

Police & Fire Reform Bill – Stage 3 debate

June 2012

This briefing covers the Stage 3 debate on the Police and Fire Reform Bill on Wednesday 27 June 2012.

UNISON does not support the centralisation of police and fire services and there has been little in the Bill process that has changed our view. These services should be subject to local democratic accountability and despite efforts to strengthen the local element; it remains a centrally directed service.

The issue of [VAT liability](#) highlights this point. Despite the misleading Policy Memorandum to the Bill, it was clear from the outset that the proposed structures would not qualify for an exemption, at a cost of between £30 - £40m. We could have single police and fire services established as local government joint boards, funded through a precept and retain s33 status. Of course that would mean less direct ministerial influence, but it would strengthen local democratic accountability and stop a handout to the Treasury.

MSPs are being asked to vote for a Bill without a final business plan for the new services. For the police, the key issue is maintaining an artificial target of police officers, within the budget cuts, resulting in the loss of up to 3,000 police staff roles. Hundreds of police officers are already being taken off the street to back fill police staff jobs and this will rise further once the plan is completed. This cannot possibly meet the best value provisions in the Bill. UNISON supports a balanced, modern police team, with the right skills and expertise for an effective police force. We need the skills of police staffs to enable police officers to do the job the public wants them to do, where they want them to do it – that is fighting crime, out on the streets. The new force should be able to set a balanced police staffing structure free from political direction on police officer numbers.

We also believe this will lead to the future privatisation of police services. While we welcome the broad assurances given by the Cabinet Secretary, the purpose of s26(2)(b) is to facilitate the appointment of private contractors as police staffs. We can foresee an argument that the only way of maintaining the police officer target and some best value, is by the privatisation of significant police functions including custody and 999 calls.

There are some positive developments in the Bill. We welcome the updating of outdated provisions in relation to the role of police staff (s26) and their inclusion in the assault offences(s87). However the PCSO provisions (s29) are still not Human Rights Act compliant. There has been some clarification on staff transfer provisions, even if the explanation given to the committee on TUPE was factually incorrect.

Overall this centralising reform is driven entirely by cost savings that have not even been detailed in a proper business plan. In particular, the de-civilianisation of the force will take it back to the inefficient days of the 1970's. Like [Life on Mars](#) or The Sweeney – fun TV fiction, but not a model for a modern police force.

Useful links

- [UNISON evidence to Justice Committee](#)
- [Police officers taken off the street](#)
- [UNISON Scotland police web pages](#)

For further information contact [Dave Watson](#) Bargaining and Campaigns Team on 0141 342 2840.

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