Thank you for inviting Reform Scotland to submit evidence to the Justice Committee’s inquiry into the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill.

Although we do believe that there needs to be a strengthening of specialist police functions and welcome the proposals to bring these services together, Reform Scotland is against the proposal to create a single Scottish police force. However, we recognise that the political climate is such that the new force will be created so we have focused our evidence on how to ensure the new single force is not a centralised one. Reform Scotland’s main concern with the bill, as proposed, is the proposal to take a largely local service and turn it into a centralised national one, something for which we do not feel the Scottish government has demonstrated the need, and which represents a reduction of accountability and transparency, not the increase which is required.

As a result, our submission mainly addresses the appointment of members to the proposed Scottish Police Authority, the financing of the police and the role of local authorities within policing.

Scottish Police Authority
One of the key drivers of Reform Scotland’s approach to policing in Scotland is the need to improve local accountability. We would agree with the Scottish government that the current system of joint boards, representing a redundant layer of government in Scotland, means very few people have an idea as to who represents them in the policing chain of command. It is, therefore, essential that any changes to the structure improve local accountability.

However, we would disagree with proposals for the Scottish government to appoint members of the Scottish Police Authority, in effect creating a policing quango, which blurs transparency and accountability and leaves the public unsure who is responsible. Instead, Reform Scotland believes that the Scottish Police Authority should be made up of representatives of each of Scotland’s local authorities, with each council having a right to place a representative of their choosing on the board. Due to the national elements of policing, we would be happy for representatives from the Scottish government, whether minister or senior civil servant, to also sit on the board.

We appreciate that this means a rather large police authority. However, this is due to the number of local authorities in Scotland. As the policy memorandum states “most policing and fire and rescues services are delivered locally” and we therefore believe that it is essential that this is reflected in the make-up of the Scottish Police Authority.
Reform Scotland does not believe that the need to remove councillors from this role in the policing hierarchy has been justified.

Finance
Reform Scotland disagrees with the funding proposals which would see the police being funded directly by the Scottish government. We believe that it is essential that local authorities continue to contribute toward the cost of policing, just as we believe that they must be involved in the new Scottish Police Authority. As the old adage goes, “He who pays the piper calls the tune”, and if local authorities have no control over the purse strings then it will be difficult for councils to adopt differing policies towards policing, or even have a meaningful input into policy direction.

Whilst there is some scope to allow local authorities to increase funding to the police, there also needs to be the ability for them to decrease funding if they believe funding can be better utilised elsewhere, especially if that funding is in areas such as youth services or social work which may be able to prevent crime in the first place.

Role of local government
Historically, policing has been a local service in Scotland, reflecting different priorities around the country. Different types of crimes are more or less prevalent in the different police forces around Scotland, resulting in different police forces needing to focus on the different problems affecting their local area.

Such differences were reflected in the 2010/11 recorded crime in Scotland statistics. For example, Grampian had the worst record for crimes of indecency per 10,000 population but one of the lowest rates for fire-raising, vandalism etc; Strathclyde had the highest rates for non-sexual crimes of violence, but one of the lowest for motor vehicle offences; Central had the second highest level of fire-raising, vandalism etc but a lower than average level of crimes of dishonesty; and Dumfries & Galloway had the highest level of motor vehicle offences but the lowest level of violent crime.

Local priorities can still be taken into account within the structure of a single police force; however, it is not clear how this need for diversity and flexibility could be accommodated within the structure currently proposed. Although division commanders would appear to have some level of accountability to local authorities, they are ultimately answerable to their chief constable. If there is a conflict between some of the policing policies being pushed then ultimately the local needs end up coming second – unless that chief constable is, in turn, answerable to a Scottish Police Authority made up of representatives of local authorities.

For example, what flexibility is there to allow Edinburgh, should it wish, to adopt a prostitution tolerance zone again, while allowing another area to adopt a different practice? It is important that enough freedom is given to division commanders to try out different policing methods. This also enables innovative and new policing practices to be tried out. As with all public services, increasing diversity can raise standards for all. Imposing a one-size-fits-all structure from the centre will stifle that innovation.
Reform Scotland believes that the Scottish government has not provided sufficient justification for taking a service which has historically been delivered at a local level and running it from the centre. We believe that the changes we have proposed to the funding of the police as well as the makeup of the Scottish Police Authority help protect the vital role local authorities play in policing whilst achieving the Scottish government’s stated aim of creating a single Scottish police force.

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