

Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Designation of local commanders

Written submission from Highland Council

The Highland Council welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing regarding the designation of local police commanders.

Role of the Local Police Commander

The Council's experience of this role has been extremely positive. The decision to designate the Chief Superintendent as the local police commander has been a helpful development. This has resulted in engagement between the Local Authority and Police Scotland taking place at an appropriate senior level and ensuring that, when issues arise, the local commander has the authority to effectively deal with these issues.

Since the inception of Police Scotland, Northern Division has had two local commanders. Both have had excellent relationships with the Local Authority. Members have found them open and frank in their analysis of policing for the area and considered in their responses. Both have made themselves readily available to address issues or concerns raised by Members.

Where concerns have been raised, these have related to, at least a perception, that there is a lack of local autonomy for the local police commander. The centralised handling and approach towards issues such as control rooms, armed policing, closure of police stations and road policing, has resulted in a strong perception that the views of the Highland community have not been taken cognisance of. It is vitally important that local police commanders have the appropriate authority to implement and adapt national policy to fit local circumstances. Both our local commanders have had an excellent understanding of the local area and the style and approach to policing here reflects this understanding. It is reassuring that the approach and message from Police Scotland centrally in recent months, has been to emphasise the importance of local autonomy for police commanders.

The final area which we would choose to highlight in relation to the role of the local police commander is in relation to the appointment itself. The Police and Fire Reform Act 2012, notes that Local Authorities will be consulted on the appointment of a local police commander. At present, the Local Authority is asked to confirm the appointment rather than being consulted on it. It would therefore be helpful if, in the future, the Local Authority Chief Executive was involved, to some degree, in the recruitment process for this post.

Scrutiny Role

The local Highland Policing Plan was developed following engagement across Highland and through a variety of mechanisms. This included consultation with local groups including Community Councils and Resident Associations, the general public, Local Authority Councillors, MSPs and MPs, and local community planning partners. A survey of residents was conducted and a series of ward forums held to specifically

discuss local priorities. In addition to the Highland plan, 22 multi-member ward community policing plans have also been developed which respond directly to local needs and demands. Members across the Local Authority have had the opportunity in input into the development of these plans and set the priorities for policing within the Highland area.

Members scrutinise police performance through reports covering the region at each meeting of the Council's Communities and Partnerships Committee. The local commander is in attendance at each meeting to present the report and answer queries from Members. The Local Commander has welcomed this constructive challenge and responds well to Members' questions.

The Local Commander has also agreed to provide more localised reports twice a year for each of the Council's 8 Local Committees. This reflects performance against local ward policing plans. Local officers, normally the Area Commander, are in attendance at these meetings and are able to provide full responses on local issues raised at these Committees. This has been an extremely positive development and enables strategic scrutiny to take place at the Communities and Partnerships committee but for more local matters to be discussed within an appropriate forum. The positive contribution and engagement from Police Scotland in these local committees has been welcomed by Members.

From our experience, the positive attitude of Police Scotland officers in these scrutiny forums and their openness to challenge from elected members is good practice in public service. We are learning from that approach in the redesign of our organisation and feel other community planning partners could benefit from it too.

Similarly the Council has arrangements in place for seeking any amendments to the local police plan through relevant Strategic Committees with changes sought confirmed through the Council meeting. Any changes which have been sought have been accommodated by Police Scotland.

General engagement

Police Scotland attends Community Council meetings, Ward Forums where these continue and takes part in community planning partnership meetings, leading on the theme of Safer Highland.

The recent changes introduced through the Community Empowerment Act 2015, have changed the nature of community planning and with it the role of Police Scotland as a lead partner along with 4 other public agencies. The Local Commander has been supportive and constructive about this change and has been instrumental in developing new partnership support arrangements, in which Police Scotland play a core role.