HMICFRS

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

The Police Service of Northern Ireland

An inspection of how well the service treats its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland

Contents

Summary

Good

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (‘the PSNI’ or ‘the service’) is good in its treatment of its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland.

The PSNI operates in a particularly complicated social and political environment. This makes it difficult for the service to build a positive relationship with some communities. In this context, it has done well to inspire confidence.

The service treats the public fairly and respectfully. There are signs that the historically difficult relationship between the PSNI and some Catholic communities is improving. In some areas, officers are now more able to carry out neighbourhood policing using marked police vehicles and organise meetings with community leaders. More schools are now receptive to working with the PSNI’s school liaison officers.

The PSNI does not monitor its use of force or stop and search powers closely enough. That means it can’t be confident its officers are always behaving fairly and properly. The service needs to invite better external scrutiny to help it understand whether the public believes it makes appropriate use of these powers. That would help the service make changes to improve its performance.

Most frontline PSNI officers aren’t issued with conducted energy devices (CEDs, such as Tasers). Those devices are less lethal than the firearms issued to all PSNI officers for personal protection purposes. Without immediate access to CEDs, frontline PSNI officers who respond to serious incidents involving dangerous people have fewer options available to them to resolve the incident with the minimum use of force.

CEDs could be made available to more officers in the PSNI, but that would attract a high level of interest from communities. So, we recommend that the chief constable consult widely on any proposed changes and communicate the public safety benefits of such an approach, before any changes are made.

The service has a strong ethical culture and is generally well placed to tackle corruption. The anti-corruption unit has enough resources and the staff who run it have received the correct training. The service recognises that abuse of position for a sexual purpose is serious corruption and has processes in place to deal with it.

The PSNI treats its workforce fairly. It works hard to identify and resolve problems or perceptions of unfairness. In terms of the religious identity of its staff, the service still shows a large disparity, with two Protestant officers for every Catholic officer.

That disparity is a complex problem that the service won’t be able to address on its own. But the considerable efforts it has made in this area impressed us.

The service has recently improved its grievance procedure, but it needs to do more to inform the workforce about it. Its approach to wellbeing is disjointed, with long waiting times to access mental health support compared with other kinds of support.

Many staff expressed a lack of confidence in the performance review system.
The service should introduce more consistent processes for managing poor performance and developing talent.

Introduction

About HMICFRS

We independently assess the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services – in the public interest. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that citizens would ask, and publish the answers in accessible form, using our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

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 PSNI each year.

In accordance with the Act, in 2019 we were commissioned to inspect the service. We were asked specifically to examine how much the service inspires confidence among its workforce and the people it serves.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland

For most aspects of this inspection, we adopted a similar methodology to our inspections of police forces in England and Wales. But the police service in Northern Ireland is different from English and Welsh forces in some important respects, due to the political and social context.

There is still a significant divide between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. PSNI officers and staff continue to be under threat from extremist groups. In some communities in Northern Ireland the PSNI is not welcome, and many people are unwilling to engage with the service for fear of reprisals.

That means that neighbourhood policing in Northern Ireland is different to England and Wales. All officers in Northern Ireland are armed. The service also faces specific challenges in terms of recruitment and diversity. To reflect those differences, we have adapted the methodology we use in our legitimacy inspections into forces in England and Wales.

Methodology

We carried out our inspection of the PSNI in January 2020. We asked three main questions, supported by seven subsidiary questions. They were:

Does the service inspire public confidence?

We asked: does the service treat the public with fairness and respect? Does the service use its powers, particularly force and stop and search powers, fairly and proportionately?

Is the behaviour of the service’s workforce ethical and lawful?

We asked: does the service foster an ethical culture? How effectively does it tackle corruption?

Does the service inspire the confidence of its workforce?

We asked: how effectively does the service identify and resolve unfairness at work? Does it support the wellbeing of its employees? How fairly and effectively does it monitor staff performance, and conduct recruitment?

We were also asked to inspect the effectiveness and efficiency of the service. Our findings are produced in Annex A of this report.

An inspection of how well the service treats its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland

Does the service inspire public confidence?

Good

The PSNI is good at treating the public with fairness and respect, and that inspires public confidence. We were pleased to see that improvements in the security situation in Northern Ireland have helped relations between the service and some communities.

The service uses a variety of communication channels and initiatives to engage with all the communities it works in.

The service has worked with a local university on a research programme to better understand police use of stop and search. The research made several recommendations that the service accepted and implemented. We found that, in some respects, the service had good knowledge of how officers used stop and search powers.

Areas for improvement

- Officers are not consistently submitting the correct form after incidents where they have used force. This means the service is not recording its use of force accurately. It needs to implement a system that identifies when a form is missing and prompts officers to submit one.
- The service should consult widely on making conducted energy devices (CEDs, such as Tasers) available to more frontline uniform officers.
- The service should improve its recording of stop and search data and the quality of its scrutiny, particularly external scrutiny, into the use of this power and its effect on communities.

Our detailed findings are set out below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

Does the service treat the public with fairness and respect?

The challenges of engaging with some communities mean the service doesn’t know as much as it would like about public perceptions of police fairness. Despite this, we consider the service treats the public fairly and respectfully. It works to keep people safe by engaging with all the communities it works in. To do so, it uses a variety of communication channels and initiatives.

Improvements in the security situation in Northern Ireland have helped relations between the service and some communities. Senior officers told us that, in some areas where neighbourhood patrols had to be carried out in unmarked vehicles in the past, officers can now use marked police vehicles and organise meetings with community leaders. More schools are now receptive to working with the PSNI’s school liaison officers. Neighbourhood officers told us that the increased visibility was having a positive effect on community relations. But in some places, PSNI officers still have to patrol in armoured cars.

The service’s vision is set out on its website. It states: “We want to help build a safe, confident and peaceful Northern Ireland.” It aims to do that by “treating all members of the public with courtesy, respect and fairness”. Senior leaders encourage the workforce to co-operate closely with the communities they serve. The service’s values of “we care, we listen, we act” reinforce that. The service has actively promoted that using a wide range of print and digital material, including blogs, magazines and posters. Senior leaders have held workshops with officers and staff to reinforce the message.

The service has a Policing with the Community Branch to advise its policing districts on how to engage with communities. The branch works with external agencies such as the Community Safety Unit at the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland), the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland.

The service engages with prominent individuals and organisations in the community to inform its work. It also works with the voluntary sector and statutory representatives. That helps the PSNI build stronger relationships with the public.

The service offers extensive coaching in communication skills. But it only offers that to student officers and other personnel taking part in leadership training. It may be beneficial to make this coaching available to more of the workforce.

Some frontline officers told us they had recently received specific training on how to communicate effectively with people at risk of suicide or who have mental health problems. The officers found the training particularly useful. Again, it may be beneficial to make this training more widely available, especially to other frontline officers who deal with people who are suicidal or who have mental health problems.

Shortage of investigators

In order to inspire public confidence, it is important that serious crime investigations happen promptly and are carried out in an efficient way.

In our 2018 report into the efficiency and effectiveness of PSNI we found that the service, like many others in England and Wales, didn't have enough trained investigators to meet current and future demand. During this year's PSNI inspection, the service told us it had calculated that it needed an additional 90 investigators to meet the current demand for serious and organised crime and public protection investigations. It has developed a plan to recruit and train more investigators. But it faces a considerable challenge in filling these vacancies and building a workforce that has enough training, accreditation and skills.

There may be another way to resolve the shortage. The PSNI's legacy investigation branch has a workforce of 70 officers and staff, reviewing and reinvestigating 1,130 incidents relating to the Troubles that involve 1,421 deaths. The service told us that there are government proposals to create a new independent body, which would take responsibility for carrying out these reinvestigations. It may take some time to, but if the proposals are agreed and implemented, the service should consider moving officers and staff from the legacy investigation branch into its under-resourced investigation teams. Building additional capacity in those teams would mean current investigations could be carried out more promptly and would also help build public confidence in the service.

Does the service use its powers, particularly force and stop and search powers, fairly and proportionately?

Recording the use of force

Officers across England and Wales are required to submit a use of force form every time they use firearms, CEDs, batons, handcuffs, leg restraints, spit and bite guards, incapacitant sprays or restraint techniques. That allows the police service to monitor and analyse its use of force. It also means a service can recognise cases where force is used unfairly or inappropriately, and it lets the public hold the police to account.

The PSNI expects its officers to report uses of force on an electronic monitoring system. But it doesn't check that they are doing that. It was clear to us, based on what we saw and heard from interviewees, that officers weren't reporting all uses of force. That means the service can't currently be sure its use of force is always fair and necessary. The service acknowledges that its use of force is under-reported.

The service needs to have a system for flagging up when a report is missing. Some forces in England and Wales track these reports through their command and control or custody computer systems. They then prompt officers to submit the form if they haven't done so. The PSNI should adopt a similar system.

Every six months, the PSNI has to provide the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) with a wide range of statistics on its use of force. We were pleased to find that the service acts in an open way by publishing this information on its website. But the statistics aren't thoroughly audited and, because of the under-reporting problem, they are almost certainly inaccurate. That needs to be addressed.

Armed policing: less lethal options

In recognition of the PSNI's operating circumstances, all officers carry a handgun for personal protection purposes. That depends on officers successfully completing their training and the service reviews it regularly. Operational officers must attend firearms training twice a year and non-operational officers must attend once a year. Firearms training sessions include guidance on use of force and human rights.

The service only issues CEDs to specialist firearms officers and other authorised firearms officers deployed in armed response vehicles. Similar arrangements used to apply in England and Wales. But since 2007, a wider group of specially trained unarmed officers in English and Welsh forces have carried CEDs. And some of those forces are planning to extend this training and make CEDs available to more or all of their unarmed frontline officers.

The arguments in favour of doing so largely relate to how regularly police officers have to use force to intervene in dangerous situations, and the high risks associated with the use of some types of force. For example, being struck by a police baton can result in broken bones, and officers are often placed at considerable personal risk when coming into close contact with violent people. The use of incapacitant sprays (such as CS or pepper spray) also carries risks, both to the officer and the subject.

We did not think it was logical that operational officers (particularly those working in frontline uniform response roles) in the PSNI aren't routinely equipped with CEDs as well as conventional firearms.

Statistics on the PSNI website show that in the six months between 1 April 2019 and 30 September 2019, PSNI officers drew their firearms on 254 occasions. This is a 15 percent increase compared with the same six-month period in 2018.

Whenever officers (in any force) draw firearms, the potential for them to shoot someone is present. Doing so carries a very high risk of inflicting fatal injury. While the use of CEDs isn't without risk, it is relatively lower.[1] In some situations, CEDs offer a less lethal option for officers.

We believe those arguments support the PSNI making CEDs available to more officers. But because of the local context, and because we anticipate a particularly high level of public interest in the issue, before doing so we recommend the chief constable:

- consult closely with all communities, the NIPB and other interested parties; and
- communicate to the public the benefits to public safety of equipping more frontline officers with CEDs.

[1] *Statement on the Medical Implications of Use of the Taser X26 and M26 Less-Lethal Systems on Children and Vulnerable Adults*, Defence Scientific Advisory Council Sub-Committee on the Medical Implications of Less-Lethal Weapons, 27 January 2012, para 7.

Using stop and search powers

We spoke to many PSNI officers during our fieldwork. We found that they understood how to use stop and search properly. We also found that use of the powers was generally well supervised. But the PSNI doesn't currently do enough to demonstrate that it uses stop and search powers fairly. We found problems with the way it records stop and search data, inconsistencies in its approach to training, and shortcomings in the quality of external scrutiny.

Stop and search is one of the most intrusive powers available to the police. It can erode public confidence if used disproportionately against particular social groups such as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and young men. That is why we assess all forces in how fairly they are using these powers and how they are demonstrating that to the public.

In our 2017 legitimacy report, we recommended that all forces in England and Wales should:

- monitor and analyse comprehensive stop and search data to understand reasons for disparities;
- take action on those; and
- publish the analysis and the action.

The latest data pack published on the PSNI website, which is accurate to 31 December 2019, shows that the service reports on the searches carried out under various laws. That information is broken down by gender and age group, but it doesn't identify find rates or specify how they differ across different types of searches or between particular social groups. The information doesn't include identifying or analysing potential disparities in the way the service uses stop and search. And it doesn't explain what the service is doing to reduce any unfairness.

There are also inconsistencies in how officers record stop and search data. In the PSNI, every time a stop and search is carried out, the officer who conducts the search should record on their mobile device some facts about it. Those facts include the time, date, place, grounds for and object of the search, the identity and ethnicity of the person searched (if known), and the result of the search.

The records are then held on a database so internal and external bodies can scrutinise them. The service expects supervisors to dip-sample 10 percent of all stop and search records to ensure that searches are lawful. Most supervisors do that, but it isn't consistent enough across the service. The PSNI is aware of that. It now needs to establish a better regime to dip-sample stop and search records more consistently.

In England and Wales in 2014, the Home Secretary created the Best Use of Stop and Search (BUSS) scheme. The scheme introduced several measures aimed at creating greater transparency, accountability and community involvement in the use of stop and search powers. The PSNI has adopted some but not all of those measures. The service should aim to implement the rest of the measures – for example, creating a community complaints mechanism[2] – as that may help improve community relations.

[2] Best use of stop and search scheme, Home Office and College of Policing, 30 April 2014, p5.

We found some inconsistencies in training for stop and search. The service trains all student officers in unconscious bias as part of the stop and search curriculum. Each district also provides refresher training to officers, but not all of them have attended it. Some supervisors told us that they had never received refresher training in this area. The service should ensure it provides consistent training on stop and search and unconscious bias to all relevant officers and staff.

The service has worked with a local university on a research programme to better understand police use of stop and search. The research followed student officers for a year, from the start of their training to deployment on police districts, and made several recommendations that the service has accepted and implemented.

Video recording of stop and search

The service needs to improve its use of body-worn video. For example, it told us that currently only 60 percent of stop and searches are filmed. The rest are not, either because the equipment isn't available, because it isn't working, or because officers don't know how to use it properly.

The service recognises the importance of using body-worn video for stop and search and is trying to increase the percentage of searches it films. It will need better processes in place to make sure the equipment is working and that officers know how to use it. Supervisors should check the footage as part of their dip-sampling regime.

Internal and external scrutiny of stop and search

The NIPB is responsible for the independent oversight of the work carried out by the PSNI. It recently carried out a review of the PSNI's use of stop and search and reported several areas of concern. They included the PSNI's stop and search communication approach, especially with young people; its policy on the use of stop and search powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 and Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007; and its approach to record keeping.

The service also told us there is an important outstanding recommendation from a separate human rights thematic review, dating back to 2013. That recommendation relates to recording the community background information of individuals who are stopped and searched. An example of that information is their religion. In the seven years following the review, the service has been unable to implement the recommendation. The PSNI told us it is concerned that it doesn't have an appropriate legal basis for seeking such information.

Asking people to disclose their religion when being stopped and searched is an extremely sensitive issue. Despite considerable effort, the PSNI has found it difficult to reach a solution that satisfies all its communities, other than not to ask for such detail. That may be the best or only solution. But it creates a significant gap in the PSNI's understanding of whether its use of stop and search is disproportionate when comparing Catholics and Protestants. Unless and until those being stopped and searched always freely and accurately disclose this information, the PSNI will be unable to determine whether there is any disproportionality based on religion.

English and Welsh forces don't record religion during stop and search either. But they do record ethnicity (as does the PSNI) and that reveals major disproportionality.

In England and Wales, in the year ending March 2019, black people were nearly ten times more likely to be stopped than white people.[3] While the underlying reasons for that are much more complex than simply bias (whether unconscious or conscious) by the police, the data gives rise to concern and prompts English and Welsh forces to scrutinise matters more closely. In the PSNI, the absence of data on religion in stop and search should make the service even more vigilant in its monitoring, to guard against any bias.

The PSNI attracts few public complaints regarding its use of stop and search. That may be further evidence that its officers are using the powers appropriately. But without better recording and more extensive external scrutiny, it is difficult to come to a more reliable conclusion about the low complaints rate.

Policing and community safety partnerships discuss local stop and search data at their meetings. They also look at any complaints about the service's use of stop and search. The partnerships are made up of political and independent members, with the local authority appointing the political members and the NIPB appointing the independent members.

The service collates stop and search data and presents it to the NIPB every quarter. As discussed above, the data doesn't include any analysis of whether the powers are being used disproportionately against certain social groups.

The service reviews stop and search data internally through its monthly performance group and the quarterly policy and powers development group. Chief officers chair both meetings and members discuss a wide range of data. The service shares the data presented at those groups with the NIPB.

Although those forms of scrutiny are welcome, there are gaps. The service doesn't use other means of external scrutiny from people who might have less trust and confidence in the police, or from young people. We were pleased to hear during interviews with senior leaders that the PSNI plans to introduce external scrutiny panels, including a specific young people's independent advisory group (IAG), in the next few months.

Enhancing public scrutiny will help build public confidence in the way the service applies stop and search powers and use of force. When established, the IAG should review specific stop and searches and advise the PSNI on community impact.

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[3] Police powers and procedures, England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2019, Home Office, 24 October 2019, p15. See also: Stop and search, Ministry of Justice, 19 March 2020.

Is the behaviour of the service’s workforce ethical and lawful?

Good

The PSNI has a strong culture of ethical and lawful behaviour. Officers and staff understand the importance of ethical behaviour.

The service has a good learning culture. Decisions about workforce conduct are balanced and appropriate.

The service has a well organised vetting procedure and a counter-corruption strategic threat assessment. The anti-corruption unit is well resourced and run by properly trained staff.

The PSNI recognises that abuse of position for a sexual purpose is serious corruption. We found that the workforce had a good understanding of the seriousness of that type of corruption.

Areas for improvement

- The service should make better use of its computer monitoring software.
- The service should develop a process, such as a People’s Intelligence Board, of the kind that some other forces use. That process would deal with welfare and performance matters and act on intelligence about personnel who may be at risk of corruption.
- The service should consider giving briefings about abuse of position for a sexual purpose to existing supervisors, not just those who have been promoted recently.

Our detailed findings are set out below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service’s performance in this area.

Does the service foster an ethical culture?

The service has a strong ethical culture. Senior leaders promote the PSNI Code of Ethics ('the Code') in regular written communications, and in face-to-face meetings and events. Officers and staff understand the Code. In interviews, they emphasised the importance of ethical behaviour when policing a divided society. They also told us that they believe senior leaders are approachable and that they make ethical decisions. Supervisors told us that they discussed ethical dilemmas with their teams to help them with decision making.

The service is working with the NIPB to update the Code so it reflects modern issues, such as social media use and maintaining professional boundaries. The service also has a system in place to review its policies against the Code and to ensure equality of opportunity, in accordance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

At the time of our inspection, the PSNI had a policy requiring officers and staff to disclose any personal relationships with each other. While disclosure may be necessary or advisable in some circumstances (such as where one party supervises the other), the service hadn't considered the disproportionate effect that might have on LGBT officers and staff who had not shared their sexuality or gender identity in public. Requiring them to disclose such relationships would force them to reveal their sexuality. We recommended that the PSNI revise the policy.

The service has ethical advisers who can help with difficult issues. It is also considering introducing an ethics committee in each district, and a central committee where officers can refer ethical dilemmas for advice and receive guidance from senior leaders. There has been significant interest from officers and staff who wish to be involved in that work. The committee's will share its responses with the workforce. We were pleased to see that commitment from the service, as it should help officers and staff make more ethical decisions.

The service has a good learning culture. It makes balanced and appropriate decisions about workforce conduct. For minor matters, there is an emphasis on re-training and further learning, rather than on blame and punishment. Interviewees expressed confidence that minor misconduct matters were dealt with in a proportionate way.

Sometimes, when officers face misconduct allegations, they must be suspended from duty. Last year, the service recognised that officers were being suspended for too long, and that it needed to reduce the total number of suspensions. It had been working on this during 2019 and the service reduced the number of suspensions considerably.

How well does the service tackle corruption?

The PSNI is generally well placed to tackle corruption. The service has a well organised vetting procedure and a counter-corruption strategic threat assessment. The staff running the anti-corruption unit (ACU) are properly trained. The service recognises that abuse of position for a sexual purpose is serious corruption. It has processes in place to deal with that.

Vetting

The vetting unit now has enough resources and is well organised. There are still around 1,600 officers who are unvetted or whose vetting has expired. The command team is aware of this, and the backlog is getting smaller (in November 2018, it was approximately 2,700). The vetting unit manager is confident that all officers will be vetted by November 2021. Until this work is completed, the PSNI recognises that the risk of corruption is higher.

All applicants are vetted anonymously, which means the vetting panel can't readily identify them by any particular characteristic such as religion, ethnicity or gender. So we found no evidence to suggest that the service's vetting processes might lead to a disparity in recruitment. In 2015, a detailed internal review concluded that the process was fair to all candidates. But after five years, the service should consider doing a new review to bring any conclusions up to date.

Counter-corruption work

The service's strategic threat assessment and counter-corruption control strategy is up to date and evidence-based. It is supported by good data collection and analysis, with monthly tactical assessments.

The ACU is well resourced, and its staff have a good level of knowledge and relevant experience. Officers are confident and use a range of covert investigation techniques to support their work. At the time of our visit, three counter-corruption investigations were taking place. The service regularly supervises the team's intelligence recording, development and subsequent investigations.

The unit has a dedicated analyst and a stand-alone intelligence database. The ACU records and assesses all intelligence in line with a standardised set of categories provided by the National Crime Agency. The analyst consults regularly with a counterpart in the Organised Crime Task Force. At the time of our inspection, there was no backlog of intelligence reports awaiting review.

The service has invested in monitoring software, which logs when officers and staff seek access to sensitive police intelligence material. ACU staff could use this to carry out proactive intelligence-gathering activity, but they currently use it mainly to support reactive investigations. Given that the PSNI has a well resourced and capable ACU, it should make better proactive use of the software.

The unit has developed a matrix to help it identify corruption risks. The matrix has flagged up risks that traditional methods didn't identify. The service would benefit from setting up a process such as a People's Intelligence Board (in use in some other forces). The board would be responsible for following up and acting on intelligence that suggests an individual may be vulnerable to corruption. An example of that is an officer or staff member who is carrying unsustainably high levels of debt. The board would also deal with welfare and performance-related matters.

The service has an integrity register for gifts, hospitality, disclosable associations and business interests. It manages the register well. The ACU has taken appropriate steps to make sure the workforce recognises the importance of declaring gifts, hospitality, disclosable associations and business interests. All our interviewees understood that.

The ACU receives notifications of those declarations and monitors them to ensure the people making them comply with PSNI policy.

The service recognises that, in the past, it hasn't done enough to engage with external organisations to safeguard potential victims of police corruption. The ACU now maintains an engagement diary, which shows it is engaging with external organisations, such as social services, probation and the NHS. It would benefit from extending its engagement to a wider range of organisations, such as sex-worker support services, gyms, and drug and alcohol charities. Contact with those organisations would give the ACU greater insight into whether the behaviour of any officers or staff should raise concern.

The workforce can confidentially report any concerns about corruption. But the service could do more to promote that on the internal website.

The PSNI recognises that abuse of position for a sexual purpose is serious corruption. The ACU has a strategy, and also has the capacity, capability and the will to deal with such abuse. The service provides briefings about this and other potential abuses of position to new recruits and staff on promotion. The service also keeps a record of people who have received those briefings. The PSNI should consider extending them to existing supervisors, not just those who have recently been promoted.

The ACU engages with external organisations, such as Women's Aid and those represented in the domestic violence partnerships, to raise the profile of the issue. It also works with the Public Protection Unit. All cases involving abuse of position are referred to the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland for investigation. During our inspection, we found that the workforce had a good understanding of the seriousness of this type of corruption.

Does the service inspire the confidence of its workforce?

Good

The PSNI treats its workforce fairly. That inspires their confidence.

We found that the PSNI works hard to identify and resolve problems or perceptions of unfairness. The service analyses a wide range of data to understand its workforce's perceptions about fairness at work.

The PSNI has made considerable efforts to create a more representative police service for Northern Ireland. The work the service has done in this area is impressive.

The service seeks to understand the wellbeing of its workforce using a range of methods. It has looked to other organisations for good practice and has commissioned a university in Northern Ireland to identify barriers to wellbeing that exist in the PSNI.

Areas for improvement

- The service should provide its workforce with better information about the grievance procedure.
- The service should introduce a more consistent process for managing poor performance.
- The service should seek to reduce waiting times for mental health support.

Our detailed findings are set out below. These are the basis for our judgment of the service's performance in this area.

How effectively does the service identify and resolve unfairness at work?

The PSNI treats its workforce fairly. It works hard to identify problems or perceptions of unfairness, and resolve them.

The chief constable and senior leaders are committed to engaging with the workforce and asking them for feedback and challenge. Focus groups told us that the chief constable had quickly resolved problems raised by the workforce. For example, he agreed to a request from frontline officers to wear lighter-weight uniform garments underneath their body armour. The service also keeps the workforce informed about how it has acted on feedback with a 'You said, we did' communications campaign.

In 2019, the service improved its grievance procedure by introducing a new mediation policy. Feedback had shown that the workforce didn't fully understand the process before. So far, 29 mediators have received training and seven formal mediations have taken place.

Interviewees told us they now felt more confident about reporting issues to their supervisors. But they still had only limited knowledge about how to raise a formal grievance. Supervisors told us that they still felt more comfortable trying to resolve issues informally. Resolving the most minor matters in such ways can often be appropriate. But the service should continue its efforts to inform the workforce about how to use the grievance procedure.

The PSNI analyses a wide range of data to understand its workforce's perceptions about fairness at work. It uses surveys and other methods to collect that data. Since 2016, there have been several staff surveys, some of them aimed at specific ranks, such as one for superintendents. Response rates have been low, with only 20 percent of the workforce completing the most recent survey. This isn't uncommon in police forces.

The PSNI's workforce can provide feedback to leaders via other channels too. They include suggestion boxes in police station canteens and the 'Tell us' scheme, which encourages staff to offer suggestions or ask questions of senior leaders. Interviewees told us that the service was acting on various suggestions from officers and staff. The service has recently planned a discussion point on the intranet. When this is up and running, it should encourage feedback and also act as a forum for sharing best practice.

Leaders have regular meetings with staff associations. Representatives from police officer and police staff groups told us that they had positive relationships with senior leaders.

Disparities in representation

The PSNI has roughly two Protestant police officers for every Catholic officer, even though the population of Northern Ireland is more evenly split. A more detailed breakdown of the PSNI's workforce composition can be found on its website. Clearly, that disproportionality is an important barrier to the service as it seeks to improve the confidence of all communities in Northern Ireland. The PSNI cannot hope to command full public confidence if its workforce doesn't reflect the community it serves more closely.

Creating a more representative police service for Northern Ireland is a complex issue. It will only happen as part of a process involving the whole of society. But the PSNI has made considerable efforts to address the problem. As a result of recommendations made by the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (in its 1999 report), an external provider has run recruitment campaigns for the PSNI since 2001. Those campaigns have included measures to increase the number of Catholics applying to join the service. But those measures haven't made as much of a difference to the figures as the service would like.

Considering the obvious limitations, the service's work in this area was impressive. It commissioned consultants to look at how its processes were contributing to the disparity and changed its recruitment procedure as a result. It has made considerable efforts to understand the barriers to entry, not only for Catholics but also for women and BAME individuals. The service and the NIPB have worked closely to support the recruitment campaigns, with many community leaders and board members showing their support on social media. But we heard that some community leaders were less supportive than others of the PSNI's efforts to assemble a more representative workforce.

The positive action group, which a chief officer chairs and which includes representatives from staff associations, is also trying to improve representation across the service.

Does the service support the wellbeing of its employees?

The service is working hard to improve its wellbeing provision, but its approach is still disjointed, with long waiting times to access mental health support compared with other kinds of support.

In the past, the PSNI has received support from the Police Federation to help fund some of its wellbeing services, but it now has several initiatives of its own. It has introduced wellbeing volunteers, and created a wellbeing web application to help employees with diet, exercise and mindfulness advice. Most supervisors consider wellbeing to be an important part of their role. They told us that they discussed it regularly with officers and staff, including as part of performance review meetings. Interviewees told us that they felt wellbeing was now a priority for the service.

But the provision can be disjointed, with overlaps between local and central initiatives. For example, the workforce can apply for mental health support in several ways: a telephone helpline provided by a local charity; the occupational health team; and the Police Federation (which until September 2020, still funds up to six counselling sessions per officer). Even so, applicants often face extended waits for help.

In an effort to improve co-ordination, senior officers hired a consultant in occupational medicine to help develop a health and wellbeing action plan. The service tried to recruit additional staff into the occupational health unit, but this has proved difficult due to a shortage of trained occupational health specialists in Northern Ireland. The PSNI is also unable to offer a comparable remuneration package to the one Health and Social Care Northern Ireland provides, so the service has struggled to attract applicants. But it has acted in an innovative way by employing other staff in the roles and providing training.

In our interviews, officers frequently raised concerns about their workload. That isn't unusual in police forces, as there will always be occasions when officers are required to work on their rest days. But it can have a significant effect on officers in Northern Ireland. Some travel a long way to work, because working closer to home can create security risks associated with being identified locally as a police officer.

The service needs to consider that when making decisions about asking officers to work on rest days.

Another concern raised in our interviews was that the service doesn’t prioritise mental health in the same way as physical health. While physiotherapy provision is quick and efficient, mental health referrals have long waiting lists. There is a reason the service prioritises physiotherapy: a high proportion of sickness absence relates to musculoskeletal problems associated with officers wearing ballistic protection, which can be heavy. We recognise that the demand for mental health referrals severely outstrips capacity, but the service should prioritise efforts to provide better access to support for mental health.

Communications campaigns keep staff informed about wellbeing provision. The service has run a year-long campaign called ‘It’s OK...not to be OK’, aimed at encouraging employees to come forward for mental health support when they need it. Recent editions of the PSNI’s staff newsletter, CallSign, have featured articles and information about wellbeing.

The service seeks to understand the wellbeing needs of officers and staff using a range of methods, including a suicide, health and wellbeing conference; away days; and staff surveys. It has looked to other organisations for good practice, and has commissioned a university in Northern Ireland to identify the barriers to wellbeing that exist in the service. Early findings from that work suggest that local policing teams are less likely to participate in the PSNI’s wellbeing-related events. Further work now aims to understand why and to encourage those teams to participate.

There is no common approach to welfare support for officers who are suspended from duty. That means people in need may not receive adequate support because there is no process for supervisors to follow.

How fairly and effectively does the service monitor staff performance, and conduct recruitment?

The service’s performance development review system is inconsistent, and many staff expressed a lack of confidence in it. The service has suspended its talent management programme and is working to improve the way it identifies and develops future leaders. But it has done significant work to address the perceived lack of fairness in promotion processes.

Performance management

We aren’t convinced of the service's ability to deal with poor performance. It needs to take a much more structured and consistent approach to making sure its workforce is performing well. It doesn’t have an effective scheme for identifying and developing talent either.

The service uses a performance development review system called individual performance review (IPR). Every year, each member of the workforce is set objectives, based on the policing plan and their own development goals. Officers and staff told us that they didn’t see the IPR process as useful or effective unless they were seeking promotion.

The service sometimes manages poor performance through the IPR process, but supervisors told us that this was often ineffective. Officers and first line supervisors generally prefer to use the staff review meetings, which take place every 28-days to deal with performance matters. But the meetings are relatively informal and better suited to addressing less serious concerns. The service should use more formal channels for dealing with serious issues of poor performance.

At the time of our inspection, the service didn't have an effective scheme to identify talented people. The Talent Watch programme was withdrawn due to concerns it wasn't objective enough. The PSNI has plans for improving this. The service told us it was replacing Talent Watch with the Emerging Leaders programme for officers and staff. At the time of our inspection, that was still under development.

The service uses the national fast track programme for officers with potential for senior leadership roles. But the interviewees who had heard of this programme didn't know how people were selected for it. That meant they were less likely to apply.

The service is also developing its use of the competency and values framework for selection processes. The service has used the framework successfully for senior promotion processes and plans to use it more widely. That is part of an extensive review to improve performance and talent management processes.

Several interviewees told us that, in the past, they didn't feel that promotion processes were fair. In 2016/17, the constable-to-sergeant promotion process attracted 700 freedom of information requests, 100 appeals against the result and four employment tribunals related to the process. Since then, the service has worked hard to improve workforce confidence in the process. It has established a governance board with a broad membership, including staff associations, to oversee all promotion processes. That seems to have improved the situation, as the most recent constable-to-sergeant promotion process attracted only four appeals against the result, none of which was successful.

Annex A: Effectiveness and efficiency update

How this report was commissioned

On 6 January 2020, the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) commissioned us to complete an inspection of the PSNI.

It asked us to examine all elements of the police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspection methodology. In particular, we focused on the legitimacy pillar.

The PEEL methodology examines how well police forces:

- prevent crime and tackle anti-social behaviour;
- investigate crime;
- protect those who are vulnerable;
- tackle serious and organised crime;
- meet the strategic policing requirement (not applicable in Northern Ireland);
- understand the demand that they face and allocate their resources;
- plan for the future;
- treat the public with fairness and respect;
- maintain an ethical culture; and
- treat their workforce.

Our report largely addresses the legitimacy element: maintaining an ethical culture, and treating the public and the workforce well. But various sections also contain material relevant to effectiveness (preventing and investigating crime, protecting the vulnerable, and tackling serious and organised crime) and efficiency (understanding demand, and planning for the future).

This annex pulls out the effectiveness and efficiency elements, and highlights the progress made since our previous inspections.

How well does the service prevent crime and tackle anti-social behaviour?

In our 2017/18 inspection, we concluded that the PSNI was good at preventing crime, tackling anti-social behaviour and keeping people safe. Recorded crime was stable and below the recorded rate for England and Wales. The service had a good understanding of the threat and risk of harm in its communities. It developed this through effective engagement with those communities and the local policing and community safety partnerships.

The service took effective action to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour, and worked well with partner organisations to identify problems and respond early. That said, its approach to problem solving was new and its application inconsistent. Some partner agencies were reluctant to be seen to be actively supporting the police, for fear of reprisals from dissident elements.

The inspection identified two areas for improvement. We said that the service should ensure:

- frontline officers, particularly those in neighbourhood teams, apply consistently the service's problem-solving methodology; and
- that it is capable of identifying and recording the lessons learned from problem-solving activities.

Improved problem solving

The service has made good progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

It has revised its crime prevention strategy to encourage a culture of early intervention. And the chief constable has invested in neighbourhood policing. All officers have now taken part in problem solving training, provided in conjunction with the Open University. The same training is also given to all new recruits.

The service now records problem-solving activity on the Niche records management system, which holds the crime and intelligence records. This means that problem-solving activity and its outcomes are available to all staff. Neighbourhood inspectors manage the system, which at the time of this inspection contained over 1,500 plans.

We will continue to monitor progress in this area in future inspections. But we are satisfied that the service remains good at preventing crime and tackling anti-social behaviour.

How well does the service investigate crime?

Our 2017/18 inspection found that the PSNI was good at investigating crime and reducing re-offending. Staff in the control room consistently applied the golden hour principles well, to preserve as much evidence as possible. The overall standard of investigations was good, especially those carried out by detectives in the more serious or complex cases. But the service could do more to improve the investigation of less complex, volume crimes.

Investigating officers had access to a good range of support, including effective forensic crime scene investigation. The service had its own cyber crime centre, supported by district eCrime support units, which provided evidence recovery from computers and other digital devices.

The inspection identified four areas for improvement. We said that the PSNI should:

- improve its supervision of crime investigations, particularly those investigated by uniformed officers;
- continue efforts to reduce backlogs in its forensic examination of digital devices;
- introduce measures to ensure the effective management of suspects wanted for arrest; and
- assure itself that resource distribution in the five area public protection units is proportionate and sufficient.

Better investigations

The service has addressed all of these areas for improvement.

It has trained sergeants in effectively supervising investigations and file quality standards. Working with the Public Prosecution Service, the PSNI routinely monitors the quality and timeliness of its files. The joint monitoring data shows that both the quality and timeliness of the files have improved.

The service has reviewed its approach to examining digital devices and has increased resources in this area. It has introduced four regional digital support units in addition to the central cyber crime centre. Staff have also received additional training. Demand for forensic examination of digital devices continues to increase, but the service closely monitors performance and turnaround times have improved.

As a result of our inspection, the service reviewed its approach to managing wanted people, including its use of police bail. Senior officers now actively monitor and prioritise wanted people through daily management meetings.

After our inspection, the service allocated more resources to its public protection units.

We will continue to monitor progress in this area in future inspections. But we are satisfied that the service remains good at investigating crime and bringing offenders to justice.

How well does the service protect those who are vulnerable?

In our 2018/19 inspection we found that the PSNI was good at protecting vulnerable people and supporting victims. This was an improvement on the previous findings in our 2016 vulnerability inspection, when we found that it required improvement.

The service worked effectively with a wide range of partner organisations to tackle vulnerability. But partnerships didn't work consistently across the 11 local council districts in Northern Ireland. The service generally responded quickly to incidents involving vulnerable people, including incidents of domestic abuse.

The service had introduced body-worn video devices for frontline officers, who were generally positive about them. But some officers weren't sure when the devices should be used, citing the potential conflict with people's right to privacy.

Our inspection identified four areas for improvement. We said that the service should:

- consider making the DASH assessment available for officers to use on their mobile devices;
- consider introducing a standardised referral form for vulnerable people to ensure greater consistency in the safeguarding support provided;
- ensure that clear guidance is provided to all officers on when it expects officers to use body-worn video devices; and
- extend the provision of preventative health screening to officers in high-risk roles within the public protection branch.

Increased support for victims

The service has addressed all these areas for improvement.

Officers can now complete the DASH assessment on their mobile devices, and it is forwarded to the central referral unit when complete.

The service has introduced a single referral form for domestic abuse, adult safeguarding and child abuse. At the time of this inspection, the service was planning to roll out the public protection notification system. This would automatically transfer referral information to partner agencies.

Officers are now required to use body-worn video when attending reports of domestic abuse. At the time of this inspection, the service was in the late stages of consulting on whether to make it compulsory for stop and search encounters.

The PSNI has made a significant investment in its occupational health and wellbeing department. It now provides preventative health screening to staff in roles that have the highest risk of psychological harm. This includes the public protection, child abuse and scientific support departments.

We will continue to monitor progress in this area in future inspections. But we are satisfied that the service remains good at protecting those who are vulnerable.

How well does the service tackle serious and organised crime?

In 2017/18 we concluded that the PSNI was good at tackling serious and organised crime. It had developed a very good understanding of the threat and risk that serious and organised crime and dissident terrorism posed to the communities of Northern Ireland.

The service had effective relationships with a wide variety of partner organisations, including law enforcement agencies throughout the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It had effective processes in place to investigate, disrupt and dismantle organised crime groups (OCGs). And it made good use of serious crime prevention orders to manage the most dangerous offenders.

The PSNI worked well to prevent, deter and divert people away from involvement in terrorism and serious and organised crime. It made good use of a range of media to educate and inform local people about the threat from organised crime, and about its efforts and successes in tackling it.

Our inspection identified three areas for improvement. We said that the PSNI should:

- consider adopting a tiered approach to the formal review of OCGs in line with forces in England and Wales;
- in co-operation with the National Ballistics Intelligence Service (NaBIS), secure direct access to the integrated ballistics intelligence database; and
- consider adopting the national scale (major, moderate, minor, none and negative) to measure its disruptive effect on organised criminals.

A more co-ordinated approach to serious and organised crime

The service has addressed all these areas for improvement.

It considered our findings, but decided to continue its established approach to the review of OCGs. This means that reviews are conducted more frequently than they are in England and Wales.

The PSNI is now a full member of NaBIS and has direct access to the ballistics database. The database provides information on firearms use across the UK, allowing police forces to link crime scenes using forensic information. The importance of this was demonstrated in 2018, when a firearm stolen in Northern Ireland was identified and recovered after being used by criminals in England.

The PSNI has previously assessed its performance in relation to OCGs on a three-tier scale: frustrated, disrupted or dismantled. After our last inspection, the service added none and negative to its impact assessment, bringing it into line with the national scale.

We will continue to monitor progress in this area in future inspections. But we are satisfied that the service remains good at tackling serious and organised crime.

How well does the service use its resources to meet the demand it faces?

In our 2018/19 inspection, we judged the PSNI as good in its efficiency. We concluded that it had a thorough understanding of the demand it faced then and was likely to face in the future. It understood the capability and skills of its workforce and how they might change over time. It also had a well-developed system to allocate resources, through a process known as priority-based resourcing. The service made good use of its resources.

Our inspection identified one specific area for improvement. We said that the service should take steps to ensure it has enough trained investigators to meet current and future demand.

Continued shortage of trained investigators

The service has continued to develop its understanding of the nature and scale of the demand it faces. Unlike forces in England and Wales, the PSNI isn't required to complete and submit a force management statement (FMS) to us. Even so, it has taken the commendable step of using the FMS process to develop and broaden its understanding of demand. This informs its priorities and decisions about how to use resources.

Since our last inspection, the service has reviewed its governance meetings, replacing the priority-based resourcing meeting with a service change board.

In our last inspection, we found that – like many forces in England and Wales – the PSNI was finding it hard to retain enough trained and qualified investigators to meet demand. It has tried to address this in several ways. This includes a programme in which officers are seconded to crime investigation departments, and develop their investigative skills by working alongside qualified investigators. Volunteers are given up to two years on secondment, during which time they are required to complete the College of Policing's accredited professionalising investigations programme.

Despite these efforts, the service still has a shortage of trained investigators, so this area for improvement remains.

We will watch developments in this area with interest. But we are satisfied that the service remains good in its use of resources.

How well does the service plan for the future?

Our 2018/19 inspection found that the service was planning well for the future. It had used the FMS approach to collate and analyse data, develop a good understanding of trends in demand, and make predictions about future demand. In developing its leadership strategy, the service had improved its understanding of the skills and capabilities it needed in its future leaders. And it had systems in place to identify those with leadership potential.

Our inspection didn't identify any areas for improvement.

The need for a longer-term approach to police funding

A consistent theme in our recent PSNI inspections has been the difficulty it faces in making long-term plans, due to the short-term nature of its funding. The PSNI's funding differs markedly from the arrangements for police forces in England and Wales.

Recent events have made the problem of funding even more pressing. In January 2017, the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended. The PSNI has also had to plan for the possible policing implications of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, as Northern Ireland has the only land border between the UK and the EU. Given this combination of circumstances, the PSNI has done well to develop its plans for the future.

At the time of this inspection, the Assembly had just resumed. The UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020, entering an 11-month transition period. The full implications of withdrawal remain unknown. But we hope the Assembly will now take note of the comment in our 2018/19 report and “recognise the need for a longer-term approach to police funding”.

We will continue to monitor progress in this area in future inspections. We are satisfied that the service remains good at planning. But this might be compromised if the Assembly isn’t able to provide more certainty over long-term funding.

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