



# ISOB FINAL REPORT ON ANTI-RACISM ENGAGEMENT IN POLICING: EMERGING THEMES

23 FEBRUARY 2026





# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Over five years of overseeing the Police Race Action Plan (PRAP), the ISOB has accumulated a rich body of learning about what enables - and what blocks - meaningful progress on anti-racism in policing. For its final report, it will leverage these insights, as well as those from stakeholders who engage with policing on anti-racism and race equality matters.
- Across eighteen interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, several themes have emerged. The themes confirm what many practitioners already suspect and what the ISOB has highlighted in previous reports: that policing's defensive culture places a ceiling on progress; that sustained senior leadership ownership is indispensable; and that the psychological toll on those doing this work, whether inside or outside policing, is severely underestimated and chronically under-resourced.
- The more surprising findings are equally significant. According to interviewees, one of the most effective strategies for engaging policing on race is to avoid naming race explicitly. In addition, the PRAP's central team worked in conditions that, in important respects, replicated the very harms the programme was designed to address.
- As of 20 February 2026, eighteen interviews have been completed, with further interviews already booked and additional expressions of interest being followed up. In total, thirty interviews have been completed, confirmed, or are in the process of being arranged, representing a significant increase from the originally targeted fifteen-twenty stakeholders in the project proposal.
- This document summarises preliminary findings from eighteen of thirty planned stakeholder interviews conducted thus far. Participants span national and regional ISOB members, senior policing staff, civil society organisations, anti-racism practitioners, and community organisations.
- All findings are indicative at this stage; this report aims to demonstrate emerging patterns ahead of a comprehensive analysis, which will follow once all interviews are complete.



## 2. INTERVIEWS

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Interviews were conducted between 10 and 20 February 2026. Stakeholder groups represented include:

- National ISOB board members
- Regional ISOB chairs and members
- Senior policing practitioners embedded in or working alongside the PRAP
- Civil society organisations engaged in anti-racism work with policing
- Specialist practitioners (legal, research, cultural training, youth justice)

Insights have been aggregated and anonymised.



### 3. EMERGING THEMES

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#### **Leadership still determines the rate of progress on anti-racism**

Progress happens - and stalls - because of specific people in specific roles. This holds at every level: national policing bodies, individual forces, and the PRAP team.

The quality of senior leadership is more determinative than any structural commitment, action plan or external pressure. When key individuals leave, good practice is rarely embedded well enough to survive their departure. They leave with their knowledge and expertise, and the good work they were doing often disappears with them.

2

#### **Defensiveness is the default response to scrutiny on race**

Every interviewee used the word 'defensive' to describe police responses to external scrutiny on race. It is structurally embedded. Specific language triggers it most reliably: 'racism,' 'anti-racism,' and especially 'institutional racism.'

3

#### **Performative engagement is widespread**

Policing's dominant engagement model is "show and tell," not co-production: communities are informed about what the police are doing and are invited to respond. Communities and civil society groups have learned to distinguish this from genuine influence, and participation has declined accordingly and trust continuing to erode.

The risk of 'tick-box, we've done it' complacency once PRAP ends is real and was raised by multiple interviewees unprompted.

Communities want to be heard and treated with dignity - not given data presentations and asked to react. The gap between what communities actually want from policing and what the police interpret as an appropriate response was described as fundamental. Young people remain a consistent and unresolved gap.

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#### **The shift to outcomes-based accountability was ISOB's most significant achievement**

The Maturity Matrix was the most consistently cited contribution across all stakeholder groups, including from within policing. The push from actions to outcome metrics with directional targets was hard-won and important.

However, there are concerns about the Maturity Matrix's practical unwieldiness in implementation.

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#### **Structural fragmentation makes consistent national delivery almost impossible**

43 different forces, no compulsion mechanism, high PRAP staff turnover, and a political climate that has shifted against proactive DEI work have all compounded limited progress. It



also makes it unlikely that there will be progress on anti-racism once the central PRAP programme comes to an end in the spring.

6

### **The personal toll is profound and consistently underestimated**

Several interviewees described the human cost of this work as high and support as inadequate. ISOB members routinely worked more than their allocated 16 hours.

Racial fatigue is real and structurally induced. The pattern of exhausting practitioners and cycling in new ones without systemic change was described as a feature of how policing manages scrutiny.

7

### **Language and framing are strategic decisions**

As mentioned above, engagement that explicitly names race as the issue has, in practice, been less productive in some contexts than framing around operational effectiveness, public safety, or specific cohort vulnerability – e.g., “young people aged 18 to 25.”

8

### **Interviewees are divided on what actually drives genuine change**

Legal obligation, individual relationships, public pressure, and moral argument all have advocates. However, what is clear is that moral argument alone has not proven sufficient, and that sustained political will, which is currently absent, is a prerequisite for system-level change.

9

### **Community and policing accountability frameworks are fundamentally different**

Policing accountability is primarily punitive and compliance-based. Community accountability, particularly in Black and minority ethnic communities, is more often grounded in transformative justice and harm reduction. These are not complementary models, and they reflect different understandings of what scrutiny and accountability are for. This divergence limits how far engagement can go.

10

### **The scaffolding is coming down before the foundations are solid**

The transition of the central PRAP team and the winding down of ISOB are happening before the programme's structural contributions are embedded.

Regional ISOBs are at very different stages of maturity. The risk of regression without ongoing NPCC ownership, HMIC integration, and some form of independent scrutiny is acute. This is the most urgent concern raised across the interview cohort.

*“If this isn’t managed correctly - and I’ve said this in several meetings - we will be having the same conversations in ten years, and the relationship with communities will have soured.”- Civil society leader*



## 4. NEXT STEPS

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The remaining interviews are due to be completed in the first week of March 2026. The final report will build on the preliminary insights set out here to produce a comprehensive analysis of enablers and barriers, structured as a practical guide for anyone engaging with policing on anti-racism.

The following areas will be developed in full:

- A cross-cutting analysis of the conditions under which genuine progress occurred, drawing on specific examples from regional and national contexts.
- A more granular examination of the ISOB's scrutiny model: what made oversight effective, what made it less so, and the implications for future governance design.
- An assessment of the programme's legacy infrastructure: what has been built, what is at risk, and what would need to happen to preserve meaningful gains.
- Recommendations framed around the forthcoming police reform agenda, specifically the performance framework, HMICFRS inspection, and the future of anti-racism leadership within policing.

The final report is expected to be completed on 11 March 2026.

**ENDS**