Justice Committee

Railway Policing (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from Matt Quinn

I recently read a BBC article suggesting you were requesting public opinions on railway policing in Scotland.

Currently railway policing is provided by the British Transport Police, a specialist police force operating nation wide. BTP are highly respected by industry partners such as network rail, train operating companies as well as the travelling public.

BTP's specialism and the value they place on working with their stakeholders and communities means they are often at the forefront of national initiatives that safeguard passengers and the industry. These initiatives are often then replicated and adopted by local forces. Examples would include:

The way in which BTP manage fatalities on the rail network. By working with NWR, ToCs and coroners - they ensure that the investigation of the loss of life is carried out appropriately with dignity for the deceased whilst minimising disruption to the network. The intricacies and protocols they have in place in respect to this have been mimicked by civil police when dealing with fatalities on roads.

Mental Health. I believe BTP were the first force to have a dedicated Suicide Prevention and Mental Health team, working actively with the NHS and individuals to follow up on mental health related incidents and ensure individuals were receiving care and all parties were kept appraised of actions taken. They also introduced Suicide Prevention Plans, which record information of those at risk of suicide who have come to notice before to allow for a quicker response and sharing of information to safeguard the individual. Further - they were the first force to employ mental health nurses in the force control room to advise officers who were dealing with incidents on relevant points. This is now being trialled by a further 10 or so forces. They are also piloting having nhs mh nurses on patrol with officers at key locations.

Terrorism. BTP have been at the forefront of policing and responding to terrorism incidents in the U.K. Developing their own grading systems and evaluation procedures for incidents and suspicious items that reduce the unnecessary disruption to the network. The HOT procedure has been extremely successful and is being adopted by other forces.

New legislation. BTP were key partners in the introduction of new legislation to tackle metal theft as part of their promise to tackle the loss of railway property and the disruption it causes to passengers (Metal Theft Act 2003). This is another example of where their relationships with, and understanding of, industry partners and their needs shines through in their commitment and results. They remain the national lead on metal theft in the country.
These are only a few examples and others include NIRMs, having inspectors in NWR control rooms, rail pastor schemes, tackling sexual offences (Project Guardian) and others.

BTP are the only national public facing police force. Whilst there are other national forces, none interact with the public on a daily basis to the extent that BTP or any other civil force. They engage with people of every nationality, creed, age, race, religion, sexuality, able bodied or otherwise, and maintain the lowest recorded number of complaints amongst every force in the country. Their legitimacy in terms of public perception when applying their policing function is exceptional given the added stress people feel when they travel and the recorded complaints against rail companies and staff (who work in the same environment).

They have a specialist knowledge and interest that is refreshed and consolidated every day through the work they carry out. This cannot be replicated through training or infrequent engagement with the rail network. BTP are not an omnipresent force and there are plenty of examples where home office forces, who do provide assistance in BTP absence (and vice-versa), have interacted with the rail network and through a lack of knowledge or respect - have got it wrong. A recent example would be where Lincolnshire police chased a man onto the tracks at Grantham resulting in his electrocution. In a safety critical environment - where dangers are everywhere, be it 125mph trains, 4000t freight trains, 750dc third rails, 25000ac volt overhead lines - second rate knowledge and experience costs lives.

The benefits of BTP are too numerous to mention fully - a lot of them are probably too easily taken for granted or not well enough publicised. The merger of BTP Scotland into Police Scotland will have devastating short and medium term effects (at least) for the running of the network and the passengers. Relationships would be marred between operators and police who do not have an understanding or appreciation of the environment they share. BTP officers will leave in droves to go south of the border, or those nearing retirement will go to preserve their pension and rights. Where pay and conditions are not met, the resulting legal challenges and settlements will have a devastating effect on police Scotland. There will not be enough experienced frontline officers or those of high rank to maintain the specialist knowledge and pass it on. Police Scotland will have to ascertain the extent of the knowledge they require and learn it before they can even begin teach it.

I would also consider the benefit of having more than one police force within a given territory for the benefit of anti-corruption purposes and disciplinary proceedings. In a monopoly where there is only one authority there becomes a "who will watch the watchers" scenario. A secondary police force allows for a tier of accountability and continuing inspection from impartial peers of equal knowledge and responsibility. Where you have a force that operates alone, you risk having a force that becomes isolated and introspective - failing and unable to learn best practice from forces around the country.

Secondly, please consider examples where BTP do not provide the service for policing transport systems in the Britain. For example, the Manchester tram service. Greater Manchester Police are one of the largest police forces in England and were given the contract to police the system over BTP. Inconsistencies in approaches,
funding and priorities lead to high volumes of crime, damage and disruption. Further the DCC of BTP stated when giving evidence at the committee that when he was in the MET, units assigned to transport systems not policed by BTP where routinely re-assigned to other "higher priority" areas as common practice. How will transport issues face up to domestics, Saturday night issues in the town centres, burglary hotspots etc? Where will PolScot prioritise responding to call from a train guard refusing to move a train because there's a passenger without a ticket? There's no threat to life and limb, no risk of damage to property, no crime scene with decaying evidence and the suspect isn't going anywhere. Does it take priority over the punch up down the road? Probably not. Yet every minute the train stays static, the national network gets delayed, thousands of passengers all over the country start having their journeys put back, they miss connections, job interviews, flights. Who is responsible? Not Police Scotland, not NWR, not the TOCS. Who gets held to account for failing to provide a service to the thousands of delayed passengers across the country? Eventually the train guards lose confidence, staff lose confidence, ASB and fear of crime rises, profits go down, funding for police goes down, dedicated police service declines until it becomes a priority again.

For too long this merger has been treated as a foregone conclusion and all options really need to be challenged and scrutinised. There has been no evidence presented for the benefits of the merger and rationally it cannot be concluded that this merger is beneficial - let alone necessary.

I am sure I have missed plenty of valid points - but hopefully they will be picked up by others or yourselves. Thank you for providing the opportunity to engage with this topic.

I will follow the scrutinisation of the bill with an active interest.

Matt Quinn
26 December 2016