Justice Committee

Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from Zero Tolerance

About Zero Tolerance

1. Zero Tolerance is a small national charity promoting innovative policy and practice to address the root causes of male violence against women and children. We are focused on preventing violence and abuse and changing social attitudes and values.

Our general comments on this Bill

2. We welcome the opportunity that police and fire reform offers for developing improved consistency in responses to violence against women. A single police force would be well placed to learn from the best practice in addressing violence against women happening in various pockets in Scotland (such as the Strathclyde Police Domestic Abuse Taskforce) and ensure this practice becomes the norm across the country.

3. Evidence from leading agencies such as Scottish Women’s Aid suggests that there are many positives in the police response to domestic abuse (e.g. the police are becoming more proactive in taking cases forward, responses are generally positive, police believe women and take them seriously). However, and alarmingly, there is still no overall consistent position across police forces, or even between divisions in forces, in the attitude and understanding of the individual officers attending an incident, despite the considerable work done by forces in this regard. The creation of a single force is an opportunity to address this and achieve consistency and excellence in the delivery of police services across Scotland in relation to domestic abuse and all other forms of violence against women.

4. The creation of a single force also creates the opportunity for the police to address inconsistent views towards policing prostitution and trafficking, and in particular the ‘blind eye’ approach of the Lothian and Borders force in relation to the existence of saunas which we know are in fact operating as brothels. This approach is very much tied into a local approach and a historic arrangement with the local authority, but it is anomalous and does not fit with the national policy approach to prostitution, which is defined by the Scottish Government as a form of violence against women. It may be that a single force is able to deliver greater consistency between national policy objectives and local policing.

5. It is essential however, that any national and local arrangements, partnerships and working relationships that organisations supporting women who have experienced violent crime (e.g. national and local women’s aid groups, rape crisis centres etc) have in place with ACPO(S) and the current Scottish police forces continue, so that these groups can support the new single force in developing and strengthening its response to violence against women.
6. There are particular benefits that could accrue as a result of the creation of a single force in terms of data collection, as forces do not currently have a consistent approach to collecting data on certain forms of violence against women e.g. sexual offences.

7. If there is a single national force, it will still be important for police officers to be involved in local partnerships and fora, such as Violence Against Women partnerships, organised through local authorities, and such partnerships should be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of any new local police initiatives in relation to violence against women, to ensure a consistent message which accords with national protocols and policies.

8. We would support the continuation and extension of the local ‘champions’ model, whereby local Fiscal offices have ‘Champions’ whose remit is taking forward Crown policy in relation to the prosecution of rape and sexual assault; this scheme could be extended to taking forward policy in relation to the police response to domestic abuse, prostitution, trafficking, forced marriage and other forms of violence against women.

9. The creation of a single Fire Service offers the same opportunities for consistency as mentioned in relation to policing. Fire can be used as a means of attack and a weapon, and can be a factor in domestic abuse cases, so a consistent understanding of the links between fire and gender-based abuse and a consistent national response would be welcome.

10. We have no comments on the specifics of the Bill at this time.

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Coordinator
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