Purpose of the Report

On the 26 January 2012 SCSN were invited to provide written and oral evidence to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee of the Scottish Parliament in relation to the implications of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill on Community Safety Partnerships.

Introduction

SCSN is a membership organisation set up to represent the 32 community safety partnerships (CSP) across Scotland. As well as acting as a network supporting CSP to meet one another for mutual support and share practice, the staff team also publish policy papers, maintain a database of good practice, and develop relevant training opportunities for practitioners. Working with local government, police and fire services some of our recent work includes facilitating a practice sharing event attended by the Minister for Community Safety, hosting the 4th Community Safety Convention and National Community Safety Awards. We are expecting 170 attendees at the Convention and received 68 applications for the Awards from 27 Local Authority areas. In addition, we are often invited to represent the views of the community safety sector at a national level to influence policy development.

We regularly host facilitated discussion about topics relevant to our membership and in March 2011 we hosted a consultation as part of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Bill initial consultation. Because the views of our membership in relation to the proposals varied, we chose not to submit an SCSN response, preferring to leave it to local CSP.

However, we continue to have a role to support our membership in the debate and to support them to influence how Police and Fire Reform plays out locally. In fact, at the National Community Safety Convention – Building on Success, Preparing for the Future on Tuesday 21 February 2012, Police and Fire Reform will be discussed as a plenary session and further complimented with a workshop on the pathfinder projects. Feedback from this event will influence how we continue to support our membership to engage. We will be able to give you initial feedback from this event as part of the oral presentation on the afternoon of the 21 February.
Main Report

In relation to the publication of the Bill, to date it has only been possible to undertake informal discussions but Network staff have met with about 24 of the 32 CSP in recent weeks. Police and Fire Reform has tended not to have been raised in these discussions other than it being clear that CSP are aware of the reform plans and that there is engagement with local police and fire contacts. This absence of specific expressions, either in support of proposals or against, raises concerns about the extent that CSP are fully engaged in the consultation process.

Uncertainty clearly exists about the exact nature of local representation and the ‘status’ of the local area commander in whatever structure is agreed on. Concern has been raised regarding having an ‘appropriate’ level of representation at CSP and that the ‘senior officer’ of the area will require to have a sufficient degree of delegated authority to make decisions and the ability to task and deliver on initiatives. The main concern for local elected members will be the retention of locally responsive units which are sufficiently resourced to serve their communities.

Concern also clearly exists about ‘command level’ in more rural areas, in particular in the north and islands, in relation to attendance at and management of major incidents. This has significant implications for public and partner reassurance. On a more detailed basis, what arrangements are made for cover in the absence of a local commander and how competing demands will be reconciled?

Whilst the Bill is available for consideration, it lacks detail on a number of significant issues and CSP are keen on obtaining more detail of the practical implications of the proposed changes and the likely impact on the ground at a local level.

A significant concern is the independence and accountability of the national boards and the separation between Ministers, the national board and operational delivery. The proposals currently state that members of the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Board (SFRS) would be appointed and funded by Ministers, its strategic objectives and its plans and budgetary decisions approved by Ministers. In addition, and Ministers retain the “power of direction”, albeit as a last resort. This suggests that the SPA and SFRS, at least on the basis set out in the Bill, appears on paper to be less empowered than existing Boards which have requisition powers in terms of budget and whose decisions cannot be overturned by constituent councils. This begs the question of how empowered and accountable the SPA and SFRS would be. Further clarification of where accountability will lie, how this separation will be protected and what the consequences are for our joint regional and local arrangements would be welcome and should be agreed with local partners.

The composition of the SPA and the SFRS is recommended as having between 7 and 11 members but, with 32 local authorities and related local partners, both in community planning partnerships as well as community safety partnerships, this may not be sufficient to allow for appropriate representation. The link between national governance and local accountability needs to be transparent and fit for purpose. While the Bill does not set out to create 32 Police Divisions and 32 Fire Brigades members require clarity on how and what is being devolved to a local level and what
geographical context these local levels will take i.e. where services will be shared across existing Local Authorities.

The main contribution that CSP feel that they can make is a knowledge of the local communities that they operate within as well as their interest and commitment to efficient and effective community safety at that level. CSP suggest that there is a need not only to continue to support partnership working but also to ensure engagement with communities and elected members. For a national police force (and fire service) to be seen as accountable to local communities there must be strong local links with local communities, included in this is a need for local information sharing arrangements to be sustained/protected.

Local partnership initiatives and priorities will continue to require adequate staffing and budgetary resources. It is not anticipated that the existing budgets are completely devolved as there is clearly a need to ensure the delivery of national priorities and services.

However, some concerns have been expressed about additional police resources currently funded through CSP and local authorities being included in reform totals without adequate detail or explanation being given in relation to possible continued funding at a time when local budgets are being reduced considerably. Furthermore, the position of specialist officers such as to school liaison officers and neighbourhood officers remains unclear. The question asked is how will CSP ensure that they are still getting what they agreed to pay for?

It is important that existing partnership working with local authorities including Community Planning Partnerships, Child Protection, Drugs and Alcohol Forum, the Community Justice Authority and many others which are all well established and have begun making significant changes within local communities, are maintained. The Bill refers to annual plans being developed with community planning partnerships and, although CSP are part of the community planning process, there is a need to be more explicit about the how the annual policing plan relates to existing strategic assessments and single outcome agreements. At present CSP develop partnership strategic assessments (through a nationally agreed model) to highlight police, fire and partnership priorities, which in turn are inform local outcome agreements entered into as part of the Single Outcome Agreements. Whilst this work is often led by the police there requires a commitment to ensure that these are produced and owned by all partners, and reflect/add value to partner agencies national targets. Further consideration and consultation could at this time be given to the suggestion that the Bill includes a duty on community planning partners to support community safety and the production of local strategic assessments and plans.
Conclusions

Timescales for consideration of the Bill and agreement on the range of provisions is extremely tight and the overwhelming feeling is that there is little real consultation. Without adequate time being provided for the proper consideration of the proposals, there is a real danger that CSP will not be properly engaged with. There is a concern that this could lead to a lack of ownership in the change process and a serious disconnect from local community planning processes. Whilst it is understood that the initial timetable seeks to address the ‘business’ transfer and that the full impact of the reform will take up to 2016, Network members wish to ensure that whatever is designed for implementation has been properly thought through and that they have had ample opportunity to express a view and, where necessary, influence whatever changes are being introduced.

Jacqui Doig  Donald Urquhart
SCSN Manager    SCSN Chair

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