Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Impact of police reform on local policing

Written submission from the Retired Police Officers’ Association Scotland (Ayrshire Branch)

I refer to your recent request for written views on the above subject.

Less than a year in, it is too early to make an assessment of the impact of Police Scotland. It is however, worthy of comment that, as far as the public is concerned, the transition has been achieved quite seamlessly. There are however, areas of concern.

Potential financial savings

All of the potential financial savings of Police Scotland have not been achieved because the politicians and administrators, charged with drafting the legislation, failed to ensure that Police Scotland is “Vat Exempt” as were the Police Authorities.

Political influence

Always in discussions of a national police service, have been concerns of undue political influence being brought to bear on policing. So far, none is apparent but this was not likely in the short term. At the same time, it is recognised that a national police service, provides additional opportunity for the public to raise matters of policing with their elected representatives and have them discussed in the political arena.

Officer numbers

It is welcomed that Police Scotland has given the opportunity for a consistent management structure, on the Strathclyde Police model, of reduced ACPOS and Superintendent Ranks, to allow constable numbers to be maintained. The Scottish Government has kept its promise of maintaining 1000 extra Police Officers. However, it is suggested that this has been done with the referendum of September, 2014 in mind and that officer numbers will fall thereafter. Personnel being such a major part of the police budget, this would seem inevitable, if as expected, there are further budget cuts.

Reduced support staff

There has been a reduction of civilian staff, necessitating that police officers “fill in” as required. While this will achieve a financial saving, it is not efficient to use police officers, in roles not requiring police powers and for which they are overpaid. At the same time, the public is deprived of officers performing their proper function.
Office closures

“Efficiencies” are resulting in the closure and reduced hours of opening of police offices. We trust that efforts will be made to compensate for the losses but the closure of a police office deprives the public of convenience and of a place of safety and shelter.

Prisoner detention

The number of stations, holding prisoners is also being reduced, in favour of more central locations. Savings so achieved, will be offset by the time that officers spend, out of their own areas, transporting and processing prisoners, particularly during busy periods. It may also wrongly influence decisions as to whether or not to make an arrest.

Police and public priorities

We share the concern of the Scottish Police Federation, that the over use of “performance indicators” is reducing the discretion of officers, encouraging the issue of fixed penalties, rather than the use of common sense and a focus on more serious crime, that has traditionally been the police hallmark. A quest for favourable statistics, in this way, may result in police priorities being out of sync with those of the public, resulting in a loss of public confidence. If the public don’t have confidence, that the police share their priorities, the police will lose support and the public will be disinclined to report crime.

Good practices

Strathclyde Police have done some very good work in many areas, particularly in violence reduction, domestic abuse and their approach to the victims of sexual crimes. It is anticipated that this will be the model for Police Scotland. Opportunities also arise for more specialist departments, with benefits in increased expertise and availability of specialist equipment, from which all of Scotland can benefit. However, care must be taken that community policing remains at the centre of police thinking.

It must be emphasised that a true perspective on police reform will only be possible after a longer period and we would welcome an opportunity to comment again, in two years time.

David Seawright
Branch Secretary
31 December 2013