

INSPIRE
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PSNI RECRUITMENT PROCESS
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**THE INDEPENDENT
COMMUNITY OBSERVER**

**ANNUAL REPORT
FOR THE 2026 PSNI
RECRUITMENT
CAMPAIGN**



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Background

In September 1999 the report of the Independent Commission on Policing, (known as the Patten Report) recommended that police recruitment should be contracted out to an independent agency and that there should be community oversight of the process.

Subsequently, the Board set up a team of volunteers from all sections of the community known as Independent Community Observers (ICOs). Their role is to observe, and report to the Board on the PSNI recruitment processes in line with Section 10 of the Police (Recruitment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2001.

Context

This report will consider the PSNI recruitment campaign which was launched in January 2026 with assessment centres taking place from May to July 2026.

As per previous campaigns the ICOs were solely involved at the assessment centre stage. This stage involves ICOs observing a sample of the recruitment process for the post of PSNI police constable and reporting back to the Board on:

- the adequacy of facilities and arrangements
- whether, as far as practical, the same procedures were applied to all candidates

The recruitment stages:

- online application form
- online initial selection test
- assessment centre
- merit list passed to the PSNI

Detail

The PSNI recruitment campaign opened in January 2026, with assessments taking place in a community venue setting from May to July 2026.

Due to several ICOs wishing to be put on the reserve list since the last PSNI recruitment campaign in 2025, more recruitment was undertaken to ensure adequate capacity and to ensure the effective implementation of the ICO scheme.

Four ICOs were successfully appointed following interviews conducted in July 2025. This increased the total number of active ICOs to 11, which is an adequate number of volunteers to ensure the continued operation of the scheme.

ICOs attended the Assessment Centres from 6 May 2026 through to 6 July 2026, which included the observation of sergeants' briefings, roleplays and closing report. The final assessment day was held on 6 July 2026.

The ICOs made a total of 27 visits to the assessment centre and during this time they observed 88 roleplays, 27 sergeants' briefings and two closing reports. Within these visits the ICOs observed and commented on whether:

- candidates were given equal amounts of time for each process
- the same procedures were applied to all candidates
- instructions to candidates were clear, whether spoken or written
- the right number of assessors/role players were with the candidates
- candidates were treated with respect / courtesy / sensitivity / confidentiality and professionalism
- candidates were given prompt responses to any questions they had
- the size of the rooms / temperature / lighting were acceptable
- there were no distractions for candidates such as excessive noise
- background briefings were provided as necessary
- sessions lasted the specified length

At the time of ICO visits 93% (25) found that the same procedures were being applied to all the assessments. This is an increase of 4% from the previous campaign (89% from 31 visits).

During ICO visits 96% (26) rated the facilities as good which was a 36% increase from the previous campaign (60%).

ICO visits rated 4% (1) of the facilities as acceptable compared to 40% from the previous campaign.

A further statistical breakdown of the reports received during the 2026 campaign are outlined below.

Table 1: Duration of the observation:

Duration	Total	Percentage of total
Less than an hour	3	11%
One hour to 89 minutes	4	15%
90 minutes to 119 minutes	14	52%
120 to 180 minutes	6	22%
Overall total	27	100%

Table 2: Type of test centre observation

Type of test	Total
Sergeants briefing	27
Roleplay 1	49
Roleplay 2	34

Type of test	Total
Roleplay 3	5
Closing report	2
Overall total	117

Table 3: Observer rating of procedures

Procedures	Total	Percentage of total
Same procedures applied across all assessments	25	93%
Same procedures not applied across all assessments	2	7%
Overall total	27	100%

Table 4: Observer rating of facilities

Facilities	Total	Percentage of total
Good	26	96%
Acceptable	1	4%
Overall total	27	100%

Independent Community Observers debrief session

Following the completion of the 2026 PSNI recruitment campaign, the Board held a debrief session with all ICOs to gain further insight and context around their feedback on the assessment centre venue.

It was noted that there had been a marked decrease in the number of visits carried out during this campaign compared to the previous year. This was due to several factors including several days of disorder and violence that descended on Belfast following a knife attack. Subsequently Deloitte cancelled two evening sessions and after several ICOs had cancelled their scheduled visits due to safety concerns, Board officials paused all visits for a four day period

Board officials also noted that it was difficult at times to pair up ICOs with a partner to carry out visits due to the nature of the ICOs availability over morning, afternoon and evening sessions. Another factor affecting ICOs availability was due to several volunteers being on holiday over June and July.

As a result, ICOs conducted fewer visits during the 2026 campaign (27) compared to the 2025 campaign (35).

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DOCUMENT TITLE

The Independent Community Observer
Annual Report for the 2026 PSNI Recruitment Campaign

ONLINE FORMAT

This document is available in PDF format from our website.

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 2026

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