



## KEY FACTS

# AN INSPECTION OF AIRPORT AND HARBOUR POLICING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

THE BELFAST INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT CONSTABULARY  
AND THE BELFAST HARBOUR POLICE

OCTOBER 2025



## WHAT WAS THIS INSPECTION ABOUT?

Northern Ireland's airports and harbours are vital parts of Northern Ireland's infrastructure and critical to business, tourism and connectivity for citizens. They need to be policed effectively to maintain national security, combat crime and protect the public.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for policing all of Northern Ireland but there are two other police services, that are funded and governed differently and work with the PSNI. Inspectors looked at Belfast International Airport Constabulary (the Airport Police) and Belfast Harbour Police (the Harbour Police) that provides services in the Belfast Harbour Estate and at George Best Belfast City Airport. They examined how these police services operated and the outcomes they achieved.

## HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THIS INSPECTION?

Inspectors talked to Airport Police and Harbour Police leaders, Police Officers and Harbour Police support staff. They also spoke to Belfast International Airport (BIA) senior managers and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

Inspectors met with stakeholders and statutory agencies, including the PSNI, the Department of Justice (DoJ), the United Kingdom (UK) National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the Department for Transport.

Inspectors reviewed governance structures and how policing was delivered by the Airport Police and Harbour Police. They looked at how both police services used and monitored data to shape their strategic direction and evaluate their outcomes.

Inspectors looked at how well each police service understood its roles and responsibilities in dealing with crime and how staff resourcing was structured to meet the policing needs of each area. Inspectors examined the effectiveness of partnership working with the PSNI.

Inspectors also reviewed a sample of criminal case files to see how investigations were conducted and cases prepared by both services for prosecution by the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS).



## WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND?

- Inspectors were not assured that the legislative security planning framework, that set out the rules and procedures for security planning at UK airports, was working effectively in Northern Ireland. The PSNI needed to be assured that policing at Northern Ireland's airports complied with agreed national standards and was operating efficiently and effectively.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police did not have an agreement with the PSNI setting out their roles and responsibilities for investigating high-risk criminal incidents despite all three Police services working together. This needs attention.
- Inspectors were very concerned about the Airport Police's lack of appropriate policing experienced leadership, governance and accountability arrangements and its implications for policing at BIA. The Airport Police's rank structure was not effective, and it didn't have a policing vision, strategy or plan to direct policing activities and priorities. Training, performance management and criminal investigation supervision also required improvement.
- Inspectors were concerned by the risks for Police Officers and the public when the Airport Police and Harbour Police needed to travel outside their policing jurisdictions, for example when transporting a suspect to a PSNI custody suite.
- The Harbour Police were a 'trusted partner' and had a positive working relationship with the PSNI. Belfast Harbour Estate benefited from a neighbourhood policing focus and highly visible police presence during daytime hours.
- Inspectors were concerned Harbour Police's centralised Criminal Justice Unit was discouraging their Police Officers from maintaining an investigative mindset.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police didn't routinely publish information about their activity and outcomes. Inspectors believed they needed to be more transparent and that this could foster public confidence in policing.



## WHAT NEEDS TO BE BETTER?

### At a strategic (leadership) level:

- The PSNI should lead a fundamental review of the policing of all of Northern Ireland's airports. This should include input from all relevant airport partners and statutory organisations and, when completed, should be shared with everyone who took part.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police need to formalise their relationship with the PSNI and develop an agreed Memorandum of Understanding clearly setting out roles and responsibilities for investigating high-risk crime like domestic abuse, human trafficking and serious sexual assault.
- The DoJ should prepare the legislative change needed to ensure Airport and Harbour Police Officers can use their policing powers where and when needed.
- The Airport Police need to create a vision and strategy to direct policing at BIA with actions to improve governance and accountability measures.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police Policing Plans should take account of Programme for Government priorities and reflect PSNI Policing Plan priorities like Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and domestic abuse.

### At an operational (on the ground) level:

- The Airport Police rank structure needs reviewed to ensure it is effective and that appropriate leadership and accountability arrangements are in place.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police should work with the PPS to introduce the digital transfer of criminal case files.
- The Airport Police needs a workforce training needs analysis and annual training schedule that includes PSNI input. Airport and Harbour Police Officers need annual training on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 and on the Victim and Witness Charters.
- The Airport Police and Harbour Police should publish information each year on their policing activities, including how long it takes to investigate offences and prepare case files for prosecution or a no prosecution decision. This would provide more transparency and contribute to improving public confidence in policing in Northern Ireland.



## WHAT DO INSPECTORS WANT TO SEE NOW?

Inspectors want to see action taken by the Airport Police, Harbour Police, PSNI and DoJ to ensure that Northern Ireland's airports and harbours are policed to national standards in the most efficient and effective way.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

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