

Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Local Policing

Note of visits to Dumfries and Galloway, Fife and Moray

June and September 2015

Background

1. The Justice Sub-Committee on Policing visited Dumfries and Galloway, Fife and Moray in January 2014 to see first-hand how local policing arrangements were working in practice ten months into police reform. These areas were selected as they cover a mix of geographical areas and models of local scrutiny. A note of the key themes arising from those visits is available at:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s4/JusticeSubCommitteeonPolicing/Inquiries/Note_of_visits_Jan_2014.pdf

2. Sub-Committee members returned to these areas eighteen months on to see how matters have progressed since their first visits and whether the same issues of concern still remain. Members were also interested in establishing what impact control room closures¹ have had on call handling and response times.

3. A note of the key issues arising from each of the return visit is set out below.

Visit to Dumfries, Monday 1 June 2015

4. Margaret Mitchell and Elaine Murray visited Dumfries and Galloway Divisional Headquarters in Dumfries on 1 June and held meetings with: the divisional management team, community inspectors and officers and response officers, members of the Police, Fire and Rescue Committee (PFRC) at Dumfries and Galloway Council, and staff from various partnerships² who work with the local police. Key themes arising from the visit are set out below.

National and local priorities

- Locally, violent crime has reduced and detection rates increased. There had been an increase in common assaults and domestic abuse, as a consequence of alcohol.
- National priorities did not always have “a local flavour”. National campaigns were not always aligned to peak periods for that criminal activity locally and campaign material was often received too late to be of use.
- There was a feeling amongst officers that the leadership style of the national force had softened and become more understanding to the need for flexibility, to use discretion, and to police locally and by consent. However, PFRC members felt strongly that the ‘Strathclyde model’ was being imposed on Dumfries and Galloway “without a doubt”.

¹ The control room at Dumfries closed in May 2014 and at Glenrothes in March 2015.

² Staff from the local authority safe and healthy communities, substance misuse, and adult support and protection teams, and from the Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women Partnership.

- Some officers felt that the pace of change had been too quick and that it was now time to “take stock”.
- Officers and councillors noted that national policies on road closures and charging of events had replaced local flexibility. Similarly, procurement had become centralised to the detriment of local businesses.
- The legacy Dumfries and Galloway Division was now part of the Local Policing West area and therefore, officers could be deployed across a much wider area to deal with particular events or incidents. Officers from D&G and Strathclyde had different approaches which could create problems when dealing with the public.

Targets and discretion

- Officers did not have any targets to meet. They highlighted that stop and search in the area was based on intelligence and managed in terms of local needs, but noted that there was more of a performance culture and target-based approach on stop and search and other practices in the Strathclyde area.
- Roads policing key performance indicators, which had been in place in the early years of reform, had been removed this year.

Communication

- Shift briefings were held at the start of every shift and staff and divisional briefings were held regularly. Information was also disseminated through the intranet and the divisional commander visits police stations on a regular basis.
- Officers described being “bombarded” with “an explosion of information” and being expected to respond to requests for particular statistics within unrealistic timescales (often within a couple of days).
- There was little consultation on proposed changes and officers were unclear whether their views, when requested, were taken into consideration. Officers had not been consulted on the proposed changes to detention, arrest and custody arrangements contained in the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill.

Control rooms and 101 non-emergency number

- There were delays in receiving information from the control room regarding incidents.
- Intelligence gathered from calls to the local control room, which had been used to create a broad picture of what was happening in the community, was no longer being recorded by the new control room. As a result, it had become more difficult to gather evidence to support prevention work and to obtain ASBOs, for example.
- Councillors and some officers had been told by the public that they had experienced difficulties in getting their calls answered.
- Officers reported complaints from the public that the control room was no longer sending officers to minor incidents to which they would have been deployed previously. An example was given of an individual who had her car broken into on three separate occasions and had reported each incident to the police but her details had only been recorded over the phone and no officer deployed.
- Officers had to use the 101 number to speak to officers in another area.

Local scrutiny

- Officers were not convinced that the local scrutiny model was as strong as in the legacy forces. The PFRC was meeting less frequently and there was a feeling amongst officers that it was “still finding its feet”.
- PFRC members do not feel that they have the necessary “clout” to properly hold the police to account. They often found out about police decisions in the local news whereas they would previously have scrutinised and had input to the decisions.
- PFRC members noted that some community councils were struggling to get a community officer to go along to their meetings.
- The Scottish Police Authority had assigned a board member to the PFRC, which had been a useful contact where the PFRC could direct queries or feed in concerns.
- PFRC members felt that, rather than being called ‘V’ division, the area division name should have some connection to the local area.
- The PFRC chair was disappointed that the COSLA local scrutiny committee chairs’ meeting held one year into police reform had been a celebration of achievements rather than a forum for sharing good practice, questions and discussing areas of improvement.

Impact of loss of police staff

- Officers were now responsible for firearms licensing (previously undertaken by police staff). With around 11,000 applications, each taking around six hours to complete, this was a significant burden.
- Officers noted that analytical intelligence had been lost with police staff.
- Officers reported that backfilling of police staff roles was happening, with one noting that the backfilling of police counters and reception areas was becoming “frighteningly regular”.

Police numbers, personnel and pension changes

- Officers noted that the commitment to maintaining 17,234 police officers removed flexibility in how to deliver policing.
- Changes in personnel, particularly at divisional management team level (e.g. three officers in post of divisional commander within two years), had created continuity problems. This was set to continue with a large volume of superintendents due to retire in 2016 and others resigning due to pension scheme changes.
- Pension changes had significantly affected police officer morale. Officers said they no longer received individual pension projections (previously issued by the local authority) and so they were unable to calculate the impact of pension changes.

Community engagement

- Officers felt that they had strong engagement with the local community but the focus on community partnerships and relationships had been lost a little in recent years. They highlighted the need to streamline the list of 161 ongoing partnerships and initiatives in that area.

- Police Scotland held two open days recently in Dumfries and Sanquhar, focusing on recruitment, crime prevention and safety. Over 1,000 people had attended and positive feedback was received from attendees.
- Partners had not experienced any difficulties in contacting police on operational matters, but had struggled to get decisions from Police Scotland on more strategic issues, such as its involvement in joint initiatives.

Access to specialist resources

- Officers noted that access to specialist resources had improved.
- Some officers had concerns about the length of time taken by Gartcosh Crime Campus to process evidence (some were waiting for months rather than weeks to receive evidence from mobile phones, whereas this could previously be done within the legacy force within a few days or weeks). However, specialists dealing with high-profile and high-priority cases, such as rape investigators, had not experienced these delays.

Computer systems

- The division was still using legacy computer systems and this would continue until i6 becomes operational in July 2016. The national element to custody processes had resulted in additional pressure on already busy custody suites as identical information had to be recorded in both hard copy and electronically.

Visit to Glenrothes, Monday 1 June 2015

5. Christine Grahame and Alison McInnes, accompanied by Jayne Baxter, visited Fife Divisional Headquarters in Glenrothes on 1 June. They held meetings with: the divisional management team, community inspectors, community and response officers, representatives of two partner organisations³, and local councillors. Key themes arising from the visit are set out below.

National and local priorities

- An academic study of stop and search activities in Fife is expected to report soon with a series of recommendations. It is anticipated that the report will refer to the accuracy of data held and the level of confidence among the public in Fife about application of stop and search policies. The report will be made public following consideration by Mr House.
- Police officers are trained in identification of people with mental health conditions, such as autism, so that they are treated appropriately in stop and search situations and other circumstances.
- Dealing with risk of crime is an increasing priority both locally and nationally, with preventing crimes against children (including neglect and domestic violence) being a particular priority. When called out to deal with a case of stolen property, for example, officers will increasingly pay attention to domestic circumstances.

Communication

- Shift briefings were held at the start of every shift and staff and divisional briefings were held regularly. However, officers reported logistical difficulties

³ Fife Alcohol and Drug Partnership and Fife Women's Aid

arising from the size of the “hubs” into which they were organised – making it more difficult to coordinate tasks, impacting adversely on response times and stress levels.

- Councillors suggested that communications to the public required to be better planned and delivered, recommending that this should be the specific responsibility of a senior officer.
- Social media is used both to gather intelligence and to communicate with the public and ward sergeants receive training in this area.

Control rooms and 101 non-emergency number

- Senior officers indicated that Fife had a good record on response times (“the best in Scotland”) and that they were content that the transition had been handled successfully.
- Partners raised questions about the effectiveness of publicity about the 101 non-emergency number.

Local scrutiny

- Local community questionnaires had been used to inform the development of local policing plans and area plans which offered a better fit with local government and health services.

Impact of loss of police staff

- Officers reported no discernible backlash from a reduction in the number of civilian staff; however, they raised some concerns about reduced resilience. In particular, they mentioned the need to train police officers to issue firearms licenses as this was no longer a function of civilian staff.

Police numbers, personnel and pension changes

- Fife Division was experiencing an unusual level of change at senior level with a number of officers taking up promoted posts in other divisions. However, one replacement officer had significant experience of the area, a fact welcomed by local councillors.
- New recruits to Police Scotland can be placed anywhere in Scotland. Similarly, any officer who accepts a promotion can be allocated to work anywhere in Scotland. In both circumstances, exceptions can be made (including for family reasons) and officers are allowed to express a preference. In promotion situations, 90% get to work in their preferred area.

Community engagement

- Fife Division was increasingly working with other organisations (private companies as well as public sector organisations) to identify people in vulnerable situations to help prevent abuse and other crime. Increasing use is being made of a vulnerable persons’ database and models for cooperation between health services, local government and the police are being developed.
- The view was expressed that similar partnership arrangements need to be developed at national level, for example, between the serious and organised crime unit and the private sector.
- Fife Division had introduced an open-ended pilot scheme at the start of the year, allocating two dedicated community officers to each council ward. This allowed a

greater focus on community problems and sustainable solutions and offered better continuity by reducing abstractions. Anecdotal evidence from officers, partners and councillors suggested that the pilot was popular with the public.

- Councillors expressed concern about the national policy of charging for police attendance at community events such as local galas and the potential adverse impact on community engagement.

Access to specialist resources

- Senior officers reported that requirements for access to national resources are discussed at daily divisional meetings after which requests are made and prioritised nationally. In addition a monthly meeting takes place with those responsible for allocating national resources.
- Officers acknowledged benefits from special units, such as those dealing with rape and murder, but questioned how the relevant officers were being deployed when no such crimes were being reported.
- Partner organisations warmly welcomed the work of the domestic abuse taskforce, particularly its investigation of historical cases. They indicated that local officers appear to be receiving better training in this area and delivering a more consistent approach.

Computer systems

- Officers reported that IT systems in different areas across the country were not always compatible. Consequently, the sharing of information was not as developed as it could be.
- Partners talked about the importance of systems to support the sharing of information in a multi-agency context where there is no standardisation across the country.

Visit to Elgin, Monday 7 September 2015

5. John Finnie visited Elgin police station and the local family protection joint unit on 7 September. He held meetings with: the divisional command team, partnership representatives⁴, Police, Fire and Rescue Service members, operational officers, and community councillors, and police and social workers based at the joint unit. Key themes arising from the visit are set out below.

National vs local priorities

- Community councillors had been formally invited to input to local policing plans and the final versions had broadly reflected their views. Partnership representatives had not been formally asked to identify priorities for local and ward plans. Some suggested that, in an already 'cluttered landscape', there was no need for a separate local policing plan. Instead the police could have more input to the community plans.
- Partnerships involving the police were working well at an operational level. However, some felt there was less commitment from the police at strategic level, highlighting that officers attending these meetings often did not have the authority

⁴ The partnership representatives were from Moray Council, the NHS, social work and the public protection unit.

to take decisions and that strategic decisions were now required on issues that were previously dealt with locally.

- Some officers felt that the 'Strathclyde model' had been imposed on the local area and that concerns over police carrying firearms had been badly handled at national level. They spoke of local policing being "in tatters" and argued that the divisional command unit should have the resources and responsibility for all units in the local area rather than some departments, e.g. roads policing, reporting nationally.
- Under the national Scottish Crime Reporting Standard, the subsuming of crimes had become more common and there was a tendency to both under- and over-report. Officers were also under pressure to put some cases to the procurator fiscal without a sufficiency of evidence.

Local scrutiny

- Local councillors indicated that there was "a great deal of confidence about local policing in Moray" and recognised the benefits of increased access to specialist resources. They noted that there may be issues surrounding the resourcing of forensics.
- A Police, Fire and Rescue Service Committee (PFRSC) member, who sat on the legacy police board, suggested that the new local scrutiny arrangements were more effective, particularly being located in Moray rather than in Aberdeen. Efficiencies in the management of PFRSC meetings could be achieved to ensure no police time was wasted.
- There was no change to the police relationships with community councils, with an officer at inspector level still attending meetings and providing written updates in advance.

Targets and discretion

- Some partnership representatives noted that police officers in Moray were still able to exercise discretion, for example, in relation to stop and search, while others felt that local decision-making and discretion had been diminished.
- Officers spoke of being micro-managed, discretion having been taken away and a lack of trust.
- The divisional command team gave an example of where discretion had been used in relation to speeding. 50% of those stopped were issued a ticket while the other 50% were given a warning which, they suggested, was a successful preventative measure.

Police numbers in the area

- Police numbers in the area had not reduced significantly under Police Scotland; however, it was noted that the figures may not show the full picture as some officers were being deployed on civilian duties.
- Minimum cover had become "the new norm". Some officers suggested that there were "too many reviewers, and not enough doers", with many officers in the area working in national units rather than on frontline duties.
- Sickness and absence levels were well below other areas and some officers, who had left the force to move into the oil industry, had returned due to the downturn in the sector and a "love for the job".

- There were no issues with responding to 999 calls, but there were delays in responding to low-level crime where it could take up to five weeks to follow up reports with a visit.

Communication

- There was a feeling amongst partners, councillors and the divisional command team that Police Scotland had learned lessons from its approach to early consultations, such as on the removal of police counters and traffic wardens, and consultation was now meaningful.
- There was some concern amongst partners around communication and short notice of meetings being called by Police Scotland. Audio and video-conferencing was used wherever possible.

Morale

- The divisional command team felt that the negative publicity at national level, particularly in recent months, had had an impact on the morale of officers locally. The challenges of promoting the positive work that officers undertake were noted.
- The lack of discretion, micro-managing and lack of trust prompted one officer to say that the approach “knocked the stuffing out of you”.

Proposals for ‘super-division’

- The divisional command team saw the proposed merger of two separate policing divisions in the North East of Scotland (Aberdeen City Division, and Aberdeenshire and Moray Division) as a positive move, as the two divisions were already working as one single division on many activities and each would continue to have a separate command team led by a Chief Superintendent.
- The Community Council had been asked for its views on the proposal and was also generally supportive of the move.