

# Working class

The initial evaluation of the work-based assessment trials are due to be published. Helen Gilbert speaks to officers in Thames Valley Police, one of the forces involved in the trials promotion.

When the Ospre Part II role play exam came under fire from both police officers and forces for being 'unrealistic' and a deterrent for experienced officers looking to take the next step to sergeant or inspector rank, the Government had to sit up and take notice.

Last Spring the Home Office launched trials in seven forces, which scrapped the Ospre Part II element, and replaced it with a method involving the temporary promotion of officers who are monitored, in post, for a year, via work-based assessment (WBA).

The Bedfordshire, Sussex, Thames Valley, Met, Merseyside, Hertfordshire and Leicestershire Police trials are currently in the process of being independently evaluated. Findings are expected to be published by the Home Office in Spring 2006, but it looks like the new approach could be rolled out.

Thames Valley Police has been particularly impressed with the impact the new approach has had on boosting the numbers of officers coming forward for promotion. Before the trial was introduced, the force had approximately 80 vacancies for sergeants. According to Insp Maurice Collins, the equality leader for Thames Valley Police Federation and the Federation representative on the WBA [work-based assessment] Project Board, experienced officers were not keen to take the Part II exam because of the false nature of the role play.



Officers will be assessed while working

'A typical [role play] scenario would be go and meet the vicar to plan the village fete. A sergeant or inspector doesn't do that because they're too busy. A local bobby would do that. It was a bit Disney. A lot of the skilled officers at PC and sergeant level weren't children, they didn't like doing role play. Now a significant number of experienced officers have put themselves forward.'

So what does the new approach involve? According to Insp Mary Cooper, Thames Valley Police's promotion trial project manager, the new route to achieving the national qualification consists of five steps (see box), which culminates in a temporary promotion where candidates are assessed in rank, in a

real life working environment. Candidates are promoted into actual vacancies and assessed against six national occupational standards. Throughout the year, line managers and assessors help candidates build a portfolio of evidence, demonstrating their suitability for the role. 'If they meet all the standards, they are confirmed in rank after 12 months,' says Insp Cooper.

The new method also requires candidates to apply for the work-based assessment phase within five years of sitting Part I. 'It's making sure the currency of qualification is there.'

Other benefits of the new system include having the pick of the best officers, when there are more candidates than vacan-

cies and an extended period of development and support for new sergeants and inspectors. 'There is also a real, strong link to performance in the workplace,' adds Insp Cooper. 'It brings personal development records to life because what is written in the PDR (personal development records) will influence the path to promotion, whereas it was somewhat divorced from it before.'

'The new approach is arguably more comprehensive,' explains David Backhouse, Thames Valley Police's head of training.

'Candidates are observed over an extended period and need to evidence capability in a range of situations and a number of occasions. This is clearly more



thorough than a few minutes in an assessment centre. It measures capability in the workplace, not in the artificiality of short scenarios of the job.'

Mr Backhouse believes that while people can potentially role play for an hour and a half, they cannot sustain it for 12 months. 'You're assessing real people in the workplace, dealing with real tasks, using the same standards and the same requirement for people to demonstrate capability. What better measure can there be than that?'

Chief Insp Dave Parker, Thames Valley Police force training manager agrees. 'It's better because you're actually testing people in the workplace. The feedback I've had from officers is that Ospre Part II appears to be unrealistic, it doesn't relate to day to day business.

'Work-based assessment assesses what they are doing, as opposed to a 'pantomime' environment. Because you're being assessed on six national occupational standards you're getting validity of information and making sure the standard is really there.'

Chf Insp Parker adds that, in some cases, Ospre Part II was putting officers off going for promotion because they had not studied for a considerable period of time and had witnessed colleagues failing.

Insp Cooper was also aware of the problem. 'The success rate of Part 1 was relatively high; Part

II was a different story. The net effect of this was some officers were being deterred from putting themselves forward for the entire process. Now experienced officers are putting themselves forward for promotion through WBA.'

Although no officers have actually been promoted yet – the process takes 12 months – I believe most of the current candidates, will succeed, filling the gaps in sergeant ranks that have plagued the force over the past four years.

It makes positive reading. But, as can be expected with any new trial, there have been some minor teething problems. In the past the force has had to rely heavily on acting sergeants, but because they are not promoted, they do not have to go on training courses and are therefore always in post.

Under the new scheme, temporary sergeants are required to go through development programmes and attend work-based assessment workshops. As a result, the candidates are abstracted from frontline duties from time to time.

According to Insp Collins, there were some instances when managers were reluctant to let candidates go, but this has since been sorted out through improved communication.

The inspector also points out that Basic Command Units should constantly be reminded to meet the needs of the candi-

date, giving them the opportunity to evidence the required skills for their portfolio. 'We have had to remind some line managers that you don't bang them in custody for the rest of the year.'

Insp Cooper acknowledges there is always potential for tension between operational and training needs, but stresses the need for flexibility and being able to use resources in the best ways possible. 'We do not put people into posts where they cannot demonstrate all the skills they needs to pass,' she says.

Indeed, these are only minor issues and the fact that the trial was set up as a corporate level project from the start with chief officer support, has no doubt

played a part in preventing potential problems.

Insp Collins explains 'The pilot has been successful, it has re-engaged experienced officers. There were huge gaps before. Now the force is able to better match vacancies with the number of candidates, there should be a reduction in the number of acting ranks. The work based assessment has been critical to enable the force to deliver in its requirements of inspectors and sergeants.'

If work-based assessments are given the go-ahead this year, forces across the country could see an end to the lack of officers putting themselves forward for promotion.

### How the trial scheme works:

- **Step 1:** This is an agreement negotiated with the line manager and endorsed by the relevant and appropriate local commander to initiate an application for promotion. It must be supported by evidence of competence in the current rank as shown in the Personal Development Record. The candidate must be substantive in their current rank prior to Step 2.
- **Step 2:** This is a written, multiple-choice exam, nationally designed and administered with a syllabus based on the National Occupational Standards. (Same as OSPRE Part I.)
- **Step 3:** This involves a formal application for promotion submitted to a selection board comprised of various qualified personnel managers including both police staff and officers.
- **Step 4:** This is a mechanism for keeping the number of successful candidates broadly in line with the number of expected vacancies, for example by a structured in-force interview, which seeks to assess candidates' potential to achieve the core competencies required for the next rank.

Following steps three and four candidates would be identified as being:

- Suitable for promotion though, not necessarily guaranteed an early posting.
- Having development needs to be met in the next six-12 months
- Unsuitable for promotion at this stage  
Those judged unsuitable will be ineligible for another interview for at least 12 months, subject to appeal based on fresh evidence of competence.  
Those having developmental needs will be able to appear before a promotion panel in either six or 12 months and will follow a development action plan.  
As vacancies occur and depending on their position in rank ordering, those judged suitable for promotion will be promoted temporarily to the higher rank.
- **Step 5:** Is a temporary promotion to the higher rank for a period of at least 12 and not more than 24 months, during which candidates will be assessed in the workplace against selected National Occupational Standards appropriate to the new rank. Achievement of standards will lead to substantive promotion after 12 months; otherwise temporary status can be extended for a further 12 months. Failure to achieve a satisfactory assessment within 24 months in all the mandatory competencies would mean that the candidate would revert to step 3.