

Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Police Scotland's Custody Provision

Written submission from Unison Scotland

Introduction

UNISON is the main trade union for Police Staff across Scotland. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Justice Sub Committee's scrutiny of Police Scotland custody provisions.

Custody is widely recognised as being one of the highest risk areas in policing. Having the ability to restrict the liberty of citizens with direct impacts on Human Rights carries a significant responsibility and evokes a whole range of emotive sentiments. It is therefore vital that the management and maintenance of custody provision in Police Scotland is conducted in a manner which is conducive to delivering the best possible outcomes. This includes maximising the care, welfare and rights of people brought into police custody, whilst minimising the risk to those individuals, and the police staff and officers responsible for them.

Background

Following the creation of Police Scotland, the leadership team established a Custody Division, an autonomous policing division removed and no longer run as an extension of local policing.

This was designed to assist with the development of greater consistency and stability in custody provision across Scotland. While this has in part been achieved through the development of consistent policies and procedures, it has also created significant difficulties as a result of the declining number of police staff employed as Police Custody and Security Officers (PCSOs)¹.

As a consequence of these declining numbers, Custody Division has been reliant on support from Local Policing Divisions to provide significant numbers of Police Officers to cover (known as 'Backfill') in custody areas due to annual leave, sickness and PCSO vacancies.

Present

Due to the varying ability and capacity of different local policing areas to support and commit resources to Custody Division, we have seen greater inconsistency and a lack of continuity in custody suites across Scotland in terms of the numbers of officers coming in, the training they have and the impact on the PCSOs they are working alongside. Police Officers from local policing deployed in Custody often don't have the knowledge or training of PCSO's and this affects the level of assistance they provide. This contributes to increased strain on staff and delays affecting service delivery.

¹ Police Custody and Security Officers (PCSOs) occupy a unique position within Scottish Policing as they are conferred with some of the powers of a constable within custody areas as detailed under Schedule 2 of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012.

UNISON is acutely aware of a considerable number of PCSO vacancies being deleted as alluded to in the Scottish Police Federation (SPF) Submission to the Committee on 9th November 2017.²

As the SPF rightly suggest, Police Scotland have in an effort to address the custody issues presented by UNISON, sought to permanently deploy 120 police officers from local policing as a short/medium term solution to provide greater resilience and consistency. However, such moves are not a viable long term solution as this removes officers from frontline duties and places them into police staff civilian roles.

There is continuing uncertainty surrounding the future of police stations and custody centres. To date nothing has been presented as to what the future shape of Custody Division will look like. We have observed some of the estate close, either permanently or during the week, with police staff being asked to move to other stations during closure. In the West Local Policing Area this is a weekly occurrence.

The heightened national security state earlier this year placed an increased burden on the service and staff. The challenge was for local policing to still provide backfill cover to Custody Division yet increase officer visibility and public reassurance measures. At the time staff/officers were being asked to work 12 hour shifts in Custody to release some officers to carry out front line policing duties.

Staff Health and Wellbeing

Due to the absence of a detailed vision of Custody Division during the first 4 years of Police Scotland, PCSO recruitment has stalled and numbers declined. PCSOs find it increasingly difficult to take annual leave and out of a sense of duty to their custody and local policing colleagues, find they often forego taking their refreshment breaks due to the burden this has on their colleagues and in contributing to delays for officers waiting with custodies.

Increasingly our PCSO members are reporting to UNISON that the combination of the above factors, increased workloads and uncertainty over where they will be working from one week to the next, are contributing to elevated stress levels and low morale.

Conclusion

It is clear that the current model is not sustainable and presents a number of organisational risks. Staff working in custody need clarity over their future and a resolution is required which provides true resilience and stability.

UNISON believes the opportunity exists to rebalance Custody Division with greater numbers of PCSO's as this guarantees greater reliability and consistency in staff numbers whilst providing a more effective Best Value solution to policing.

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² http://www.parliament.scot/S5_JusticeSubCommitteeOnPolicing/Inquiries/SPFfinancialplanning.pdf