reprisals. This means that policing in Northern Ireland is different to that in England and Wales.

It is also important to note that some legislation in Northern Ireland differs from that in England and Wales. This includes, for example, specific criminal offences, [powers to stop and search](#) and the [PACE Codes of Practice](#).

To reflect those differences, we have adapted the methodology that we use in our PEEL inspections of police forces in England and Wales.

## **About the data**

Data included in this report comes from a range of sources, including:

- [statistics published by the service](#);
- our inspection fieldwork; and
- data provided by the service as part of our document reviews.

## **HM Inspector's summary**

Long-term budget reductions and periods of no recruitment have led to a decline in [officer](#) and [staff](#) numbers. This decline, made worse by high levels of sickness absence and [duty adjustments](#), has reduced the service's overall operational capacity.

To meet operational demand and to overcome resource gaps, the service frequently uses overtime and cancels officers' rest days, often at short notice. Ongoing high demand and lack of capacity continue to contribute to high levels of fatigue and burnout.

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Continued uncertainty about Northern Ireland's funding arrangements means that the service often doesn't know its operating budget until halfway through the financial year. This makes strategic workforce planning difficult. It also affects the timeliness of inflation-related pay awards, which can take the service a long time to implement. Such delays continue to have an impact on workforce morale.

Since our [last inspection in 2024](#), the service has restarted officer and staff recruitment, despite the risk of no additional funding. As late as November 2025, it received a one-year funding uplift, but longer-term funding remains uncertain.

The service is determined to increase officer and staff numbers by 2028. At the time of our inspection, the capacity of its training facilities was limiting the number of officers it could recruit. However, I was pleased to learn that it was investing in a new training venue. When complete, this development will allow the service to train more student officers at the same time and thereby increase the number it can recruit.

The service's decision to freeze student officer recruitment has inevitably reduced its ability to appoint officers to [neighbourhood](#) and local policing teams. This, in turn, has limited its ability to move existing officers to fill vacancies in other departments, such as investigations.

The service predicts it will take several years before it can restore enough capacity in these specialist areas. In the meantime, it won't have enough detectives to meet demand. There is a risk that ongoing workload pressures will affect the well-being and performance of people in these roles and their willingness to stay. The service aims to mitigate these risks through its workforce recovery plan, which sets out an evidence-based case for additional funding to increase its workforce.

The service suspended its use of professional development reviews in 2023. Since then, it hasn't had a structured process for supervisors to hold one-to-one meetings or record officer and staff well-being and development needs. This limits performance management and the service's ability to support its workforce. The service intends to introduce a new system, and we will assess its effectiveness once implemented.

The service is committed to supporting workforce health and well-being and has received external recognition for this. It has a CARE framework, which offers an extensive range of psychological well-being resources. However, I am concerned about the high levels of mental health-related absence and duty adjustments as well as the high proportion of officers applying for ill-health retirement. At the time of our inspection, the service still didn't have a psychological screening programme for personnel working in high-risk or emotionally demanding roles. Without adequate screening and support, the workforce is at greater risk of harm. Therefore, the service needs to improve its provision to officers and staff.

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We found that officers' use of force and [stop and search](#) powers was reasonable and proportionate. They were courteous while using these powers. However, officers' record keeping and standards of supervision need to improve.

Stop and search is an important aspect of detecting and preventing crime and keeping the public safe. However, having fewer officers to meet demand means that there is less time for it. During our inspection, we identified that the rate at which the service used stop and search was the lowest since records began 20 years ago.

We found that stop and search and use of force had effective oversight and scrutiny. We observed independent, robust and effective scrutiny of how the service exercised its powers. And we found that the service was open, receptive and responsive to feedback.

During our inspection, we were again impressed by the professionalism and dedication of officers and staff. Despite the service's many challenges, there remains an unwavering commitment to keeping people safe, preventing crime and providing [victims](#) with an effective service.



**Lee Freeman KPM**

His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

# Attracting, developing and retaining the workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace

## Adequate

The Police Service of Northern Ireland is adequate at attracting, developing and retaining its workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace.

### Areas for improvement

**The service should progress the implementation of its new professional development review system and make sure its workforce uses it consistently and effectively**

At the time of our inspection, the service hadn't held professional development reviews (PDRs) since 2023. It told us that it withdrew the previous system due to poor functionality, internal audit findings and negative workforce feedback. Although some informal conversations continued, the service couldn't monitor how many took place, how often they occurred or how effective they were. This meant that the service had no single, reliable process to assess competence, recognise good performance, support progression or record unsatisfactory performance. It is important for line managers to hold regular one-to-one meetings with their team members. They should record when meetings take place and document the main discussions.

In consultation with the workforce, the service has developed a new approach to PDRs called PDRChat. 'Chat' stands for:

- coaching for performance;
- health and well-being;
- ambition; and
- tenure.

At the time of our inspection, the service was planning to introduce PDRChat in January 2026 and had started training supervisors. It intends PDRChat meetings to take place on the anniversary of each person's start date. This should spread demand across the year, but it may take up to 12 months before all [officers](#) and [staff](#) have their first PDRChat meeting.

To be effective, PDRChat needs to help supervisors, officers and staff record development needs and track progress. Without this, supervisors and their teams will have no formal systems or processes to document development actions or monitor improvement. This is particularly important given that more than 300 officers and staff were in temporary promotions before our inspection, some for extended periods of time. Service policy requires supervisors to record development needs before and after temporary promotion. The lack of an effective PDR system limits the service's ability to meet this requirement and support [personnel](#) appropriately.

The service should monitor PDR completion rates and quality. During our inspection, we were told that supervisors often treated the previous system as a tick-box exercise. And it provided limited value because they didn't have time to complete it properly.

To make PDRChat a trusted and valued system, the service needs to make sure that supervisors allocate enough time to complete meetings and actively support progress against any agreed actions. This will help the service build a more consistent and meaningful approach to PDRs.

**The service should assess the psychological risks associated with its roles, introduce a structured screening programme and offer appropriate support to officers and staff exposed to higher risks**

The service has recorded workforce psychological well-being as a strategic risk on its corporate risk register. It recognises that unmanaged psychological harm can affect operational performance and organisational resilience. Family liaison officers and [officers](#) and [staff](#) who routinely deal with traumatic events and material such as online [child](#) abuse imagery are among those most exposed to psychological risk.

The service told us that between 2020 and 2025, average officer sickness absence increased from 11.17 to 21.91 days per year. Of those absences, 52.8 percent were linked to psychological factors. It also told us that that over the same period, the number of referrals to the [occupational health unit](#) increased by more than 1,000 cases per year. These included referrals for mental health support and musculoskeletal injuries as well as more routine cases such as vaccinations and fitness-for-work assessments.

At the time of our inspection, officers and staff who had been referred for mental health support faced a four-month wait to be seen. Although the wait has decreased from over 12 months in previous years and not all referrals relate to officers and staff in high-risk roles, the service should take proactive steps to reduce risk to mental health and well-being.

The service is also receiving a growing number of ill-health retirement applications, with many relating to post-traumatic stress disorder. These trends reduce workforce availability and suggest the service's approach to preventing mental health problems isn't fully effective.

The National Police Wellbeing Service, more commonly known as [Oscar Kilo](#), has identified roles that have the highest risk of psychological harm. It recommends that officers and staff in these roles undergo continual psychological assessment and, when necessary, receive targeted preventative measures and support.

The service's approach to health and well-being has many levels. It has introduced a CARE framework, which combines psychological education, self-assessment, training, support, tools and questionnaires. The service's Modified Group Traumatic Episode Protocol, a peer-led trauma intervention programme, was highly commended in the [2025 Oscar Kilo awards](#) 'Trauma and suicide prevention' category. It has led to reductions in distress, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms among [personnel](#) who have experienced traumatic events.

However, at the time of our inspection, the service didn't provide preventative health screening or routine psychological support for officers and staff before they enter high-risk roles or while they work in them. Although it was developing a psychological screening plan, it hadn't yet finalised or implemented it. This left some personnel in high-risk roles without consistent and preventative support. It is important to note that forces in England and Wales can access funding to support psychological screening. However, the service can't access this funding.

## **Innovative practice**

### **'Supporting Those That Serve' and 'Friends and Family Evenings' help families support officers' health and well-being**

'Supporting Those That Serve' is the service's programme to help [officers](#)' families understand the realities of policing in Northern Ireland and how they can best support their loved ones. The service offers a wide range of resources to raise awareness of available support, including a comprehensive family handbook, pocket-sized guides and podcasts.

The service also holds a Friends and Family Evening for new student officers after they pass their final exams. [Occupational health](#), the [Police College](#) and peer support team volunteers attend these events to share well-being resources. All members of the senior leadership team take turns to lead them. They are accessible to the audience and speak about the importance of health and well-being, encouraging officers to access the support available when they need it. Attendees consistently provide positive feedback about the event and the support materials the service offers.

Given the complex operating environment and ongoing security concerns in Northern Ireland, the service has developed a safe and meaningful way to connect with officers' families and friends. The service intends the initiative to change culture, reduce stigma and make sure that no officer or their family feels unsupported.

In recognition of this programme, the service was runner-up in the [2025 Oscar Kilo awards](#) 'Families and Leavers' category.

## **Main findings**

In this section, we set out our main findings that relate to how good the service is at attracting, developing and retaining its workforce and creating a diverse and inclusive workplace.

### **The service continues to face financial pressures, which affect its ability to deal with demand**

In the year ending 31 March 2023, the service, faced with ongoing funding shortfalls, took the difficult decision to pause officer recruitment and introduce strict vacancy management controls. It applied similar restrictions to staff vacancies. It told us that, between the year ending 31 March 2021 and the year ending 31 July 2025, officer numbers decreased from 7,008 to 6,267 and staff numbers decreased from 2,574 to 2,266.

In our [previous inspection report](#), published in April 2025, we highlighted the effect that reduced workforce numbers were having on [neighbourhood policing](#) and investigations teams. They have led to officers and staff working under added pressure. To meet demand, the service often uses overtime and cancels officers' leave and rest days. This leads to fatigue and burnout.

In January 2025, the service produced a workforce recovery plan and a business case for increased funding. The business case set out how reduced budgets were affecting the size and capability of the workforce and limiting the service's ability to meet demand. It also highlighted the effects on the health and well-being of its workforce. The service submitted its case to the Northern Ireland Executive and received a sympathetic response. However, at the time of our inspection, it was still

waiting for a firm commitment from the Northern Ireland Executive to improve its financial position. This combined with uncertain annual funding arrangements continues to constrain the service's ability to address workforce pressures.

### **Northern Ireland's financial arrangements limit the effectiveness of strategic workforce planning**

The funding arrangements for Northern Ireland and delays in notification of funding arrangements mean that the service often doesn't know its operating budget until halfway through the financial year. The lack of funds and this uncertainty make it difficult for the service to develop and implement a strategic workforce plan.

### **The service has restarted officer and staff recruitment**

In 2025, the service decided to restart officer and staff recruitment, despite budgetary uncertainty. In doing so, it ran the risk it wouldn't get the extra funding it needed to cover the increase.

Under its workforce recovery plan, the service aims to increase its headcount by 642 officers by 2028. It projects that to reach this number and replace officers who leave during the same period, it needs to recruit 1,700 officers. Due to limitations in its training facilities, it can only recruit and train a maximum of 51 officers per month. It has bought a new site, which it plans to develop into a new police college. At the time of our inspection, the service was starting to develop the business case for a new facility. However, it anticipates that it will be more than five years before it is built, and progress will be subject to prioritisation and provision of funding by the Northern Ireland Executive.

By 2028, the service also plans to recruit 730 staff to increase its staff headcount to 2,500. This will support its plan to make best use of its resources, which includes reassigning police officers from back-office functions to more operational roles.

### **The service doesn't have enough accredited detectives**

The service's workforce recovery plan highlights its lack of investigative capability and capacity along with areas of growing demand. Although the service has a crime faculty, which can provide investigation training, it told us that it didn't have enough accredited detectives.

This shortage exists because, at the time of our inspection, the service was unwilling to release officers from neighbourhood or local policing roles to fill investigative posts. To do so would leave local policing and neighbourhoods with fewer resources and increasing reliance on less experienced officers. Although officer recruitment had restarted, senior leaders told us that it might take up to two years before they could start to fill investigative positions. As a result, the problems associated with a lack of investigative capacity, high workloads and low morale will persist.

The service told us that detectives' workloads were high and investigation teams had vacancies. In our last inspection, we highlighted the significant demand on detectives in public protection branch (PPB) roles, including those responsible for managing offenders. We reported that the service needed to reduce the ratio of offenders to offender managers. During this inspection, we revisited the PPB to assess progress. Officers told us that workloads had increased rather than decreased. PPB leaders weren't aware of any service-wide plan to address these resource problems. This lack of progress means that the service continues to expose its officers to high caseloads and risks not managing high-harm offenders effectively. The service should communicate its plans to increase investigative resources to its workforce and make sure that these plans progress promptly.

The service told us that a crime mentoring scheme was in place to support detectives. However, few of the officers and staff we spoke to were aware of it, and those who were, said they were unable to take part due to workload pressures. We found that officers weren't using the scheme to its full potential.

### **The service doesn't consistently provide officers and staff with specialist skills for investigative work**

While officers in the offender investigation unit felt that they had received the right training for their roles, we found that the training provision in the PPB was inconsistent. Some officers and staff told us that they lacked the skills needed for essential tasks such as examining digital devices. Gaps in specialist capability increase the risk that investigations are delayed, incomplete or reliant on personnel who aren't fully competent.

The service told us that it planned to recruit 20 staff investigators during 2026. While this is to be welcomed, as it may allow the service to appoint experienced investigators, it is unlikely to have much effect on overall resilience.

### **The service provides effective training for neighbourhood policing**

The service has developed a comprehensive neighbourhood policing training programme, which it provides through its neighbourhood faculty. Training is based on a detailed training needs analysis completed by Ulster University. This recorded the views of communities in Northern Ireland and officers on what was needed for effective neighbourhood policing. Courses are based on the [competency and values framework](#) and the [Hallmarks of Neighbourhood Policing](#). The neighbourhood policing hallmarks align with the [College of Policing's](#) neighbourhood policing performance framework.

The service told us that during 2024/25, it provided 652 training places for neighbourhood officers and 54 neighbourhood policing courses. The neighbourhood sergeants we met during our inspection told us that their teams had received training on problem-solving, data use and hotspot identification.

## **Temporary supervisors need better structured development and training**

As [first-line supervisors](#), sergeants have a critical role in setting and enforcing standards. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that it had temporarily promoted 387 officers and staff, including 301 constables who were promoted to sergeant. Many of these sergeants have had no previous leadership or supervisory training to equip them for the role. The service also told us that it was due to permanently promote a further 200 constables to sergeant.

Officers and staff told us that the service relied on peer-to-peer learning rather than formal supervisor training. However, at the time of our inspection, the service had recently introduced a two-day supervisors' training course for sergeants and a two-day course for inspectors. The supervisors' course is a positive step, but we heard of some sergeants who had course start dates more than six months after promotion. The service should speed up the provision of this training.

## **The service has a clear understanding of the well-being challenges of its workforce**

The service has a clear understanding of the well-being challenges of its workforce, which are set out in its workforce recovery business case. Officers and staff face persistently high workloads due to reductions in headcount.

The service told us that it had almost 1,200 officers with some form of [duty adjustment](#). These were a mixture of permanent duty adjustments for those with a long-term health condition and short-term recuperative duty adjustments for those recovering from injury. According to the service's own research, this was between 7 and 8 percent higher than the figure in three of the largest urban forces in England and Wales. It also told us that it had over 500 officers off sick. This number included both long-term sickness absence (including officers awaiting ill-health retirement) and short-term sickness absence. It told us that, although average working days lost had been decreasing over the previous six months, the amount of sickness absence was consistent with its long-term trends. This means that the service typically has only around 4,800 fully deployable officers, which is 75 percent of its headcount.

According to the service's own research, there is a correlation between the reduction in workforce numbers and rising levels of sickness.

Health and well-being is a strategic priority for the service and forms part of the annual performance plan 2025–2026. It includes well-being-related performance measures and an extensive range of well-being support. Notably, the service was the winner of the 'Healthy Living' category at the [2025 Oscar Kilo awards](#) for its innovative 'Watch Your Wellbeing' initiative. This is a comprehensive programme designed to improve physical and emotional well-being across the service.

The service communicates with workforce members and acts on information and feedback to improve their well-being. We found that the senior leadership team provided visible support for well-being and emphasised the importance of asking for help when needed. This included the chief constable, who speaks about well-being at officer and staff events.

Staff and officers access health and well-being support via the ME app. This is a self-assessment and referral app for workforce well-being. It guides users to a range of options, including peer support, one-to-one physical training sessions, free physiotherapy sessions and cognitive behavioural therapy. However, when we asked about the ME app in focus groups, not everyone had heard of it. Those who had were reluctant to use it and preferred to speak to somebody from the occupational health unit in person. To get the full benefits from the app, the service should promote the app's aims and purpose more effectively.

The service regularly surveys users of health and well-being support and tracks data on referrals and waiting times. In response, it has increased investment in its health and well-being services. It has recruited two cognitive behavioural therapists to the health and well-being services team. At the time of our inspection, it was planning to recruit two more therapists by mid-2026. It hopes this increase will reduce delays in referral times so that personnel referred to the occupational health unit for mental health support are seen within three months. Officers and staff told us that they welcomed this, as waiting times were a concern. We encourage the service to prioritise the recruitment of additional cognitive behavioural therapists.

### **Consistently high workloads are adversely affecting workforce health and well-being**

Officers and staff we spoke to raised concerns about unmanageable workloads and working hours. Neighbourhood officers told us that their teams were short-staffed and that the resourcing team regularly [abstracted](#) them from their roles to help local policing teams cover other events. This resulted in frequent shift changes and cancelled rest days. It affected officers' capacity to focus on neighbourhood priorities and limited their opportunities to work with local communities. Short-notice changes of duty led to regular cancellation of meetings with local partner agencies.

Neighbourhood officers said this led to strained working relationships and a lack of faith in the reliability of the service. In addition, short-notice changes of duty and a requirement to work overtime often had negative effects on officers' work-life balance and contributed to stress and anxiety.

Local policing officers said their teams were also short-staffed and that they were working their rest days to meet demand. They told us that they didn't get breaks and worked unpaid overtime to manage their high workloads. Due to the need to respond to calls, they didn't get time to work on investigations, which affects the service they provide to [victims](#) of crime.

### **The service understands why people are leaving its workforce, but it doesn't make effective use of 'stay' interviews**

The service carries out exit interviews and collects data on leavers' reasons for leaving, their length of service and relevant equality information. The people and organisational development department collates and reviews this data and shares its findings with senior leaders and the [Northern Ireland Policing Board](#). We heard in focus groups that the service didn't always use independent line managers to hold exit interviews. This means that leavers may not always feel able to speak freely about their reasons for leaving. The service should change the process so that people who are independent of the leavers' line management hold the exit interviews.

The service doesn't have a structured approach to ['stay' interviews](#). It told us that, as part of the new PDRChat process, managers should discuss career progression and workforce members' intentions to remain in the service. At the time of our inspection, the service was planning to introduce PDRChat in January 2026, so we were unable to assess its effectiveness. However, without a consistent approach to stay interviews, the service risks missing opportunities to identify and address factors that influence retention before officers and staff decide to leave.

The service's own analysis shows that the main reasons why officers leave are ill-health retirement, normal retirement or deciding to leave early. It has recently surveyed its workforce but didn't include questions on whether respondents wanted to stay or leave. However, the service recognises the need to give increased support to student and probationary officers who may otherwise decide to leave their police career early.

The service is aware of some of the challenges faced by [under-represented groups](#). It offers supportive measures and incentives to overcome these issues but doesn't evaluate their effectiveness.

### **The competency and values framework isn't always suited to specialist roles**

We found that the service's use of the competency and values framework could hinder its ability to recruit staff with the right skills for technical roles. This is because the framework wasn't designed to assess the capabilities and skills required to perform technical roles. Staff working in IT or [cybersecurity](#) told us that the framework didn't place as much value on these skills as the commercial sector. They also said that the service couldn't match private sector pay. This means that the service often loses staff to the private sector once they have completed their training and become competent, which leads to high staff turnover and associated costs.

## **The service continues to face difficulties in attracting applicants to its workforce from all sectors of the community**

We found that the service was working hard to make sure its workforce was representative of the communities it served. The '[Northern Ireland Policing Plan 2025–2030](#)' includes explicit commitments to developing a representative workforce. The annual performance plan provides supporting quantitative and qualitative measures, such as workforce diversity in recruitment campaigns, turnover rates, exit interview trends and evaluation of outreach initiatives.

Achieving a representative workforce continues to be difficult for the service. The 2021 Northern Ireland Census showed that 45.7 percent of the population have a Catholic background. According to service data, however, Catholic officer representation has stayed at around 30 percent over the past decade, while Catholic staff representation has stayed at around 20 percent. The service recognises that improving these levels will become more difficult because of the decision to freeze student officer recruitment and as existing officers leave.

The complex operating environment in Northern Ireland continues to limit the service's ability to carry out effective recruitment and outreach. Historical tensions between the police and some communities affect levels of trust. This has led to some people being reluctant to work with the service or consider policing as a viable career. Applications from some counties are still low. The terrorism threat against members of the service remains high, and some new recruits have to change where they live for safety reasons. This means that they often distance themselves from family and friends, both geographically and in terms of involvement. These barriers reduce the pool of applicants from diverse communities, which means that the service faces greater challenges than forces in England and Wales in attracting and retaining people from under-represented groups.

## **The service is committed to recruiting a workforce that is representative of its communities**

The service focuses some of its social media campaigns on minority communities. This supports its aim of increasing applications to join the service from members of nationalist communities. The service also runs 'Reference, Engagement and Listening' events with different communities. Members of the senior leadership team have supported these events in person, where they have shared their experiences of policing and answered questions from the public.

The service's strategic community engagement group promotes policing careers to diverse audiences. The service also supports career events. These are opportunities for prospective applicants to find out about the demands and opportunities of a policing career.

Neighbourhood policing teams have an important role in developing trust with under-represented groups. Despite ongoing resistance in some areas, officers attend

Catholic schools and meet with the community to raise awareness of opportunities to join the service. The Catholic Police Guild also supports this work. Officers involved in this work told us that sustained involvement had led to some of the young people they met expressing an interest in policing as a career.

The service uses targeted outreach, such as social media and events at Gaelic football matches, and has redesigned its recruitment campaigns based on community feedback. The focus is now on showing the service as an employer of choice. These actions show that the service is taking responsive and proactive steps to increasing its attractiveness to potential applicants.

### **The service is trying to improve retention and development of people from diverse groups**

According to the service, the recruitment campaign started in 2025 was showing encouraging signs. The HR department is working with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to collate and analyse data on recruitment attrition levels. These measure the percentage of applicants who accept offers of appointment but then drop out of the process.

The service told us that, when compared to previous recruitment campaigns, there were improved application rates from ethnic minority candidates, higher success rates among Catholic applicants and more applications from candidates with disabilities. Data collection also includes attrition at the various stages of recruitment and training. The service has found that attrition rates for existing Catholic officers are higher than those for Protestant officers. It told us that it was working to understand why this was and what steps it could take to address it.

The service has introduced targeted initiatives to support under-represented groups, particularly women in specialist roles. The people we interviewed gave examples of bespoke development days for women who were applying to firearms and armed response roles. These included coaching, mentoring and practical skills sessions to address barriers shown through analysis of previous recruitment cycles. Interviewees from the HR department told us that eligible officers and staff from under-represented groups could apply to the College of Policing's [Aspire leadership development programme](#), which aims to support career development.

### **The service could be better at communicating its positive action plans and evaluating their effectiveness**

Some staff and officers told us that the service supported [positive action](#). However, others were less satisfied and said that activity in this area was limited to posters and occasional community events. They described an absence of structured talent management support for women and other under-represented groups as well as limited involvement with staff networks. Although some officers spoke of a cohesive workforce culture, not everyone agreed that the service communicated positive action initiatives effectively or applied them consistently.

While the service shows a willingness to support the development of people from under-represented groups, it should evaluate the benefits of its initiatives and programmes and how effectively it communicates them.

### **The service is taking steps to understand its culture**

The service completed a cultural audit in 2023. It then consulted the Police Federation of Northern Ireland, the Superintendents' Association of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (which represents staff) and support networks on the findings. It agreed a 16-point action plan in response. This included running an inclusion survey. The survey took place during September 2025 and achieved a completion rate of over half the workforce. This rate is high compared to the average completion rate for our workforce surveys, which was 24 percent in our last round of police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy inspections.

Of those who responded to the survey:

- 63 percent agreed that they felt a strong sense of belonging and inclusion;
- 96 percent said that they understood what constitutes inappropriate behaviour in the workforce;
- 92 percent knew how to report inappropriate behaviour;
- 17 percent had experienced inappropriate behaviour in the last year; and
- 11.9 percent reported unprofessional behaviour, which was the most reported issue.

Reassuringly, the survey didn't show any evidence of systemic bullying, harassment or discrimination, nor was this something we found as part of our inspection. We look forward to seeing how the service plans to address the survey results and communicate this to the workforce.

### **The service provides equality, diversity and inclusion training to the workforce**

The service works with [Diversity Mark](#) to promote workplace equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). It has developed two online training modules to increase workforce awareness of EDI. These include leaders' responsibilities and how to challenge inappropriate behaviour. Officers and staff must complete both courses. The service reported completion rates of 95.3 percent and 88.7 percent, respectively.

### **Senior leaders show visible support for EDI**

The service holds regular 'Team PSNI' events, which bring together around 500 members of the workforce at a time. They allow the senior leadership team to update personnel on organisational priorities and plans to improve the service, strengthen workforce capacity and progress EDI and well-being activity. Each event includes an 'ask the chief anything' session. Questions that the chief constable doesn't have time to answer are answered in writing later. At the time of our inspection, around 4,000 members of the workforce had attended a Team PSNI event. The service told us that workforce feedback on these events was very positive.

The chief constable also holds a quarterly 'your voice' meeting, which provides a forum for staff associations and support networks to give feedback. Representatives from the Police Federation of Northern Ireland, the Superintendents' Association of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance spoke positively about these meetings. They told us that the culture of the senior leadership team had improved since around 2023 and leaders were more open and responsive. However, some support networks were more critical of the process. The senior leadership team should strengthen its working relationships with these networks. It should clarify expectations and set a clear operating framework.

### **The service should support its workforce to maintain high standards of behaviour**

Officers and staff told us that they had received training on EDI and leadership responsibilities. They understood how to challenge inappropriate behaviour, but we found that their confidence in doing so varied by rank, role and work location. The Superintendents' Association of Northern Ireland told us that some of its members were concerned that they might face complaints if they challenged inappropriate behaviour. Although they were still prepared to act, they tended to take a cautious approach and wanted to be sure of their grounds before doing so. The service has introduced a confidential reporting line, but some officers and staff told us that they lacked confidence in using it.

The 2025 workforce inclusion survey asked officers and staff about the support they received after formally reporting inappropriate behaviour. Only 28 percent of respondents reported that they were satisfied with the support provided and 19 percent were satisfied with the action taken. These findings show that the service needs to continue encouraging members of its workforce to report inappropriate behaviour, reassure them it will take their concerns seriously and support those who come forward.

# Using powers fairly, appropriately and with justification

## Adequate

The Police Service of Northern Ireland is adequate at using its powers fairly, appropriately and with justification.

### Areas for improvement

#### **The service should improve its recording of use of force**

The service doesn't accurately record the number of times [officers](#) use force on members of the public. When officers attend incidents where force is used, they are each required to record the details on a use of force form. This system allows the service to scrutinise officers' use of force and make sure it was proportionate and justified. To improve its data collection, the service introduced an automated system that reminds officers to complete a use of force form after they have used force on a member of the public. After receiving the notification, officers should either complete a use of force form documenting what force they used and why or close the notification by stating that they didn't use any force. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that there were about 13,100 unanswered notifications. It also told us that this figure had been as high as 20,000 in the preceding months.

During our audit of [body-worn video](#) footage of use of force incidents, we found that not all officers submitted a use of force form when they should have. In some instances, we found that multiple officers were using force, but the number of use of force forms submitted didn't match the number of officers seen using force.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency publishes data from the service on the use of force by officers. For the financial year 2024/25, there were 19,028 recorded uses of force. This was 12 percent lower than the number recorded during the previous year (21,508).

The accuracy of official published data on use of force can't be assured when a substantial number of possible incidents remain unreported by officers who attended them. The service can't know what risk lies in the 13,100 outstanding notifications. The risk could include serious injury following police contact, which it should have referred to the [Police Ombudsman](#).

The service should make sure that officers accurately record uses of force and their justification.

### **The service should improve its supervision and quality assurance of officers' use of force and stop and search powers**

We found that the service's supervision and quality assurance processes were inconsistent when [officers](#) reported use of force or [stop and search](#) incidents involving members of the public. Supervisory reviews were often superficial and didn't provide guidance or effectively remedy poor practice.

During our inspection, we regularly saw supervisory reviews of stop and search incidents that consisted of a single word or very brief entries. Reviews by supervisors were often short or bland and provided no worthwhile guidance or feedback that officers could use to learn or develop. The service's policy guidance includes an expectation that supervisors will review all stop and search cases where they reasonably believe the person searched was under the age of 18. In four of the five searches of [children](#) that we reviewed, no supervisor's review was evident. This is concerning and doesn't maximise [safeguarding](#) opportunities for young people who come into contact with the service.

In 6 of the 20 use of force cases we reviewed, officers didn't accurately record the type of force they had used. We saw [body-worn video](#) footage where officers had used handcuffs but recorded it as "limb restraints used" and didn't mention handcuffs. We reviewed one incident where multiple officers were involved in restraining an aggressive woman who was resisting arrest. Only one officer completed a use of force form despite several others being actively involved. Supervision was often superficial and didn't address the obvious data-recording errors. Proper oversight by supervisors of these incidents, including a review of the related body-worn video footage, would improve data accuracy.

Appropriate oversight should include supervisors giving feedback to the officer who submitted the report. The feedback should have value, use all possible sources of information and confirm that the behaviour of the officer was proportionate, legal and necessary. The service should train its supervisors to understand the importance of the data generated from each interaction they review and to identify any development opportunities for the officers they manage.

We encourage the service to include use of force and stop and search feedback in proposed improvements to professional development reviews.

## **Promising practice**

### **A firearms training simulator is improving the service's training provision to students and officers who are pregnant**

In September 2025, the service bought a new firearms training simulator and installed it at the [Police College](#). Trainers told us that it was significantly better than the previously available training.

It has over 1,000 pre-installed scenarios and allows the controller to choose from around 3,000 options in response to a student's behaviour. During the simulation, trainers can assess the student while they are in a stressful but safe environment. Students can also use non-lethal options including [Tasers](#) and batons. At the end, trainers give feedback to improve the students' performance.

Trainers described the simulator as "a state-of-the-art piece of kit". The service has immediate plans for pregnant [officers](#) to use it. Previously they couldn't complete firearms training because the noise could damage the hearing of their unborn [child](#). As the simulator doesn't involve using live firearms, pregnant officers can use it safely. This will allow them to retain their licence to carry personal protection weapons.

At the time of our inspection, use of the simulator was still at an early stage with only around 70 student constables having used it. We encourage the service to look for opportunities for the wider workforce to make best use of its capabilities.

## **Main findings**

In this section, we set out our main findings that relate to how good the service is at using its powers fairly, appropriately and with justification.

### **Officers consistently use body-worn video in use of force and stop and search incidents**

We found that officers consistently wore and used body-worn video (BWV). The service monitors compliance rates for officers' use of BWV during stop and search and use of force incidents. It told us that the use of BWV by its officers in October 2025 during stop and search was 94 percent. Between September 2024 and October 2025, the trend for BWV use was steady and remained 1.6 percent higher than between September 2023 and October 2024. A continuation of this upward trend will improve transparency and public confidence in the use of stop and search.

We found that officers understood the benefits of BWV use and that the culture in frontline teams was supportive of the service's policy on when BWV should be used. The service has recently introduced two changes to BWV. The first is a 'vicinity function', which automatically activates all BWV within three metres when one camera is in use. The second is a continual recording loop, which retains the previous 30 seconds of recording when activated. Some officers told us that they had personal safety concerns about these developments. In particular they were concerned that BWV may inadvertently record them disclosing personal information such as their home addresses during conversations with colleagues. The service can mitigate this risk by redacting or muting such material in the footage when necessary. We encourage the service to continue dialogue with officers to resolve their concerns.

### **The service monitors and scrutinises the use of spit and bite guards**

Several policy documents we examined provided clear guidance on the use of spit and bite guards and the circumstances in which officers must use BWV. Spit and bite guards are fabric guards that a detained person wears over their head to help minimise risks associated with spitting and biting.

The policies state that if an officer is wearing BWV, they must use it to record all stop and search incidents. In addition, they state that officers must use BWV to record any incident where the use of force is reasonably foreseeable. Where force is used but not recorded on BWV, officers must provide a reasoned explanation, which is subject to approval by a supervisor. Policies also specifically require officers to activate BWV whenever spit and bite guards are used in locations away from a custody suite.

The service told us that it collected data every week on the use of spit and bite guards to identify recurring themes and presented it to the relevant external scrutiny panels. We saw clear evidence of this scrutiny.

## **The service responds to independent external scrutiny and challenge to improve officers' use of force and stop and search powers**

The service told us that its use of powers was scrutinised by several organisations including:

- The Independent Reviewer for Justice and Security (with a focus on [Justice and Security \(Northern Ireland\) Act 2007](#) powers);
- [Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland](#) (which inspects and reports on areas or themes across the [criminal justice system](#)); and
- [the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People](#).

Additionally, it is scrutinised by the service accountability panel (SAP), which focuses specifically on the service's use of force and stop and search.

An assistant chief constable chairs the SAP quarterly. The service told us that the purpose of the SAP was to provide community-focused scrutiny of the use of policing powers. Its findings and views then inform the development of policing tactics and policy. It reports its findings to the service's performance board and, where relevant, to the [Northern Ireland Policing Board](#).

The SAP includes a diverse group of people with a variety of backgrounds and specialisms. The meeting we attended had members from the service, five independent advisor group members, a representative of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, a policing board representative and a human rights advisor. The service invites a representative of the Irish traveller community to attend the meetings, but none was present on this occasion. However, the service confirmed that they have attended other SAP meetings.

The SAP focuses on incidents involving children. The most recent report it gave us was from June 2025. Over the reporting period, the panel examined 1,209 cases of use of force on children. It found that 95 percent of these cases involved taking hold of the child or using handcuffs. The panel also reviewed a small number of incidents where higher levels of force were used on children. This shows both the openness of the service to external scrutiny and the robustness with which panel members carry out their roles.

In the meeting we attended, we heard frank and challenging discussions about the circumstances of each case. Afterwards, officers spoke positively about the benefits of the SAP and its focus on how the service uses its police powers.

The service is already subject to external scrutiny of many of its activities. To improve the SAP further, the service should consider introducing a chair who is independent of the police. It should also consider increasing the proportion of panel members from outside the service. These changes would give the SAP greater independence and provide an opportunity to involve more members of the community.

### **The service works effectively with children and young people who guide the service on youth-related matters**

The service organises a ‘youth champions’ forum, which has five themes, one of which is stop and search. It meets three times a year. The service briefs participants on topics linked to young people and their interaction with the police. Participants include representatives from [Youth Justice](#), the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. An assistant chief constable chairs the forum.

The service also established a ‘youth and policing partnership’ forum at the start of 2025. The forum includes young people as well as other strategic organisations including the Police Ombudsman. An assistant chief constable, who is also the children’s champion for the service, chairs the forum.

The service told us that the young participants in the forum were mostly 15–16 years old. They are from diverse social backgrounds and include [children in the care system](#) and from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. There are only a few from ethnic minority backgrounds, but there are participants who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and some children with disabilities. Many of the young people involved have experience of the criminal justice system.

Officers from the youth engagement team attend the forum and arrange much of the work linked to young people. They told us that they actively asked for feedback from forum participants. As a result, young people have helped to develop guidance videos to explain stop and search and the custody process to other young people. Young people also told officers that the service’s website was too difficult to understand and had too much data. The youth engagement team arranged for changes to make it more attractive and user-friendly for children to access.

Representatives from the service’s communications department had been to the latest forum. They explained the service’s use of social media and took feedback to help improve involvement.

The introduction of these youth-focused advisory groups is very positive. They increase public confidence in the police and generate long-term relationships to promote improvement in the way the service works with young people.

### **The service has worked with youth groups on a stop and search information card**

During our inspection, we saw an example of the service and youth groups working well together to develop ‘The Children and Young Person Stop and Search Information Card’. This provides detail on what children and young people can expect during a stop and search incident, a brief explanation of officer powers and how to make a complaint if necessary. The card signposts people to further information on the service’s website via a QR code.

Officers are expected to hand the card to any child or young person after they have been stopped and searched. The service can track the number of visits to the website via the QR code. It believes that there is a positive correlation between the number of cards given out and visitors to the site. However, site users are anonymous, so the service can't be sure who is using the QR code to visit the site.

The development of this work with the young people of Northern Ireland is positive and we encourage the service to build on its successes to date.

### **Officers understand how to use stop and search powers fairly and appropriately**

During our inspection, we reviewed a sample of 105 stop and search records from 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025. Based on this sample, we estimate that 83.8 percent (+/- 5.9 percentage points) of stop and searches the service carried out during this period had reasonable grounds recorded.

We also reviewed BWV footage of 20 stop and searches. We were impressed that in every case we saw, officers treated members of the public with dignity and respect, even when members of the public were verbally resistant.

However, the [PACE Codes of Practice](#) for police use of [stop and search powers](#) require that, when an officer is searching someone, they must give them certain information. We found that officers weren't always giving all the information they should. In 19 of the 20 search records we examined, we saw that officers had explained what object they were looking for and the legal power they were using. On 18 of 20 occasions, officers told the member of the public that they were detaining them. But we found that officers provided information about where they worked in only 13 of the 20 cases we reviewed. And they told the member of the public about their entitlement to a record of the search in only 12 of the 20 cases we reviewed.

We also found that in 7 of the 20 cases we reviewed, the grounds recorded on the BWV footage, when the officer spoke to the person being searched, didn't always match the grounds later submitted on the search record. They should be the same.

### **The service could further improve stop and search training**

In our 2020 report '[An inspection of how well the service treats its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland](#)', we commented on inconsistencies in the service's approach to stop and search training. This included a lack of refresher training for supervisors.

Since then, the service has produced a short guide to help officers when completing a stop and search. The service also gives officers [continuing professional development](#) training on the use of stop and search powers and procedures. During our inspection, many officers told us that they felt confident in the use of stop and search powers. But some officers told us that they felt there was a lack of refresher training. Although the service has taken steps to improve, our findings show that the service hasn't yet sufficiently addressed the lack of training on stop and search.

**The service needs to make sure it collects accurate data on ethnicity to allow it to understand how fairly its officers use stop and search**

Accurate data on self-defined ethnicity (how people define their ethnicity) allows the service to understand the rate at which it uses stop and search on people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the local resident population.

The codes of practice governing stop and search in Northern Ireland don't require officers to record the self-defined ethnicity of the person they have stopped and searched. However, since the summer of 2025, the service has encouraged its officers to request self-defined ethnicity from people in all instances of stop and search. Previously, the officer recording the details recorded their view on the ethnicity of the person searched. Although this approach was legally compliant, it was likely to be less precise. The service told us that officers were taking some time to adjust to the new way of working, but it was determined to make this change.

In our review of 20 stop and search cases filmed on BWV, we found that in all 20 cases, officers didn't ask for self-defined ethnicity. This sample included five cases from the month before our inspection. The service told us that officers should have been asking for this information in this period. Officers should make sure that they ask for this information to allow the service to identify any [disproportionate](#) use of the power more accurately. This is particularly relevant as Northern Ireland is becoming more ethnically diverse. Accurate data on the ethnicity of the people it stops and searches will help the service make sure that it is adapting to changes in demographics and prepare for future scrutiny.

**The service needs to make sure it collects accurate data on community background to allow it to understand how fairly its officers use stop and search**

Since April 2024, in response to [the appeal court's findings in the Ramsey case](#), the service has been running a pilot scheme. Using this scheme, officers ask for the self-defined 'community background' of people they stop and search under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007. The service plans to use the data generated to establish if there is disproportionate use of stop and search powers against sections of society. We saw the latest monthly report, which showed that 60 percent of those searched declined to answer the question. And officers didn't ask the question in a further 8 percent of cases. At the time of our inspection, the service told us that the pilot was ongoing.

The social context within the communities of Northern Ireland and the sensitivities linked to religion mean that officers are reluctant to ask questions about a person's community background. However, there is a legal basis and some public interest in collecting the relevant data to help guide the service and make sure it uses its powers fairly.

We encourage the service to continue its dialogue with the public and its officers so that everybody understands why it needs to collect community background data.

**The service is carrying out fewer stop and searches but doesn't fully understand why**

In the year ending 31 March 2025, the service carried out 18,096 stop and searches of people. This was 28 percent lower than the previous year and was the lowest since records began 20 years ago. It equals 8 stop and searches per 1,000 population. This was lower than the average of 8.6 stop and searches per 1,000 population for forces in England and Wales.

This drop isn't in line with the overall picture for forces in England and Wales in which, on average, the number of stop and searches decreased by only 1.3 percent. The service told us that there were several possible reasons but didn't give us evidence that it understood which factors were relevant.

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