Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Impact of police reform on local policing

Written submission from Eric Davidson

You have asked for comments on how the new national policing arrangements are affecting local policing in the areas in which we live. You further seek views on whether, or not, the service provided has changed in any way and does it still seem to meet the needs of the area in which we live.

I would suggest that to most people there can be no meaningful answer to these questions as most people will base their opinion purely on whether, or not, they still see police cars driving around or the occasional bobby on the beat. As that aspect of policing has not changed under the single force there seems little chance that anyone has noticed any difference to the service provided post 1 April.

Councils, I am a sure, will notice a difference in the sense that they no longer have their own local Police Board, which accorded them direct access to the Chief Constable and therefore allowed them some modicum of control over the actions of the police in their local area. Councils now have to deal with Chief Superintendents leaving the sole Chief Constable to report to more politically driven committees.

The only public facing aspect of the new Police Service for Scotland that has received some negative press of late is with regard to the public offices and whether they should continue to be open during hours where statistics would seem to prove no one uses them. Any change to public offices, however, cannot be laid at the door of the single force as all legacy forces, over the last three to five years, were carrying out surveys and writing reports indicating that change was necessary. In other words, single force or not, there would have been changes to the service provided to the public through the network of public offices.

So has there been any change to the service provided by the police since 1 April?

Of course there has and very little has been for the good of the service provided. Let me explain.

The whole need for change was driven by one thing; the politicians decided that money had to be saved. A consultation exercise was undertaken and the vast majority (89.2%) of those who responded said that they were either against the idea of a single force, as the move was too radical and likely to create more questions than answers, or they did not have enough information to make a proper judgement. Rather than provide more information and using only what little information was to hand the decision was made to go to a single force as that was where it was perceived the most saving could be made.

Having decided that there would now be but one Chief Constable the job was finally given to Stephen House, the then Chief Constable of Strathclyde, as of 1 October 2012. Prior to Mr House taking up his post there had been around eighteen months of work carried out by the Police Reform Team to set-up some kind of blueprint for
the new force. Meetings were held around the country, on a regular basis and staff kept informed of proceedings, all of which sounded quite positive.

As far as I can see very little, if any, of that reform work has actually made its way in to the real world of policing in Scotland. I get the feeling that the Reform Team, quite rightly, suggested that change should be a slow and measured process. I further get the feeling that that was not good enough for the politicians who wanted to see their savings occur a whole lot quicker no matter that damage may be caused along the way.

Let’s remind ourselves of what was being asked of the Police Service in Scotland. It was to bring 10 separate strands together in to one. Those 10 strands did not (and still don’t) have an IT system that allowed them all to speak to each other. They all had different pay structures, job titles, computer systems and were all organised in a slightly different way from each other. Almost overnight they were then expected to create, from these 10 strands, one strand that could run the length and breadth of Scotland.

Mr House appears to have found a quick solution to the problem of creating that one, single strand. What he has done is nothing short of the Glasgow-fication of the Scottish Police Service. Basically if it was done a certain way in Strathclyde, prior to 1 April, then that is how Scotland will do it now. There has been no account taken of the excellent work being carried out in the other legacy force areas of Scotland nor has there been any account taken of whether, or not, the Stratchclyde way was the best way in the first place.

Documents did float about that referred to a more joined-up style of policing in Scotland but they all referred to IT systems that don’t exist and may not exist for years to come. A new IT system, especially one that will be expected to deal with data being collected across Scotland, will need to be created and tested before it can become active. This process is not one that can be hurried. We’ve all seen the outcome of hurrying a new system along; it rarely works properly.

As well as the major problem of bringing 10 strands down to one, Mr House also had his hands tied with regard to other issues. He was told that he had to retain all the police officers based in Scotland as the new single force was launched. He was also told that there would be no compulsory redundancies amongst police staff and that there was to be no centralisation of services to the detriment of the service being provided across the whole of Scotland.

The need to retain the same number of police officers was purely political and was never backed up by any proper review. The only reason that figure had to stay the same was to allow Mr MacAskill to constantly tell us that the SNP Government had added 1,000 more police officers during their time in office. Oh yes and he also constantly told us that crime was at its lowest rate in 35 years. The single force can take no credit, therefore, for the fact that crime continues to fall. If it has been falling for 35 years then chances are it would have continued to fall whether we had changed the police structure or not.
So Mr House has had to keep his police officers and yet, in some way, still make financial savings. This brings me to the element of policing in Scotland that has changed but not so the general public would know. It is not the front-line activities that have changed but how those front-line activities are supported. In other words there is a systematic dismantling of police staff roles across Scotland brought about by a desire to save money and not by a desire to create a better service.

Mr House has said on many occasions that the ideal service is one that offers a balance between those who carry out the policing and those who provide support to them. If you have too few police officers then you struggle to solve crime and if you have too few police staff then you struggle to cover all aspects of administration, which can be as diverse as looking after budgets through to intelligence gathering.

Grampian Police were actively heading down the road of more police staff roles in the lead up to the single force decision being made. Grampian recognised that it was actually more cost effective to reduce police officers to a number that had been deemed safe and to increase the police staff to take on roles that did not have to be carried out by a police officer. Police staff cost less and therefore the service they provide is more cost effective in the long run.

I always used the analogy that the police staff were to senior police officers what the Civil Service is to the Cabinet. You can change the Prime Minister but you never really changed the support system beneath the Prime Minister. That way work went on pretty much as normal even if the man at the top changed. You only have to look to America, where the whole regime changes with the President, to see what a mess can be created by too much change too quickly.

In the lead up to the single force coming into being there seemed to be no effort made to actually determine which police staff jobs would be needed in the new organisation and which jobs might fall by the wayside. As I understand some Divisions are still undertaken reviews of their staff at the moment, some seven months into the new organisation. This has led to police staff being allowed to leave at a time when the new organisation hadn’t completed a full review of which jobs might be needed and whether, or not, they had someone to fill that job.

Although redundancies aren’t compulsory ask yourself this – when presented with these two options, which one would you choose?
   a) Remain with the force on a supernumerary list even though we’ve no idea at the moment if there will ever be a job for you; or
   b) Take a package of redundancy/early retirement (though remember that’s only guaranteed until 31 March 2014)

The audit report recently criticised the new force for not having a financial plan. There didn’t seem to be any effort being made to control budgets after 1 April. Prior to that date within each division someone was working to ensure that devolved budgets were spent wisely. After 1 April there were no devolved budgets and it seemed that no one was keeping an eye on spend at divisional level or, more importantly, potential efficiency savings at divisional level. In short, there seemed no obvious sign that accounts were being balanced. However, the fact that Mr House
can now announce that he is only 2.9 million away from balancing the books seems to imply that someone was keeping an eye; no doubt in Glasgow.

The reality seems to be that the new force not only had no financial plan it had no plan of any kind, as far as I can see, beyond the simple proviso that if it was good enough for Strathclyde then it was good enough for Scotland. The school-ground bully now had the keys to the school and could do whatever it wanted. If you look at the people who occupy the senior positions of the new force then you will see the effect that the Central Belt has on Scotland. Hardly surprising that those people living outside of the Central Belt never feel that they get fair treatment. So much for the Scottish Government demanding there would be no centralisation.

In this response I am basically arguing that the only real change to policing in Scotland is behind the scenes. The public can’t see these changes and won’t be aware of the damaging effect such changes are having on the service provided and staff morale. However, if staffing cuts are allowed to carry on as they are and reorganisation forced through without proper thought then the public will very soon see a change and it won’t be for the good. Policing will suffer and the detection of crime will be affected especially if they meddle too much with the way in which intelligence is gathered and disseminated.

Politicians have to stop forcing savings simply by cutting budgets. All the forces, prior to 1 April, were already making significant savings leading to them all becoming leaner and more cost-effective. With a considerable amount already saved from budgets that were allocated prior to the single force it may not be possible, no matter what anyone might say in the political arena, for massive savings to go on being made without a massively crushing effect on the service provided.

I believed in policing in this area when it was Grampian Police. I believed the Chief Constable when he spoke of his vision for the future for it was a vision that I knew was for me and my well-being. I no longer have that belief in policing as I no longer know if the men at the top really care about me in Grampian. I’m sure the Chief Superintendents still care but they don’t have the same clout as a Chief Constable. They are all at the beck and call of Glasgow and as long as that remains the case I remain worried about the future of policing in Scotland.

Eric Davidson
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