

Taking the lead

Why the police service should sit up and take notice of a report on the role of sergeants. Keith Potter talks to the researcher behind the HMIC thematic.

When Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) published its thematic inspection into the leadership and supervision provided by frontline sergeants, the work was recognised in many quarters as being particularly strong. Jane Stichbury, the lead Inspector, acknowledged at the press launch of *Leading from the frontline* that the recommendations were much more hard-hitting than many previous reports, and John Giblin, chairman of the Sergeants' Central Committee, said HMIC should be applauded 'for putting their head above the parapet'. While the national media may have focused on the idea of weary sergeants unwilling to challenge PCs over their

continued page 20



appearance or behaviour, in reality the report makes some key recommendations on the need to improve training and investment into the sergeant rank, and to value and support a pivotal policing role. So why is this inspection by HMIC different from its many predecessors? One answer is a greater focus on observing officers carrying out their jobs, coupled with the introduction of an independent element to the research, which have given a real voice to the subjects of the study – the sergeants themselves.

The Inspectorate asked Dr Janet Foster of the Police Foundation to work as a consultant on the inspection and design the research model – the first time that HMIC has used research methods (including observational research) that have been designed by an independent researcher. This move was one of the reasons behind the final report being so hard-hitting, according to Dr Foster.

“It’s not rocket science, but it’s actually hugely important to find out what sergeants really have to say. These are people who have a vital role within the organisation, but whose voice is rarely heard, so it was really important that the evidence we gathered was robust and provided a national picture of sergeants’ experiences, so that recommendations for change were more focused.”

The survey of frontline sergeants was commissioned by HMIC, designed with Dr Foster’s help and was conducted independently to establish what the issues were for frontline sergeants.

The lack of clarity and standardisation over the role of sergeant was highlighted early on the research, as it was difficult to assess the response rate for the survey. Although there were more than 4,200 completed questionnaires – believed to be around 50 per cent of all frontline sergeants – some forces did not know how many of their sergeants were in frontline roles.

“In some cases we were receiving response rates of more than 100 per cent, because the figures we were working to did not correspond with those forces had provided,” added Dr Foster.

Alongside the survey, focus groups and literature review, HMIC’s field force also spoke to over 550 officers, and spent more than 250 hours observing the work of sergeants in five forces.

“Without the focus on observational research, there’s a danger that some of the most important things to have come out of the inspection could have been missed,” said Dr Foster. “For example, some sergeants struggled to understand what a critical incident was. You wouldn’t get that expressed through the documentation, and you may not get that expressed in a focus group, but it’s completely clear when you’re observing practical policing whether someone understands that an incident is critical or not.”

The review of frontline supervision was commissioned by Sir Ronnie Flanagan, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, in May 2007, following the Federation’s 24/7 Response Policing report compiled by Dr Mike Chatterton. That report led to concerns within the Federation about the growing workloads placed on what were perceived to be inexperienced sergeants. But Dr Foster believes that part of the value of independent research and a robust research design is the ability to ‘test’ whether these perceptions are reflected in practice.

“One of the things that independent researchers do is to define the problem. For example, the Federation were concerned before this research that there were a lot of inexperienced sergeants who were completely overworked, but in fact that didn’t prove to be the case,” said Dr Foster. “Very few sergeants had less than five years’ experience, and the vast majority had more than 10 years in service. The majority also felt they were more than able to manage their workload.

“So what had been perceived to be problems clearly weren’t, and that’s a key role for independent researchers – busting some of the myths. It’s also terribly important for policing. What we are trying to do at the Foundation is to encourage people to use evidence in their work, not just gut feeling; by using evidence they will be in a much better position to do the things

they need to do.”

However, although inexperience and workload were not the major issues that the Federation had feared, the report found more than enough evidence that the service needs to make major changes to the training, status and support for frontline sergeants. While the media picked up on one or two quotes from sergeants suggesting that they were no longer willing or able to discipline PCs for a scruffy appearance or inappropriate behaviour, Dr Foster believes that issues surrounding policing critical incidents, the feeling that sergeants are not supported or valued by their forces and their inability to demonstrate leadership are all more important problems.

“If you’ve got sergeants who aren’t leaders, who can’t get out from behind their desk, people who are not delivering, then you’ve got problems, because the public are putting their trust in these officers.”

“The research did break down the myths, as well as identifying good practice. But importantly, through both the survey and the observational work, it reinforced the concern that there was a lack of training and preparation for policing critical incidents, and a lack of understanding about what a critical incident was,” explained Dr Foster. “If you can’t identify a critical incident, it raises serious issues about organisational risk. But if you are not giving your staff much in the way of critical incident training, how can you expect them to be able to deal properly with these incidents?”

“The whole issue about dealing with critical incidents is down to preparation, training and conduct. The research identified that there were concerns about some forces’ ability to deliver at every stage on these three issues.

“Also worrying was the way sergeants felt they were treated by their own force.

Only 20 per cent said they actually felt valued by their force, while more than half said they didn't feel valued, and that feeling increased depending on the gender, ethnicity and sexuality of those responding."

The report also calls for greater clarity in the role of frontline sergeants, along with an increased emphasis on their role as leaders. When asked to 'guesstimate' how much time they spent out on the streets, sergeants said they were only supervising or managing incidents themselves for 10 per cent of their time. The majority of their time was spent behind desks dealing with 'management tasks', but as Dr Foster pointed out: "What kind of influence can you have as a leader if you are spending so little time leading on incidents? There is a question here about how sergeants are spending their time, and whether they are spending it on the right things."

Some sergeants also seemed to be confused about their role as leaders, while others felt they weren't supported by other people in the line of management. But perhaps the most worrying evidence was the lack of training and preparation officers received when making the transition from PC to sergeant.

"We were hearing the stories of officers who, knowing they would become sergeants, had looked for an opportunity to 'act up' alongside an experienced sergeant who they could learn from.

They would then find themselves completely on their own in the middle of a critical incident, with no support. That's an example of the organisation letting them down, and that feeds in to the figure of more than 50 per cent of sergeants feeling under valued or lacking support. Clearly that's not right, the infrastructure is failing there, and it's also a danger to the public.

"What really resonated throughout the report was the absence of professional development. There was a quote from one officer who said 'There's no D in PDR'. If you've got sergeants who aren't leaders, who can't get out from behind their desk, people who are not

delivering, then you've got problems, because the public are putting their trust in these officers. It's a pretty horrible situation for them to be in, if they can't get out there and do their job properly because they haven't been prepared properly, they haven't been trained properly, and they don't have the right support. You have to invest in people if you want them to deliver."

The focus on observational evidence gathering and the use of independent research delivered one further benefit – the feeling that the inspection had accurately represented the views of those surveyed. "It was great as a researcher to sit in the press briefing and see a couple of sergeants looking through the report, and clearly identifying with some of the comments," said Dr Foster. "That's when you know you've got things right. "I think there is something here on a range of different levels, whether or not it's about dress, or about critical incidents, or about support, which demonstrates that using independent researchers and observational methodology can give the research much more authenticity. We set out to give sergeants a voice; by giving them that voice, they can tell you what is happening from their perspective. And these are serious issues."

John Giblin, chairman of the Federation's Sergeants' Central Committee, believes the HMIC thematic should be looked at alongside Sir Ronnie Flanagan's review and the government's Green Paper.

"The role of sergeant is pivotal and there is recognition that this is one of the most important ranks in the service. Officers in the role need to be given the support they need to do their jobs effectively.

"With a sergeant, you are getting two for one; in the first instance you get a really effective constable and an effective supervisor with management skills."

But he hit out at the lack of training, preparation and support which sergeants are given, highlighted in the report.

"If you took a straw poll throughout the country in relation to preparation

and selection of sergeants new to the role, it ranges from good to absolutely atrocious because there is no standardisation and consistency."

Mr Giblin said that a performance development review is one of the fundamentals for officers but at the moment they are not meaningful or beneficial to 24/7 police officers who have enough on their plate.

"It is abysmal and disgraceful that sergeants, those acting up as sergeants and those new to the role are not being given the proper support – they are the superintendent and ACPO ranks of tomorrow."

He added that PCs and sergeants are most likely to be first on the scene in a critical incident and it's essential they are given the skills and training to deal with such situations effectively.

"It is incumbent on ACPO and the NPIA to do something about this," says Mr Giblin.

The thematic says that the recommendations made in the report will be revisited in 2010 to monitor the progress made by forces and Mr Giblin says the Federation will also be looking closely at whether forces are delivering to those described as the lynchpins of the police service.

Recommendations from Leading from the frontline:

- A set of national standards for the role of sergeant
- A review of the promotion process to ensure leadership skills are tested alongside competencies
- A national review of the use of acting sergeants
- Greater recognition of the role of frontline sergeant as a 'specialism' in its own right
- The need for senior management teams to demonstrate visible support for frontline sergeants
- Forces need to clarify their expectations of frontline sergeants involved in critical incidents, and ensure training and support mechanisms are in place to support them