

scottish justice matters

POLICING

Reflections on developments and
changes to policing in Scotland



Take Five

Scottish Justice Matters asks our politicians to respond to questions about crime and justice. We asked:

How can the tradition of localism in Scottish policing be enhanced within a national police force?

Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Scottish National Party



REFORM was absolutely vital to sustain the level of local policing our communities depend on. Moving to a single service is safeguarding local policing in Scotland from Westminster budget cuts, helping us to continue to exceed our target of 1000 additional police officers on the

street. Contrast this with the situation down south, where police numbers have fallen and are expected to eventually be slashed by 15,000.

Local policing and accountability remain fundamental to policing in Scotland and local policing decisions continue to be based on local intelligence and experience, shaped and delivered in partnership by designated Local Commanders.

In addition to this, all of Scotland's 353 council wards have a local policing plan developed and policing now has a statutory duty to participate in Community Planning Partnerships. More than double the number of elected councillors than before are involved in local scrutiny of policing.

Policing in Scotland is undoubtedly more local than ever, but reform has created significant advantages as dedicated local officers are now supported by national and specialist expertise and equipment whenever and wherever required. We are already seeing the benefits of this approach.

For example, the National Rape Taskforce is ensuring a robust and consistent approach to sexual crime, and the Major Investigation Teams tackle murders and other serious crimes. Having specialist units allows dedicated local officers to focus solely on policing in communities.

The results speak for themselves. Recorded crime in Scotland is at a 40 year low, violent crime is down 10% in the last year and crimes of handling an offensive weapon have dropped by 62% since 2006-07.

These successes would not have been possible without the dedication and professionalism of hardworking officers and staff: they are doing a great job of ensuring our strengthened local policing is keeping Scotland safe.

Hugh Henry, Scottish Labour Party



THE FORMATION of Police Scotland has created significant concerns regarding the localism of Scottish policing. A one size fits all programme of centralisation and provision has led to a perceived loss of meaningful local control with the closure of local police stations, control rooms and community police desks.

This has impacted on service delivery to local communities, local jobs and the local economy. Police Scotland is facing £1.1bn cuts by 2020 with around 1500 civilian jobs lost. The additional 1000 officers in Scotland are often not on the streets serving the public with many working in back offices, behind desks, doing the work of redundant civilian staff who carried out vital and often specialist jobs. These officers are not trained in such specialisms. Cuts have also seen Councils left to take on responsibilities such as road safety and traffic warden duties. This is not an effective strategy for keeping local communities safe nor is it in keeping with the statutory duty of best value or the tradition of localism we strive to uphold.

Effective local policing which provides the police with legitimacy and the confidence of their communities is essential for supporting the wider police mission of protecting the public from serious harm. Police Scotland needs to be visible, readily accessible at all times and wholly accountable to the public it represents. Scarce resources in these challenging times need to be focused on strengthening front line policing which must take account of the characteristics of different neighbourhoods. Stronger relationships need to be forged with local authorities and community planning partners. Local policing plans need to be strategic and up to date with those overseeing them ensuring that the concerns, opinions and needs of communities across Scotland remain at the heart of what Police Scotland is doing.

Margaret Mitchell, Scottish Conservatives



THE TRANSITION from the eight legacy forces to Scotland's National Police force has resulted in the erosion of the service's ties with local communities. Local

policing was supposed to be an integral aspect of a single force but instead the SNP's centralising agenda has merely weakened localism.

This is evident with the closure of more than 50 of Police Scotland's front counters and others now operating reduced hours, denying local communities the opportunity to engage directly with the police. Meanwhile the 101 non-emergency number, which the public can use to arrange to meet an officer face-to-face, has been beset by technical difficulties and long call-waiting times.

Furthermore the ongoing control room and service centre closures, (down from 11 to 5) coupled with the restructuring at the remaining sites, has resulted in the loss of crucial local knowledge which cannot easily be replaced by control from a central hub.

Crime Prevention Panels, which provide important liaison between police and local communities and provide valuable, local intelligence also face an uncertain future as Police Scotland considers withdrawing their funding.

All of which means the loss of local accountability and community liaison throughout the country but particularly in rural and remote areas. Whilst the Scottish Conservatives have voiced concerns about the loss of local accountability from the outset these concerns have been largely ignored.

A thorough review of the national police force is the way forward to ensure that vital community links are restored. In carrying out this review it should not be presumed that a single police force is the only answer. Another option would be to introduce a two-tier model, where serious crimes are dealt with by a national force, while community crimes are handled by 32 local forces accountable at council level.

In doing so a local force, directly answerable to locally elected representatives and with policing at a community level at its heart would be established.

Alison McInnes, Scottish Liberal Democrats



SCOTTISH Liberal Democrats consistently opposed the abolition of local police services in favour of one national force.

We argued it would prove unaccountable, local priorities would be neglected, and it could never be as responsive to the needs of Scotland's diverse communities. It gives me no pleasure whatsoever to see those concerns and more vindicated.

Officers and staff are no longer trusted to do what they know is best for their communities. They deserve credit for keeping things going but botched reforms have taken their toll.

Independent reports have exposed a one-size-fits-all approach, the erosion of discretion and the existence of an unhealthy targets culture. Alien policies focused on enforcement, rooted in Strathclyde, have been imposed on communities without consultation. The systematic use of armed police and surge of stop and search are just the most high profile examples.

Valued local services have also been removed. Dozens of police stations have locked their doors to the public. The closure of the majority of legacy forces' control centres and service centres means soon all 999 and 101 calls will be diverted to the Central Belt, squandering vital knowledge and expertise.

Meaningful public engagement, scrutiny and accountability are key to enhancing localism.

Police Scotland has a record of setting policies unilaterally and working on a need to know basis limited to their own ranks. People's right to know and shape how they are policed must be reinstated. Community planning partners and local councils must too be meaningfully involved in decision-making - their clout restored.

The significant devolution of budgets could also enable area spending to reflect local priorities.

Scotland's proud tradition of local policing has been badly, but not yet irreparably, damaged by the SNP's restructuring. The Chief Constable, SPA and Scottish Government have a great deal of work to do.

John Finnie, Scottish Green Party



I SUSPECT the question of 'localism' differs greatly across Scotland. Zetland Constabulary has long gone but

when Shetlanders talk about 'the chief' they mean the Chief Inspector in Lerwick not some far off individual.

Despite constant assurances to the contrary, it's apparent Police Scotland, under its present chief constable, places little value on localism with the country policed as one unit.

The Parliament's Police Committee was recently told that 'the threat level in Lochinver is the same as it is in Leith': a questionable statement which tells you a lot about operations but even more about a mind-set which has seen armed officers deployed on our streets and industrial levels of stop and search.

But all is not lost. The legislation that brought the single service into being ensured that every Council Ward has its own 'Policing Plan' and therein lies the key to returning policing to its rightful community base.

Rather than a diktat from Police Scotland Headquarters impacting on every community regardless of its composition, how much better if those Council Ward Plans are the result of proper consultation with communities giving them the style of policing they want. In turn those plans can be collectively considered at local authority level where all 32 local authorities have their own form of 'police committee'. In turn, those local authorities feed in to make the national plan.

Of course there will be central plans and reserves to deal with terrorism, organised crime and other significant threats with resources deployed on a risk assessed basis (no armed officers for Lochinver) but the core policing style will have come from and therefore be respected by local communities.

The framework is there, all that's required is for those communities and their elected representatives to assert themselves and genuine localism can be restored.