

Justice Committee

Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2016-17

Written submission from the Scottish Police Federation

I refer to the above and to your invitation to the Scottish Police Federation (SPF) to contribute our views in advance of the publication of the draft budget.

From the outset I must make clear that the Scottish Police Federation does not get access to the comprehensive financial information held by either the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) or the Police Service of Scotland (PSoS). As such we are only able to offer views based on our understandings of decisions that have budgetary considerations.

Clearly we appreciate that the Scottish Government is also unable to produce a meaningful draft budget at this time given that as this response is being prepared the Chancellor has just commenced his statement on the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The PSoS was established in an age of austerity and amongst many of the expected benefits from the single service was the ability to deliver £1.1Billion of savings by 2025/26. It is important to highlight that this estimate was amongst other things set against a background of what could be considered a routine policing background. Since 1st April 2013 the terror threat in the UK has increased to its highest level and by extension this means the police service is now operating in a distinctly non-routine (or possibly even a new routine) environment.

Regardless of what description is applied it is self-evident that such a fundamental alteration to the base line against which the savings estimates were set, now require the projections to be completely re-assessed. There can be no doubt that recent events in Paris will necessitate a wholesale re-evaluation of policing capacity and capability.

Quite simply the SPF believes that the PSoS has already saved more than could reasonably have been expected to date and must be given the breathing space to ensure it is able to concentrate on designing and delivering a police service without being completely preoccupied with the need to continue to make cuts to save money.

The SPF anticipates much of the discussions on the police budget will concentrate on the relationship between the Government's commitments to no fewer than 17,234 police officers and the loss of support staff roles through redundancy. We consider this to be unhelpful not least as it fundamentally ignores the nature of organisational change and transition; and that contractual obligations do not necessarily lend themselves to easy internal redeployment. It also ignores the expectations placed upon the police service and indeed our capacity and capabilities in this new policing world.

The SPF fully recognises that at this time a very small number of our members are performing functions that have become described as back office. Whilst this is regrettable, we have seen no information to suggest this is a long term strategic objective of the PSoS or the SPA and is rather a product of not being able to simply cease one area of activity altogether, the second an employee departs the organisation. Policing is inherently complex and unpicking the various organisational interdependencies takes time in order to ensure that ceasing one area of work does not result in failure or pressure in others.

We also consider the question of police officer vs support staff to be divisive and based on emotion rather than reality. It has become the norm to talk about police officers in whole number terms yet when it comes to support staff; the discussion concentrates on the role. Whilst in some ways this is perhaps understandable as police officers are highly adaptable deployable resources, it can result in an assumption that the loss of any support staff numbers can only be addressed by backfilling with police officers rather than a reconfiguration of existing support staff cadre.

The scale and speed with which the police service has made cuts and savings has been almost eye watering. The consequences and impact have been immediate. We have seen reductions in support functions like dog handlers and Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs) to name but a few as well as reductions in the size of the vehicle fleet and the size of the police estate. All of these things have in some way, shape or form, diminished the service provided to the public.

Police officers are overworked and under-appreciated; this message came out loud and clear in the recent SPA/PSoS staff survey and simply cannot be ignored. It would be all too easy to suggest this is an organisational matter and not one related to finance or budget but this would be an abrogation of Government responsibility.

Scotland has a very successful police service built up over many decades. That success is built on community engagement and recognition that policing needs to deliver for local needs as well as national ones, whilst maintaining our overall commitment to UK resilience. At this time it is arguable that the PSoS is falling short in all of these areas and lack of finance is a key factor in this.

We of course recognise that austerity has necessitated the taking of difficult decisions, not least in some of the areas I mentioned in the paragraphs above. That being said we simply cannot lose sight of the fact that unlike major reforms in health and education that saw tremendous investment of finance (McCrone and Agenda for Change) policing changes are being delivered against a background of cuts. This is an added pressure that needs to be recognised and one for which allowances need to be made.

Whether by accident or design there are many parts of the service that operate in silos. Each of these silos may well be able to satisfy itself that it is delivering value for money in its own particular area of the policing business, but unless we are able to see how they contribute to the totality of policing, it is difficult to genuinely gauge if that contribution is needed or indeed if it could be done without. One of our members

recently described the situation as “those that never existed in the past have created an industry to justify their existence now.”

The creation of national specialist services is clearly one of the many advantages of the new PSoS. That being said many of our members, particularly in the middle ranks of the service often express their exasperation at the difficulty in drawing on these national assets. Many report exceptional frustrations with the need to ‘bid’ for specialisms and the associated bureaucracy and time this entails. Undoubtedly the ‘dis-join’ between local and national policing is one area of the service that is wasteful, albeit it is far from clear whether any significant financial savings remain to be made there.

Inevitably, a staff association and the employer will have disagreements from time to time on any number of issues. It is exceptionally frustrating however that we see an increased tendency within the PSoS to ‘lawyer-up’ rather than engage, for free, with the representative body. We see this as a needless waste of money as many of the disputes could be resolved without the need for any formal proceedings or expenditure. The SPF often feels that when it comes to fighting a dispute (as oppose to seeking to resolve it) that money appears to be no object.

The SPF regularly hears anecdotes that new methods of working are more wasteful than those that preceded them. Ultimately it will be for the PSoS to answer these points but our members tells us that simple things like booking travel and accommodation are now more expensive and time consuming than the historic approaches and that even the most simple elements of vehicle maintenance now cost far in excess of what they used to when in-house mechanics were employed.

Even if all these things are true it would be naïve in the extreme to believe that putting these things right would provide the levels of savings that the service is expected to deliver. We do believe there remain opportunities to make marginal savings but anything that goes beyond this will undoubtedly come at the cost of the service currently delivered.

The SPF could not allow the upcoming budgetary considerations to pass without commenting in some detail on the capability and capacity of the police service in the event of having to respond to a terrorist attack.

No matter what way it is cut, the drive to save money has diminished the capacity and capability of the police service and it is time the dangers of continuing to do so are recognised and addressed.

Properly funded, well-resourced and motivated police officers working in and with our communities have shown time and again that this is the best way of delivering safety and security. Safe communities thrive and prosper. They provide opportunities for our children; they enrich our nation and are fundamentals for building a strong and successful economy and society.

The fight against terrorism needs tackled on three fronts. We need to make sure the resentments and ideologies from which terrorism is born aren’t given the opportunities to flourish. We must ensure that where they do, we have the

intelligence capabilities to gather evidence and bring prosecutions. We must also make sure that in the event we face a terrorist incident, we have the tactical capabilities to respond.

Cuts to our budgets have seen fewer police officers in our communities and necessitated the closure of many of our buildings. Police officers need time to become embedded in our communities and to build trust and relationships with them. Regrettably the austerity at all costs approach sees police officers running from pillar to post and not having the time to stop, talk and listen. It is at this most basic level that the fight against terrorism and extremism begins.

If we don't have police officers building confidence and relationships we will miss out on so much of the community intelligence that is so crucial for diverting the misguided into making more positive choices as well as the opportunities to identifying their global corruptors. No amount of investment in the people and technologies upon which our intelligence systems are based have any use, if there is no product to input. That product primarily comes from our communities.

Against this ever present threat, Scottish police officers still face the pressures of dealing with over 10,000 calls a day and we must ensure we don't further dilute the already stretched police service by taking from one part of the service for the apparent benefit of another.

Whilst any neutral commentator could not come to any other conclusion that policing is in much better shape than in England & Wales, arguably as a consequence of different political decisions, it is telling that in his CSR statement the Chancellor has just announced that "there will be no cuts to the police budget at all". This is something the SPF welcomes for we recognise that the hitherto decimation of the police service in England & Wales has an inevitable impact on the safety and security of the United Kingdom.

The SPF believes there is an opportunity to re-distribute the number of police officers we have to provide a more equitable balance between local and national priorities. We believe that if this is done sensibly, we could improve our organisational capacity without increasing costs.

The PSoS will undoubtedly need to invest in tactical resources, training and equipment at a level the service had not previously envisaged. The ever shifting terrorism intelligence picture needs a police service that has the flexibility to respond. That flexibility can only be delivered by investing in the service. The potential to organise and prepare a police service in this manner would be severely hampered by a budget settlement that does not take cognisance of this new reality and at the very least keep pace with inflation.

Calum Steele
General Secretary
25 November 2015