



An Coimisiún  
um Cheapacháin  
Seirbhíse Poiblí  
Commission  
for Public Service  
Appointments

Audit of Recruitment and Selection Policies and Practices within  
An Garda Síochána relating to promotions  
to the Rank of Sergeant and Inspector

**AUDIT REPORT**  
**December 2015**

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## 1. Executive Summary:-

The Commission for Public Service Appointments (the Commission) reviewed the processes employed by An Garda Síochána to promote staff from Garda to Sergeant and from Sergeant to Inspector. The Commission wanted to evaluate the safeguards used in the evaluation of candidates to determine whether they were sufficiently robust to protect the integrity of these processes. It also wanted to establish whether the processes were compliant with best recruitment practice as set out in the Code of Practice.

The appointment processes for promotion to Sergeant and Inspector take place annually and are managed centrally by Competitions Unit within An Garda Síochána's HR directorate. The competitions involve:-

- A "HQ Directive" circulated to all members of An Garda Síochána bringing their attention to the competitions and seeking applications;
- A highly structured and detailed Competency Based application form;
- Line Management Assessments and Ratings of candidates;
- Formation of a large number of Interview Boards each comprising two individuals who are not members of An Garda Síochána, and one Senior Garda - each Board chaired by one of the external Board members;
- A structured competency based Preliminary Interview for all eligible applicants organised on a Regional Basis – the Senior Garda who sits on the Regional Board works in a different Region;
- The best placed candidates from the Regional Interviews are invited to attend a second structured competency based interview by the final selection board or "Central Panel" also comprising two civilians and a senior Garda. None of these Board Members are involved in the Regional Interviews.

Broadly speaking, the Commission is satisfied that the processes incorporate adequate safeguards, including those listed above, that protect the integrity of the selection processes and offer the necessary assurance that candidates are appointed on the basis of their interview performance.

However, notwithstanding the enormous time and resources committed to these appointment processes the Commission considers that there are a number of elements inherent in their design and implementation that do not reflect best recruitment practice, the appointment of candidates on merit and, at the same time, conspire to diminish confidence in the promotion system.

The HQ Directives advertising the promotion competitions examined in this review were circulated in August 2013 and the final notice of results to candidates issued in June 2014.

The Commission noted that almost 1,000 candidates applied and were interviewed for the Garda to Sergeant competition and almost 400 candidates applied and were interviewed for the Sergeant to Inspector competition. These competitions involved in excess of 320 days interviewing for members of An Garda Síochána at Chief Superintendent and Assistant Commissioner level in addition to the hiring of external Interview Board Members for more than 600 days. While the numbers of interviews entailed in these two processes is already extraordinarily high, the Commission also noted the low participation rate at Garda and Sergeant level with only approximately 10% of those at Garda level and only 20% at Sergeant level applying for promotion. The Commission accepts that there are a range of factors that can contribute to this relatively low participation rate, eg satisfaction at the current grade and role, personal circumstances. It considers that An Garda Síochána should explore how it might increase the numbers of candidates applying for promotion with a view to improving the overall quality of those selected.

The Commission recognises that many of the parameters under which these competitions are run are set down in either primary legislation or statutory instruments. The Commission believes that many of these legislative provisions are outdated and need to be changed. Having carefully considered the promotion systems for posts at these levels, the Commission considers that An Garda Síochána must revise the manner in which it appoints its Sergeants and Inspectors and, in this regard, recommends that the Garda Commissioner takes the following actions:-

1. Engage with the Department of Justice and Equality along with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to review and update the Promotion Regulations to reflect best recruitment practice and to support reform of the current selection processes;
2. Benchmark promotion methodologies against those employed in other Police forces to see how the evaluation of candidates for promotion may be improved;
3. Continue to ensure that appropriate and effective measures are taken to eliminate the risk of canvassing by and on behalf of candidates including reminding all Interview Board Members that it is an offence to interfere with an appointment process and that any efforts to canvas are reported to Garda HR;
4. Ensure that members of the Interview Boards declare which candidates they know or have worked with and Competitions Unit maintains a register detailing these declarations;
5. Develop a fresh panel of Interview Board Members so that the same individuals are not called upon to act on these selection boards time and time again;
6. Eliminate line management ratings and simplify the line management assessments presented to the Interview Boards;
7. Support the promotion systems by applying a probationary period for newly promoted staff;
8. Consider how candidates may apply and be considered for posts on a Regional/Divisional basis;
9. Consider the role and current relevance of the Sergeant and Inspector Professional Examinations in establishing eligibility for these positions;
10. Review competencies used to assess candidates to ensure that the criteria relied upon by the selection boards reflect the current requirements of the roles;
11. Replace the enormously expensive and resource intensive Preliminary Interviews with a suite of bespoke screening tests designed to test

candidates on the duties and responsibilities of the role in a fair, objective and consistent manner.

12. Pending the establishment of the suite of bespoke screening tests the following steps are recommended:-
- a. Provide all Board Members with intensive interview skills training in advance of each selection test;
  - b. Engage additional assessors to move between Interview Boards to monitor and control the effectiveness and the consistency in the approach of the Interview Boards;
  - c. Bring a larger number of candidates forward to the final stage selection process and place more candidates on the final panel so that future vacancies can be filled;
  - d. Lower the rank of those serving on the Preliminary Interview Boards to increase the available pool of board members and make the process more cost effective.

(The additional costs involved in implementing the steps a – c above are offset by reducing the frequency of these competitions from annual to biannual.)

## 2. Background:-

The Commission for Public Service Appointments strives to safeguard the integrity of the recruitment, selection and appointment of people to publicly funded positions and to engender widespread confidence in the ability of those appointed to contribute to the delivery of first-rate public services.

It oversees recruitment and selection to positions across a wide range of Public Bodies, including appointments up to the rank of Inspector in An Garda Síochána. In carrying out this oversight function the Commission seeks to ensure that those appointment processes exemplify the principles of probity, merit, transparency, impartiality, consistency and fairness. The Commission is firmly of the view that these core principles are not mere ends in themselves but the means to achieving the greater goal of attracting and selecting the strongest possible candidates for positions thus facilitating the delivery of efficient and effective services.

The Commission publishes Codes of Practice which prescribe recruitment and selection standards that Public Bodies within its remit are required to meet. It examines complaints from individuals who believe that a public body has failed to adhere to the standards prescribed in the Codes. As part of its oversight function the Commission also carries out audits of appointment process conducted by those Public Bodies to determine whether the public body has adequate safeguards in place to ensure that candidates are recruited and selected in a fair and objective fashion and that there is no scope for patronage.

On the basis that its last audit of appointment processes within An Garda Síochána dated back some 4 years, the Commission decided that it was now time that it looked again at the manner in which these processes take place and that it reviewed the effectiveness of the safeguards employed to support the selection of candidates on merit.

### **3. Review Methodology:-**

The purpose of the Commission's audit is to examine the safeguards employed to protect the integrity of the selection process and that support the recruitment and appointment of staff on merit.

In preparation for its review of the promotion processes, and in light of its experience reviewing appointment processes within An Garda Síochána, the Commission's Audit Team met with the members of the Garda Inspectorate to seek their views on the role and impact of the promotion processes within An Garda Síochána. A second meeting with members of the Inspectorate was held to discuss themes emerging in the course of the review. The Audit Team also discussed the initial findings with the Chairperson of the interim Policing Authority.

The Audit was undertaken as follows:-

#### **A. Meetings with Garda HR**

Two meetings were held with the Executive Director of HR and his team to discuss the context of audit and recruitment systems generally within An Garda Síochána. Further detailed meetings were held with the HR Team responsible for managing and administering the competition process.

#### **B. Examination of Files**

A detailed examination of the records retained in Garda HR on the 2013/2014 selection processes for Garda to Sergeant and Sergeant to Inspector was undertaken. Follow up discussions were held with staff in the HR section at Garda HQ to clarify issues arising.

Files and records were examined to evaluate the effectiveness of the safeguards employed and to check for any anomalies in the management of the appointment processes. Checks were made, and evidence examined to assess the following:-

- That candidates had received adequate and appropriate information and instructions on the application process
- That Interview Board Members were properly selected and appointed
- Questions asked at interview related to the competencies for the role
- That broadly similar questions were asked of each candidate and candidates generally received the same amount of time at interview
- That individual marking sheets corresponded to scores awarded on final aggregated lists
- That the final aggregated list matched the list for appointment
- That lists for appointment matched appointment orders

### **C. Interviewing the Interviewers**

Interviews were held with a total of nine Interview Board Members who had participated in the processes. These Board Members were selected at random and were from both Civilian and Garda participants. Interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured approach and generally lasted one hour.

The broad themes covered in these interviews included:-

- general impressions of the process
- probity and fairness
- canvassing/interference
- overall impression of the calibre of candidates presenting
- feedback mechanisms
- selection of Interview Board Members
- training of both Interviewers and Interviewees
- make up of Interview Boards
- scale and administration of the process
- areas and methods of improvement

### **D. Views from applicants in the competition**

A questionnaire was developed and issued to 137 randomly selected members of the force who had been participants in the competitions under review.

The questionnaire covered a range of issues including:-

- clarity of documentation
- format and structure of competency based interview and the candidate's understanding of the process
- quality of feedback
- fairness of evaluation
- overall perceptions of promotion selection system
- impediments to applying for promotion
- suggestions for improvement



#### **4. Description of the Selection Processes:-**

The manner in which candidates applied to and were evaluated for the promotion from Garda to Sergeant and from Sergeant to Inspector followed very similar processes.

Much of the format and structure of the promotions processes are prescribed in statute.

The system is based upon a competency based approach and success is determined by performance at interview. Competencies for the roles were drawn up with the assistance of professional external expertise some 10-12 years ago.

Any serving Garda who had successfully completed the Sergeant Professional Examination is eligible to apply for promotion to Sergeant and any Sergeant who had completed the Inspector Professional Examination is eligible to apply for promotion to Inspector. There is no requirement for candidates to re-sit these examinations or to otherwise demonstrate that they have remained up to date on the subject matter examined in these examinations.

**Stage 1 Application Form** - Candidates were invited to complete a detailed structured application form. In the first part of the application form, candidates were asked to outline their academic and professional qualifications, their career history detailing positions they had held and the length of time they had spent in the role. In the next part of the form, they were required to set out how they had displayed the range of competencies required for the higher role. Their line manager was asked to include an assessment comment and provide a rating on the candidate's performance against each of these competencies. The line managers were asked to rate the candidates between a low of "One" and a high of "Five". A second line manager was asked whether they agreed with the comment and rating provided. In the Garda to Sergeant process, the completed forms and assessments were submitted for final sign off by the Chief Superintendent. Commission staff observed that most candidates attending interview received very positive ratings across all of the competencies.

**Stage 2 Preliminary Interview** - All eligible candidates were afforded a Preliminary Interview. These Preliminary Interviews were arranged on a Regional basis with candidates from a region interviewed by one Interview Board. There were 10 Preliminary Interview Boards for the Sergeant competition and 4 Preliminary Interview Boards for the Inspector competition.

Each Interview Board comprised two Civilians and one Senior Garda. One of the Civilian Board Members acts as Chairperson. Chief Superintendents sat on the Interview Boards for the Sergeant competitions and Assistant Commissioners sat on the Interview Boards for the Inspector Competitions. The Civilian Interview Board Members were selected from a list provided by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) and approved by the Minister for Justice and Equality. The members of An Garda Síochána chosen to sit on the Preliminary Interview Boards do not work in the same region as the candidates s/he is interviewing.

The Interview Board Members were required to attend a briefing session in advance of the interviews. They were provided with detailed guidance on the selection process including information on the competencies, the scoring key and note taking.

They were advised to read the assessments/ratings but not to take account of same in their consideration of candidates' performance.

The numbers invited to attend for the final interview stage was determined by Human Resources based on the existing number of vacancies to be filled.

**Stage 3 Final Interview Board** - The structure and approach adopted at the final interviews was largely the same as that used by the Preliminary Interview Boards and only marginally differs in the range of competencies examined. Again the Interview Boards comprised two civilians picked from the list provided by PAS and approved by the Minister for Justice and Equality. One of the Civilians chaired the final interviews.

The Final Interview Boards were presented with the same application material provided to the Preliminary Interview Boards.

All of those placed on the panels by the Final Interview Boards were appointed at the end of the process and no candidates were placed on a reserve list in the event that future vacancies arose.

As can be seen from the table below, the scale of the competitions is large and very resource intensive.

	Garda to Sergeant	Sergeant to Inspector
Number of Candidates attending Preliminary Interview	984	381
Number of Candidates invited to Final Interview	252	128
Number of Candidates placed on the panel	185	43
Total Number of Interview Days	228	93

That said approximately only 10% of Gardaí applied for promotion to Sergeant in the competitions reviewed and 20% of Sergeants applied for promotion to Inspector.

### **Selection of Interview Board Members –**

As stated earlier, An Garda Síochána select its external interview board members from a list compiled by PAS and approved by the Minister for Justice.

The majority of Civilian Interview Board Members who met with the Audit Team had been involved with Garda Interviewing for some years.

They displayed a high level of interviewing experience as well as a commitment to the selection of candidates on merit. They recognised the need to ensure that each interviewee had the best opportunity to present evidence at interview on each of the competencies. They all expressed the view that the selection system in which they had participated was fair and objective and that selection was only based upon performance at interview.

However, they all spoke of the cost and unwieldy nature of the process, and the difficulty and challenge of interviewing so many candidates.

All spoke of the desirability of training for candidates with regard to the selection process, refresher training for Interview Board Members and the need for systems support in the processing/managing of the interview process.

All recognised the importance of good development feedback to candidates on their performance but also commented on the very restricted time they have for the provision of this comment. They also highlighted the difficulty in providing meaningful and specific summary comment to each candidate particularly as so many present very well at interview and the board are challenged to differentiate between such a high calibre candidate pool.

There was a clear appetite for the introduction of a comprehensive and suitable system to assess candidates to go forward to final interview in replacement of the existing method.

All agreed that the calibre and commitment of candidates presenting for interview was very high. They advised that it can be very difficult to differentiate between many of the candidates and commented that many very good candidates had to be disappointed given the ratio of applicants to vacancies.

The Civilian Members on the Interview Boards advised that they were not aware of any criterion or system used by An Garda Síochána in deciding who participates on these selection boards.

An Garda Síochána is reliant upon others for the compilation of the list of external Board Members it is required to use. As such it does not have the authority to refresh/renew the existing panel of Board Members. An Garda Síochána advised that it strives to include experienced HR Professionals as well as a recently retired Senior Public Servant (eg County Manager or Secretary General level) as its external board members. The Commission understands that in some situations the selection of Civilian Board Members may ultimately be determined by the individual's availability and willingness to participate in these lengthy Interview Boards.

**Conduct of Interviews** - The records of the interviews generally captured the time afforded to each candidate for their interview along with the questioning areas covered by the board members and a summary of the candidates' responses.

Candidates were asked a broadly similar range of appropriate questions related to the competencies, and afforded broadly equal time with their Interview Board.

Details of the scores awarded to each candidate under each competency were also captured facilitating the compilation of an order of merit. A summary comment was also recorded for each candidate with a view to permitting feedback on their interview performance.

The Interview Boards transcribed the agreed marks awarded to candidates onto an aggregated list. One discrepancy was noted in the course of the Audit Team's examination of the individual marking sheets against the aggregated list. This arose from a transcription error. However it had no effect on rankings and had been picked up at an early stage in the course of the Competition Unit's own internal checking system and resolved with the Interview Board concerned.

There was no discrepancy between the list of those sent forward for promotion and the record of the interviews signed by the Interview Board Members.

In meetings with Interview Board Members, Commission staff discussed in detail the commonly held view that there is widespread interference in these appointment processes. In particular they asked whether the outcome of the processes were influenced by inappropriate communications with board members.

Although not universally experienced, some of the Interview Board Members advised that they were conscious that a level of canvassing was taking place by or on behalf of applicants. However each of the Board Members attested to impartiality of the process, the rigorous examination of candidates at interview and the fair, impartial and consistent evaluation of candidates following the interview. Commission staff did not find evidence to suggest that any such canvassing had a bearing or effect on the selection process. It must be noted however that any such canvassing has the potential to have a profound effect on the general perception of fairness in the process.

## 5. Survey Findings:-

The Commission sought to supplement its review by getting some insight into how the promotion processes are perceived by members of An Garda Síochána. It wrote to a sample of 137 candidates for the Garda to Sergeant and Sergeant to Inspector promotions processes and invited them to participate in a survey. This represented 10% of the candidate population. The candidates sampled were stationed in districts across the country. 61 returned completed forms.

The following details the key findings from the survey:-

- 42 of the 61 respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the documentation/instruction to candidates regarding the competition was clear and sufficient to allow them to prepare adequately for the interview
- 39 of the 61 respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they understood the competencies method of interview. However only 24 respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the format of the interview provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate their competencies for the role
- 40 of the 61 respondents either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that the feedback they received on foot of their participation in the interview process was meaningful and helpful. Many commented that the feedback was too generic and of no use
- 45 of the 61 respondents either “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement that the process was fair and impartial. There was no significant difference in the results between those who indicated they had been successful in the competition to those who were unsuccessful

A large number of respondents included remarks indicating that they believed that the processes are characterised by nepotism, cronyism and favouritism.

When asked about factors that might inhibit eligible candidates from applying, many respondents remarked that there are concerns in relation to:-

- successful candidates may be required to move post or location on promotion and that this creates a particular disincentive to those with families
- the low level of integrity of the process is putting people off applying for promotion
- the mechanics of the process itself (such as unfamiliarity with the competency based interview forms and competency based interviews) were also cited as barriers to potential candidates

When asked for suggested improvements in the recruitment, respondents proposed the following:-

- Independent interview process with no Garda Síochána involvement
- Shortlisting prior to interview by way of an exam
- Abolishing letters of recommendation from more senior Gardaí
- Less reliance on interview process and more ongoing assessment
- Give the option for candidates to list top 5 stations for assignment if successful
- Shorten the timeframe between the start and end of competitions. Such competitions can be long and information not forthcoming to candidates about the various stages of the process
- Have a minimum number of years experience before being eligible for promotion

The Commission recognises that the responses from the 61 candidates who took the time to complete and return the survey forms may not accurately represent the views of the candidate pools let alone the views of all of those serving at Garda and Sergeant level within An Garda Síochána. As such it cannot be relied upon, on its own, to justify changes to the systems of appointment.

That said the Commission is satisfied that the survey findings are generally consistent with the views expressed by members of An Garda Síochána in telephone calls with, and correspondence received by, the Office of the CPSA over the last couple of years. Many of the findings were also consistent with views expressed by members of the Interview Boards in their meetings with the Commission's Audit Team.

## 6. Findings and Recommendations:-

### (i) Garda Síochána (Promotion) Regulations 2006

The Garda Síochána (Promotion) Regulations 2006 set out the current framework for the conduct of promotion processes to the rank of Sergeant and Inspector.

The Regulations provide for the establishment of a Promotion Advisory Council which oversees promotion competitions and advises the Commissioner thereon. Other aspects of the promotion process covered by the Regulations include membership of the interview boards and eligibility of Gardai and Sergeants for promotion.

The Commission is concerned that these Regulations serve to hinder efforts to reform the system of appointments and believes they should be revised.

#### Recommendation 1

*The Commission recognises that its observations on the internal selection processes conflict with the provisions of the governing Regulations and it recommends that An Garda Síochána engage with the Department of Justice and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with a view to achieving a resolution that facilitates the implementation of the recommendations in this Report.*

### (ii) Scale and cost of the Selection Processes

Garda Regulations provide that all eligible candidates are entitled to attend for interview for promotion to Sergeant and Inspector. The promotion processes account for a vast amount of the organisation's time with approximately 320 days of Senior Garda (Chief Superintendent and Assistant Commissioner level) tied up interviewing candidates for the posts of Sergeant and Inspector.

The process also involves significant costs in terms of hiring external Interview Board Members.

Each candidate is permitted a day off to attend for interview and, in all likelihood, many spend a considerable amount of time preparing their application forms and preparing for their interview.

The Garda to Sergeant and Sergeant to Inspector competitions involve Preliminary Interviews organised on a Regional basis followed by second stage interviews for those who make it through the first stage. The numbers of selection boards involved in the first stage along with the Regional structure gives rise to concern about the consistency in approach between boards. Given the Interview Boards' comments in relation to the high calibre of most of those candidates presenting for interview and the marginal nature of the decisions made in determining which candidate make it through to the final interview stage, the Commission has concerns about the suitability of large scale Preliminary Interviews as the vehicle for fairly and objectively differentiating between such a large volume of candidates and picking the best candidates to send forward for final interviews.

At the end of the selection process, a set number of candidates are placed on a panel and promoted. However, no provision is made for vacancies that may arise later in the year.

In relation to the scale of the process, the Commission wishes to commend the efforts of the Garda Competitions Unit and those on the Interview Boards for the huge work involved in administering this process. It notes that there is very limited case management system support for the staff in the recruitment team or those on the Interview Boards.

### **Recommendation 2**

*The Commission believes that An Garda Síochána should explore the promotion methodologies employed in other police forces for ideas on alternative means for screening candidates other than the very costly and unwieldy Preliminary Interviews.*

### **Recommendation 3**

*The Commission considers that An Garda Síochána must replace the Preliminary Interviews with a suite of competency based selection tests that can evaluate candidate's suitability for promotion in an impartial, objective and cost efficient manner.*

### **Recommendation 4**

*The Commission considers that An Garda Síochána should bring a larger number of candidates forward to the final stage of the selection process and place more candidates on the final panel so that future vacancies can be filled.*

Where a recruiting organisation is using a number of different stages to evaluate and select candidates, it is considered best recruitment practice to apply a range of different techniques so that different facets of the candidates' experience, knowledge, skills and behaviours are examined. The selection process for posts at Sergeant and Inspector level involve two competency based interviews which both examine broadly the same sets of competencies.

The Commission recognises that An Garda Síochána will need to invest time and resources in the development of this suite of tests.

Before commencing this developmental work, the Commission believes that An Garda Síochána should review the competencies for the Sergeant and Inspector roles so that it has up to date and reliable information on which it can base its tests. The Commission understands that the existing competency frameworks underpinning the present promotion systems are around 10-12 years old. It is likely that they no longer accurately reflect the current demands of the role and should not be relied upon for the design of the new tests. An Garda Síochána will need to develop competency based selection tests that can be used to evaluate the suitability of the candidates' cognitive abilities and behavioural traits. These tests may include a combination of job simulation exercise/situational judgement test, on-line video interview/presentation and/or group exercises.

In making this observation, the Commission is conscious that it will require a change to the Garda Promotion Regulations which provides that all eligible candidates are entitled to attend for interview.



The Commission believes that An Garda Síochána should initiate work on this process as soon as possible and set a time frame for completion and delivery of the new suite of tests, eg 12 to 18 months.

### **Recommendation 5**

*The Commission recommends that, in advance of developing a suite of bespoke screening tests, An Garda Síochána needs to review the existing competency framework for the Sergeant and Inspector roles to ensure that they reflect the current demands of the role.*

### **Recommendation 6**

*The Commission believes that An Garda Síochána needs to immediately introduce additional safeguards to promote confidence in the current system of appointments pending the availability of the selection tests referred to in Recommendation 3.*

*These additional safeguards include:-*

- a. Garda HR satisfies itself that all of its external Interview Board Members have testimonials that confirm their interviewing experience and training prior to their participation in these appointment processes (see Recommendation 13 below)*
- b. Additional assessors are engaged and tasked with monitoring and controlling the effectiveness of the different Preliminary Interview Boards and to ensure consistency in the approach of the different Boards*

The additional costs involved in implementing the steps above could conceivably be offset by reducing the frequency of these competitions from annual to biannual.

### **Recommendation 7**

*Lower the rank of those serving on the Preliminary Interview Boards to increase the available pool of board members and make the process more cost effective*

The Commission considers that as Inspectors and Superintendents have a closer working relationship with those at the rank of Sergeant and Inspector respectively, they are better placed to determine which candidates demonstrate the qualities required for the role. The Commission also considers that this will provide invaluable development opportunity for those selected for these boards.

This measure will greatly increase the pool of available board members and lower the cost to the organisation of involving so many senior Gardaí for weeks at a time. It will also bring the processes more in line with public service norms where Interview Boards comprise staff at one level above the post being filled.

### **(iii) Canvassing and Probity**

Some of the Interview Board Members who met with the Audit Team advised that they believe there are occasional incidences of canvassing carried out by and on behalf of candidates in the course of the promotion competitions. However they also believe that any attempts to influence the outcome of the appointment process are not a factor in the evaluation of candidates. The Civilian Board Members advised that they have not detected overt efforts by Garda Board Members to use undue

influence to affect the outcome of the process. All reported that they are happy to stand over the manner in which candidates are evaluated.

However, responses to the survey of a sample of candidates indicate that there is a low level of confidence in the probity of the system of appointments. It also highlights a belief that patronage is quite prevalent in the organisation and that candidates think they need to have a mentor at a senior level pushing their case for promotion.

The Commission notes the view of the Board Members that their evaluation of candidates is based on the evidence presented by the candidates in the course of the appointment process. It also notes the Board Members' comments that it can be very difficult to decide which of the many strong candidates who attend for Preliminary Interview ought to be sent forward to the final stage of the process. The Commission is very concerned that so many candidates have such little confidence in the integrity of the promotion processes.

### **Recommendation 8**

*The Commission recommends that all future HQ Directives for appointment processes clearly set out that any efforts to interfere with the selection process constitutes an offence and that canvassing will lead to the disqualification of the candidate concerned.*

*In addition all Interview Board Members must be advised of their responsibility to protect the integrity of the selection process and that (i) under the provision of the Public Service Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Act 2004 it is an offence to interfere with the selection process, (ii) that those chosen to sit on Interview Boards have a duty to report any suspected efforts to canvass on behalf of a candidate or otherwise interfere in an appointment process to the Executive Director of HR for investigation and (iii) those found guilty of an offence are liable for disciplinary action, a fine and imprisonment.*

### **Recommendation 9**

*The Commission recommends that Garda HR informs all Interview Board Members of the correct protocols for managing possible conflicts of interest and connections between candidates and Board Members. It also recommends that Board Members are required to declare which candidates they know and on what basis, and that these declared connections are recorded and retained on the competition file.*

#### **(iv) Calibre of candidates and the provision of feedback**

Members of the Preliminary Boards in particular advised that the level of performance of more than 50% of the candidates is very high and is improving year on year. They reported that most candidates are extremely well prepared and, based on their performance at interview, appear well capable of performing higher duties. There were differing views on whether this reflected the ability of the candidates, the candidates' investment in interview preparation and training or their experience in interviews from previous applications.

The Board Members reported that they are faced with a real challenge in terms of differentiating between the top 50% of candidates presenting for interview and selecting those it wishes to send forward to the Final Board.

At the end of the interviews, the members of the Interview Board agree a summary comment that explains the decision reached in relation to the candidate's interview performance.

The Commission considers that specific and meaningful feedback is very useful in instilling confidence in the system of appointments.

However, the Commission considers that the present construct of the process (more than 100 candidates interviewed by each of the Preliminary Interview Boards over a six week period) means it is simply not possible to provide constructive career development advice to candidates. The summary comment available to candidates is generally non-specific and of limited value. Members of the Interview Boards commented that it is often very difficult to differentiate between the top candidates, that some marginal calls are made, and as such it can be difficult to offer specific and meaningful feedback to explain why a candidate just missed out.

#### **Recommendation 10**

*It is recommended that, in acknowledging receipt of applications or when inviting candidates to the initial stage of the selection process, the Executive Director of HR reminds candidates that they must be realistic about their prospects. It is worth restating that fewer than one in five candidates are likely to be successful in their applications. The Commission considers that the candidates must be reminded that the calibre of those presenting for interview is generally very high and that the Interview Board Members frequently comment that more than 50% of those who present for interview show, in the course of their interviews, that they have the abilities to perform very well in the higher role.*

#### **Recommendation 11**

*The Commission recommends that candidates are provided with their marks, the average marks awarded by their selection board and the cut off point (the mark needed to qualify) as it assists candidates in their understanding of their performance relative to other candidates.*

#### **(v) Selection of Board Members**

Under Garda Regulations, the external members of the Interview Boards must be nominated by PAS and approved by the Minister for Justice. Many of these board members have acted on the Garda Interview Boards on numerous occasions. However it appears that the Regulations do not put any requirement on PAS to proactively engage in systematically reviewing the skills levels of and offering training to the board members on the list. Also by virtue of the manner in which it is required to select its external Board Members An Garda Síochána cannot properly evaluate the calibre of these external Interview Board Members.

Competitions Unit is sometimes compelled to select these Board Members on the basis that they are willing and available to commit six or more weeks to this process. This has resulted in many of the same people sitting on the Interview Boards year after year. While not in any way wishing to disparage the individuals who have participated on these Interview Boards, who are generally extremely competent and of unquestionable integrity, the presence of the same people on the Interview Boards on an ongoing basis can and does lead to a perception that they may not be

sufficiently willing and/or able to exercise their independence in the manner expected of them.

An Garda Síochána is working on the basis that the civilians included on the list of names provided by PAS are fully trained and competent interviewers. However the Commission does not consider that this is sufficient and would expect that An Garda Síochána provide bespoke interviewer training, including mock interviews, for all of its Board Members so that they are properly prepared for the arduous task of questioning and evaluating candidates, many of whom will be presenting with broadly similar experience.

### **Recommendation 12**

*As part of the planning stage for the next promotion competitions and in advance of the significant revamp of the competitions that ought to dispense with the need for Preliminary Interviews, it is recommended that An Garda Síochána, Department of Justice and Equality and PAS work to establish a deeper panel of Board Members so that those who sit on the next set of Interview Boards have no association with previous interviews and are bringing a fresh perspective to the process.*

*While the Commission does not intend to be overly prescriptive about how the panel of Interview Board Members might be refreshed, it suggests that the parties involved seek Expressions of Interest from people with validated/recognised interview training and experience and who are available to work for the period of time required at an agreed rate so that they may be evaluated on their calibre and suitability for these roles.*

*Furthermore the Commission believes that every effort needs to be made to minimise the possibility that Internal Board Members sit on interview panels in consecutive competitions and certainly not permit them to sit on the same regional panels for consecutive competitions.*

### **(vi) Training of Board Members**

The Board Members have reported that the training provided could be improved. In the course of the meetings with the external Interview Board Members, it did not appear that they understood or had been given explicit instructions in relation to their role as custodians of the probity, merit, fairness and equity of the process. Training provided by An Garda Síochána is more about a familiarisation with the vagaries of its own selection process and less about understanding the specific competencies, questioning technique, performance indicators or even the different roles of the individual Interview Board Members. In light of the difficult tasks the boards have in differentiating between the stronger candidates, it is imperative that the Board Members are given every opportunity to develop their questioning skills and their capacity to evaluate candidates in an objective and transparent fashion.

### **Recommendation 13**

*The Commission recommends that all Board Members, including the Garda members selected for the Interview Boards, undergo tailored training to support them in honing their interviewing skills for each competition.*

*It is also recommended that, through appropriate interview training and bespoke briefing, the Interview Board Members are given specific guidance in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities.*

### **(vii) Role of Assessments and Performance Appraisal**

All applications are supported by highly detailed Line Management Assessments and these assessments are made available to the selection boards. The assessments include a written evaluation and numeric rating of the candidates' competencies. However the boards are, in effect, instructed not to take account of these in making their decisions on the candidate. Most candidates are given a rating of 4 or 5 (very strong or exceptional) across the board. While the written assessments can give some insight to the boards, the numeric ratings offer little value. Also, as so many candidates achieve very high ratings from their line managers, it is arguable that ratings serve to undermine the credibility of the process. In the event that the score awarded to the candidate by the Interview Board is at odds with the rating included by the line manager on the assessment form, candidates may be inclined to accept the strong rating awarded by their line manager. Conversely, in the event that the rating awarded by the line manager is unfavourable, the candidate may attribute a disproportionate significance on how this impacts upon their candidature. Also it is possible, if not likely, that some line managers are as concerned about the impact of their assessment and ratings on their continuing working relationship with the candidate as they are about supporting the effectiveness of the selection process.

The Commission questions the applicability of the Line Management Ratings and Assessments. Other than validating or verifying the accuracy of the information provided by candidates, the narrative on the Line Management Assessments appear to add limited value to the appointment process.

While line managers are required to commit enormous time and effort to completing assessments and ratings for each candidate and the Board Members are required to note these assessments and ratings, each Interview Board is instructed to evaluate the candidates based on their interview performance and to disregard the assessment and rating provided.

Garda HR has acknowledged that there are shortcomings in the manner in which performance is formally managed and appraised and in how competencies necessary for promotion to the rank of Sergeant and Inspector may be acquired. This has an impact on the credibility of the promotion processes as candidates often cannot comprehend how others, who they consider are less effective in their day to day duties, fare better in the promotion processes.

The Commission noted that the selection boards are provided with details on the candidates' sick leave and disciplinary record. While it acknowledges that these may have an impact on the candidates' eligibility and suitability for promotion, the Commission considered that candidates and Board Members alike should have greater clarity about how this information should be applied during the candidate assessment process.

The Commission also noted that all of those who were successful at the end of the Final Interviews were promoted on a permanent basis without recourse to a probationary period. The Commission considers that best practice recruitment and selection processes help to reduce the risk of making a bad appointment. They do not eliminate the risk entirely. The Commission believes that, as a further safeguard,

the promotion process needs to be supported by a robustly managed probationary period. In these and any other similar recruitment process involving large numbers of appointments, it is likely that some selection errors will be made resulting in the appointment of unsuitable candidates. An Garda Síochána must have the capacity to revert those candidates who are successful in the appointment process but not successful in the role.

#### **Recommendation 14**

*The Commission recommends that the Line Managers rating of candidate's competence is discontinued and, in view of the length of time taken to complete the assessments, that the Line Management assessment element of the application forms is substantially simplified with Line Managers completing an overall assessment rather than providing a detailed narrative on each individual competency.*

#### **Recommendation 15**

*In the interest of engendering greater transparency, the Commission recommends that Garda HR reviews the manner in which details on the candidates' sick leave and disciplinary records are considered in the course of the selection process and that more explicit guidance is provided to candidates and the Interview Board Members alike.*

#### **Recommendation 16**

*The Commission recommends that An Garda Síochána support its promotion processes with a robustly managed probationary period.*

#### **(viii) Career Planning**

It is broadly recognised that those who have worked in different roles tend to obtain a greater range of experience and broader skills and can have an advantage over others at interview. The Interview Board Members have advised that some specialist posts, by their nature, appear to offer candidates who have worked in these areas with greater scope to display their competencies and as such they can become a "gateway" to promotion.

It is not clear if there is a transparent staff mobility system in place that provides opportunities for members of An Garda Síochána to work in these "gateway" positions.

#### **Recommendation 17**

*The Commission recommends that An Garda Síochána considers how it can establish a robust and transparent system for making lateral reassignments which provides those who have demonstrated a commitment to career progression with an opportunity to broaden their experience base. While not wishing to be overly prescriptive in how such a system might operate, the Commission believes there may be merit in seeking expressions of interest in these lateral assignments.*

#### **(ix) Eligibility for promotion to Sergeant and Inspector**

All those at Garda Rank who pass the "Sergeant Professional Examination" and all those at Sergeant Rank who pass the "Inspector Professional Examination" are entitled to apply for promotion. There is no requirement for candidates to re-sit these

tests or to otherwise demonstrate that they have remained up to date on the subject matter examined in these tests.

### **Recommendation 18**

*The Commission recommends that An Garda Síochána reviews the role and current relevance of the Sergeant and Inspector Professional Examinations in establishing eligibility for these positions. The suite of selection tests referred to in Recommendation 3 above may also incorporate an examination of the procedural matters that a candidate will require on taking up the higher duty roles.*

### **(x) Proportion of Candidates putting themselves forward for promotion**

The Commission notes that approximately 10% of those serving at the rank of Garda put themselves forward for promotion while approximately 20% of those at Sergeant rank applied for promotion to Inspector.

The Commission considers that An Garda Síochána should seek to increase the proportion of candidates applying for promotion so that the overall calibre of those presenting is as high as possible.

The Commission notes that many of those surveyed indicated that the perceived likelihood of having to move location on promotion acts as a disincentive to apply.

### **Recommendation 19**

*It is recommended that An Garda Síochána reviews the manner in which successful candidates are assigned to the Sergeant and Inspector positions and that it considers the feasibility of allowing candidates to indicate which divisions or regions they wish to be considered for.*

## **7. Acknowledgements:-**

The Commission wishes to express its appreciation to Garda HR for its high level of co-operation and engagement throughout this audit. It also recognises the invaluable contribution to the audit by all Interview Board Members contacted and the insights into the appointment processes they so readily offered.

In addition the Commission wishes to thank the Garda Inspectorate and staff in the Department of Justice and Equality as well as the Votes Control side of Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for providing it with contextual information that was so important in forming a view of the effectiveness and impacts of the promotion processes to posts at Sergeant and Inspector level.