Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Impact of police reform on local policing

Written submission from East Lothian Council

1. I am writing on behalf of East Lothian Council in response to the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing’s Call for Written Evidence on the Impact of Police Reform. This response results from Council consideration and discussion at its meeting on 17 December 2013, and represents the consensus of all 23 elected members.

2. Policing principles are set out in section 32 of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012:

32 Policing principles

The policing principles are-

(a) that the main purpose of policing is to improve the safety and well-being of persons, localities and communities in Scotland, and

(b) that the Police Service, working in collaboration with others where appropriate, should seek to achieve that main purpose by policing in a way which-

(i) is accessible to, and engaged with, local communities, and
(ii) promotes measures to prevent crime, harm and disorder.

3. East Lothian Council has welcomed the commitment and engagement of local police colleagues and the creation of a Local Policing Plan. However, there have been several instances where, in the Council’s view, activity in practice has fallen short of reasonable aspirations to work in partnership.

4. We have recognised the financial background to police reform and believe that greater efficiency is possible under a single force. However there is a danger of cost transference: i.e. where apparent savings for one public body result in extra costs for others, and the savings to the public purse do not materialize.

Collaboration, consultation and working together

5. Police Scotland recently announced proposed changes to the opening hours of police public counters in East Lothian. It also announced a withdrawal of traffic warden services in such a short timescale as to leave no realistic opportunity for the Council to introduce suitable alternative arrangements. In both these instances, Police Scotland has caused the Council and local communities concern over:

- a lack of consultation;
- a lack of sharing of information about how their proposals were arrived at; and
- the fact that these changes were proposed without reference to the Local Policing Plan.
6. I attach a link to the report that was considered by Council on this subject in October 2013, the recommendations of which were approved. That report forms part of the Council’s evidence:

http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/14894/14_police_public_counter_service_and_traffic_warden_review

7. Since that report was written, following further dialogue with Police Scotland colleagues (and campaigning by local people), we have been told that there will be changes to the proposals for public counter opening hours within East Lothian.

8. It also appears that there has been a subsequent rethink on public counter opening times in other areas, for example in West Lothian. There does not seem to be any real transparency over the basis on which these decisions have been taken. It is the view of East Lothian Council that these changes are best led and managed by the divisional commander.

9. With reference to traffic wardens, we are in negotiation with Police Scotland about the possible extension of traffic warden services but we remain very concerned that any proposal to withdraw the traffic warden service from 3 February (as Police Scotland recently announced) will inevitably have consequences for local areas where decriminalisation processes have not begun. Furthermore, while local authorities have the power to introduce charges for parking, it is not clear that charges would repay the cost of enforcement. In some cases, the prospect of charging will run counter to other priorities such as attempts to regenerate town centres. Councils then face the prospect of having to enforce parking without any corresponding income.

Centralisation

10. The reviews of the public counter service and traffic warden provision have highlighted and added to growing concerns that the creation of the national police service has led to centralisation of police service priorities and policies.

11. This centralising direction necessitates changes at local level which have consequences for local communities. Council officers value their positive relationship with the local commander, and the input of local officers who take note of local priorities, but would argue that some decisions made at central level have taken insufficient account of these priorities.

12. There is also concern at a possible trend to divert resources away from preventative and early intervention work. For example, the withdrawal of the road safety (education) officer from East Lothian schools, and the possible reduction in support for the Risk Factory, will significantly reduce the work being done to educate and inform children and young people about safety. This goes against the national policy direction which has been embedded within the East Lothian Single Outcome Agreement to develop a prevention and early intervention model of public service.

13. While we can accept that some of these issues may be seen as non-core business for the police, they represent nonetheless an important area of work which
then has to be picked up by another public body, most likely the local authority, with the consequential costs involved.

**Criminal Justice**

14. Criminal Justice social work colleagues feel that altered policing priorities are having perhaps unintended consequences for other agencies involved, in respect of the management of offenders and alleged offenders.

15. They express a concern that arrests, even as they are increasing, are becoming less consistent with the degrees of seriousness of particular types of offence, and with the impact on victims and perpetrators. They also note that measures which had already been introduced to try and redirect some cases away from Court (i.e. diversion, direct measures etc) are now not being utilised to the appropriate extent. As such, the court system is unable to deal with the number of cases being referred to it at a particular level.

16. There is evidence of a recent increase in summary criminal business in courts in Livingston and in Edinburgh, and of an increase in waiting times.

17. Police Scotland became operational on 1 April 2013. According to evidence presented by the Scottish Court Service in October to the Strategic Officers Group, on which East Lothian Council is represented:

17.1. for **Edinburgh’s Justice of the Peace Court**, in the three months ending August 2013 compared to the same period the previous year:

- there had been an increase of around 50% in summary complaints registered;
- summary complaints outstanding had increased by 139%;
- the time taken to bring a case to court (waiting period and trial diet) had increased by 17 weeks;

17.2. in **Edinburgh Sheriff Court** for the same period:

- there had been an increase of around 42% in summary complaints registered;
- summary complaints outstanding had risen by around 49%;
- time taken to bring a case to court had increased by 2 weeks.

18. These figures suggest that more cases are coming to court and that there are longer waiting times for matters to be heard in court.

19. Social work colleagues point out that increasing the time between an offence and sentencing dilutes their opportunity to make positive inroads into people’s behaviour and attitudes. Put simply, people are more receptive to intervention the closer it is to the relevant event.

20. Working closely with the Police is central to addressing offending behaviour. We would emphasise the need to tackle issues in a shared approach.
21. Edinburgh is due to become the receiving court for East Lothian business when Haddington Sheriff Court closes in January 2015. East Lothian Council presented evidence to the Justice Committee that an adequate business case had not been made for closure of Haddington Sheriff Court, that little regard had been taken of the likely impact on local communities, and that there were doubts over the capacity of Edinburgh courts to absorb the business. To hear of current increases in summary criminal business in Edinburgh raises further concerns.

22. Another area where a more collaborative policing style may lead to improvement is in tackling suicide rates. According to Scottish Government statistics, in the financial year 2012-13 there were 62 homicides in Scotland, while in the calendar year 2012 there were 762 deaths by suicide. Each suicide represents a tragedy for the person involved, their family and the wider community. In East Lothian as in the rest of Scotland, suicide rates far outweigh homicide rates. The Council will seek through the work of the East Lothian Partnership to consider the opportunities for using the knowledge and talents of local officers in the best ways possible to help tackle this problem imaginatively and sensitively.

**Resourcing**

23. The Council has for a number of years provided resources to support local Police Initiative Teams, via a Service Level Agreement - in effect, purchasing extra policing cover. The Council currently provides around £0.5m each year for this purpose. The Service Level Agreement is due to be reviewed.

**Conclusion**

24. As mentioned above, the Council recognises the financial background to police reform and to some of the decisions of Police Scotland. However this arguably makes it all the more important that changes to priorities and procedures should be considered as part of the development of the Local Policing Plan, so that relevant parties can be consulted and the impact on communities taken into account.

25. The Council appreciates that this is the first year of the new arrangements and acknowledges that time is needed to let new processes settle. The Council looks forward to a continuing good relationship with Police Scotland.

26. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your thinking on policing in Scotland.

Angela Leitch
Chief Executive
10 January 2014