

Sergeant Assessment feedback

Members of the Joint Audit and Ethics Committee recently sat on promotion assessments as observers. The terms of reference were to report back on the consistency and fairness of the current assessment process, specifically the consistency applied to conducting the assessments and the way in which they were scored.

It was reported back to the committee meeting on 11th September 2017 that the recent round of Sergeant assessments was scrupulously fair in its application and that the assessments were conducted consistently. The assessors conducting the process applied marking criteria exactly in accordance with their training.

That conclusion and report to the committee completed the committee members' brief.

The committee is however, aware that a review of the promotion assessment process is being undertaken and having observed the current process from an independent perspective, some feedback may be useful. This feedback is based on the observations of the recent Sergeants assessments:

Observers attended both the initial assessment centre and the interviews conducted with those who progressed beyond it.

- The current two part process is designed to give confidence to candidates that it is conducted fairly and consistently and from the previous comments there is little doubt that is the case. The absence of any input from peers or line managers ensures that candidates are not helped or hindered by nepotism, favouritism or personality issues. Essentially they will stand or fall on their own merits when judged objectively against set criteria. Candidates can be sure of that fact and that is in itself a major positive factor in giving them a great deal of confidence in the promotion system.
- However, candidates and the organisation also have to be sure that the selection criteria being so scrupulously applied are the right ones and the Force's process will identify the best candidates.

- **Stage one is an assessment centre** which requires all candidates to complete a task. It is very clinical. There is little interaction between candidates and assessors while they present their response to the task. Assessors write continuously with their heads down, recording evidence against the three competencies being tested. It is timed with a countdown timer and candidates are stopped immediately at the expiry of their allocated time.
- The criteria used to demonstrate suitability for promotion in the current assessment process are drawn from the national competencies for Sergeants. These are clearly very relevant, but as a matter of policy they are the **ONLY** attributes measured and assessed. Other issues which the Constabulary relies on first line supervisors to manage include amongst other things, operational competence, ethics, welfare, service recovery and general operational experience are not tested or considered. All other factors outside of the three competencies being scored are disregarded as irrelevant, even if the assessors have any concerns about the candidate.
- Assessors were scrupulously fair in applying the assessment process and marked in strict accordance with the criteria. However, both candidates and some assessors are of the view that candidates can pass the assessment centre by learning how to navigate the process and some assessors informally voiced some concerns that the rigid nature of the assessment can lead to situations where they have no option but to pass someone who has delivered the correct words, but is nevertheless unconvincing.
- As an example, one observed candidate passed the assessment with outstanding marks after an exercise which required the delivery of an effective briefing. Every piece of information which was required to gain marks was delivered, but in a manner that showed a complete lack of communication skills. Assessors quite rightly noted that communication skills are not one of the competencies being tested and despite being uneasy in the extreme about the candidate's suitability for promotion, nevertheless were obliged to award an extremely high mark
- Whilst there is an opportunity to ask questions in the assessment centre, in reality if the candidate has already 'ticked all the boxes' then essentially they will be successful because the list of follow up questions is a standard list designed to elicit marks against the competencies.
- There is unease amongst some assessors that the organisation has chosen to decide whether to promote people whilst actively disregarding organisational knowledge of their abilities and relying completely on an artificial process dealing with artificial situations to identify the best candidates.
- Furthermore, the situations used to assess candidates are all crime/incident related which is not truly reflective of the policing workload

which creates more demand relating to such things as social issues, mental health and vulnerability than it does crime

- Observers saw candidates who had been performing an acting role for some considerable time, then failing the assessment and interviews. They are either good competent officers who have not delivered a good performance during assessment, or alternatively the assessment has provided an accurate picture of their abilities and they should not have been in a position to perform the role for a protracted period. Assessor comments were heard such as 'That was a shame because he/she is actually a really good Sergeant'
- **Stage two interview.** What was evident at the interview stage was that it is not structured in a way that allows an opportunity to examine the successful candidates in more detail or address any wider issues, concerns or ambiguities arising from the previous stage. In practice the interview stage appears to be little more than a re-run of the assessment centre in a different guise and a second opportunity designed to give the candidate a chance to score points to tick off against a narrow range of competencies.
- Candidates are all asked identical questions and given 6 minutes to answer them, again against a timer. The answers are assessed solely by the extent to which they address the competencies. Once again the emphasis is assessing what is said and matching it to a competency area and there is little or no time available to explore the depth or genuine understanding of what is said. No relevance or credit is given to any non-competency framework issues that are commonplace to the role of an operational Sergeant.
- The amount of time allowed for interview and the way in which it is so rigidly structured sometimes left assessors discussing and speculating at the conclusion of an interview as to how much they thought a candidate had a full understanding about things said in interview. The purpose of an interview is arguably the opportunity to probe and dig deeper, explore issues of concern and resolve doubts and ambiguities, but the rigid nature of it does not allow that to happen.
- One thing that is apparent throughout the whole process is the degree to which assessors apply the criteria and ensure that the marks they ascribe to candidates can be referenced to evidence gleaned during the interview and/or assessment. The most crucial point of the whole process is the point at which assessors consider the marks they have given against the competencies and convert them into an overall numerical score. This numerical score is crucial as it will define a line at which some will pass and some will fail. There is however, no clear conversion process which assessors can use to convert for example an 'A', 2 'B's and a 'C' into an overall score. A different team of assessors may well say 2 'A's and 2 'C's deserve the same overall score, whilst others may consider the presence of a higher number of lower grades should result in a lower overall score,

despite the presence of an additional higher score. At the culmination of the process and at such a crucial pass / fail stage, the system becomes very vulnerable to subjectivity.

- In the absence of for an example an A scoring 5, a B scoring 4, a C scoring 3 etc, assessors use more subjective means such as viewing an A, B, or C etc as high ones or low ones in order to establish the final numerical score, but this may well differ across different assessors.

In summary, the existing process is clearly intent on the pursuit of fairness and whilst this is achieved by assessing a nationally agreed but narrow range of competencies and applying exactly the same questions to every candidate through every stage of the process, the extent to which this approach provides an ability to gain a full picture of the people it is placing into a key role is one for the Constabulary to consider. It is hoped these comments will assist the debate.