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David Linden MSP
Convener, Criminal Justice Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

29 October 2026
By email

Dear Convener,

Pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28: the absence of police staff representation

I write as Branch Secretary of UNISON Police Staff Scotland, the recognised trade union for police staff employed by the Scottish Police Authority. I wish to raise a formal concern about the Committee's engagement with police staff representatives, and to set out a risk the Committee should keep in view as it considers the policing budget for 2027-28.

The lack of engagement with staff voice

At its meeting on 28 October 2026, the Committee took oral evidence as part of its pre-budget scrutiny. The Scottish Police Federation was invited to give evidence on behalf of police officers. No representative of police staff was invited.

UNISON did submit written evidence to the Committee, and I would ask that it is given full weight. However, a written submission is not a substitute for the opportunity to give evidence in person, to answer members' questions and to respond to what other witnesses say. When one part of the workforce is heard in the room and the other is confined to paper, the Committee hears an unbalanced account of how policing in Scotland is resourced and delivered.

Police staff are not an afterthought to policing. They answer emergency and non-emergency calls, staff control rooms and custody suites, carry out forensic and intelligence work, and run the systems, estate and corporate functions without which no officer could do their job. The Chief Constable has said that Police Scotland is one workforce. If that is so, the people who make up so much of that workforce should be heard when its funding is examined.

I therefore ask that the Committee commits to inviting police staff representatives to give oral evidence whenever it takes evidence from officer representatives on matters of policing resources, workforce or demand, including at any further stages of this pre-budget scrutiny.

The risk of favouring officer numbers

The Committee will have heard strong arguments for additional resources to be directed to police officer numbers. I would urge caution. If the Committee's recommendations favour officer numbers over a properly resourced, balanced workforce, there is a real risk that additional officers will not reach the street at all. They will be used to plug gaps in police staff roles.

This is not speculation. It has happened before. In 2012 the Accounts Commission, in its Best Value report on police authorities and forces, confirmed that police officers were covering police staff posts, and warned that this was unlikely to be an efficient or sustainable use of resources in the longer term. In the years that followed, the commitment to maintain officer numbers at 17,234 was protected while police staff numbers were cut, and officers were repeatedly found backfilling civilian roles at stations and in back-office functions, despite assurances that there was no policy to do so.

In 2022, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, in its review of Police Scotland's Strategic Workforce Plan, described the fixed officer number as a blunt instrument not supported by evidence, and found that more progress could be made in having roles filled by police staff so that officers are freed for operational duties.

The lesson is clear. Using warranted officers to do non-warranted work costs more, takes officers away from the duties they were recruited and trained for, and places them in roles for which they lack the specialist training and experience that police staff bring. It also hides the true scale of staffing shortfalls, because the gaps are covered rather than reported. The public is told officer numbers are being maintained, while visible policing is not.

Our members are seeing the same pressures today. Vacancies are being held, workloads are rising and staff are being asked to absorb more with less. If new money is targeted at officer numbers alone, the gaps in staff roles will remain, and they will be filled the way they have always been filled: by taking officers off the street.

Where the pressure is now

Control rooms. Police Scotland is rebalancing the workforce in its contact, command and control function, so that work in the control rooms is done by police staff and officers are released to the front line. UNISON supports the principle. It is exactly the kind of balanced workforce this letter argues for. But rebalancing only works if the staff posts are there to receive the work. Control room staff are already stretched: controllers are routinely covering work from other teams, large numbers of staff are carrying time off in lieu well beyond agreed limits because the hours cannot be released, and annual leave is being restricted to hold staffing levels. Moving more work into the control rooms without funding more staff to do it will not release officers. It will either break the control rooms or pull officers straight back in to keep them running, and the rebalancing will fail.

Custody. Custody is one of the highest risk environments in policing, and police staff carry much of the work in it. Our members in custody are working under sustained pressure, with leave regularly refused on staffing grounds and time off in lieu building up for the same reason. There is no documented safe staffing benchmark for custody, so there is no agreed point at which a suite is recognised as running too thin. When staff numbers fall short, the gap is covered by officers taken from other duties, or it is not covered at all. Neither is acceptable in a setting where the safety of detained people and of staff is at stake.

Data backlogs. Police Scotland is carrying significant backlogs in information management work, including a backlog of Subject Access Requests that is not expected to be cleared until 2028. These are statutory obligations owed to members of the public under data protection law, and they will not clear themselves. The work is done by police staff. Without more staff to do it, the backlogs will continue to grow, the organisation will remain in breach of its legal duties, and the temptation will again be to divert officers to work that does not need a warrant.

The common thread is simple. Each of these pressures is a staffing problem, and each can only be solved by funding more police staff. More money for policing must mean more money for more staff. If it does not, any additional officers the budget pays for could be absorbed into these gaps rather than reaching the street.

What we ask of the Committee

I would ask the Committee to:

- invite police staff representatives to give oral evidence in future sessions on policing resources and workforce, alongside officer representatives;
- consider UNISON's written submission in full as part of its pre-budget scrutiny report;
- recommend that any additional funding for policing is tied to a balanced workforce plan, with police staff roles properly funded and filled, rather than to officer numbers alone;
- recommend specific funding for additional police staff posts in the control rooms, in custody and in information management, so that workforce rebalancing can succeed and the data backlogs can be cleared; and
- ask Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority to report on the extent to which police officers are currently deployed in roles that do not require a warrant.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet you or the Committee clerks to discuss this further.

This letter is written without prejudice to UNISON's position on any related matter, and UNISON reserves its right to raise further points as the Committee's scrutiny progresses.

Yours sincerely,

David

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cc:

Neil Gray MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice
Pauline McNeill MSP, Scottish Labour Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Justice
Kim Schmulian MSP, Reform UK justice spokesperson
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Maggie Chapman MSP, Scottish Greens Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Justice
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