

MSP Briefing

Police Resources

Introduction

This briefing covers the Justice Committee Debate: 4th Report 2008 - Report on Inquiry into the Effective Use of Police Resources to be held on 16 April 2008. In particular we highlight the contribution police staffs (civilian staff employed by police authorities) can make to improving policing in Scotland. This is an issue that is given only limited consideration in the Justice Committee report.

Background

Police staffs play a crucial role in the operations of the Scottish police forces, with a wide range of jobs from caretaking to custody officers, and from finance to forensics. Overall police staffs, as a proportion of the total workforce in Scottish police forces, range from 28% in Strathclyde to 36% in Grampian, with the national average being 31%. These numbers have grown in recent years, although not to the same extent as elsewhere in the UK, partly reflecting the increased specialisation of police functions and partly to free police officers from duties that do not require full police powers.

The Future of Civilianisation in Police Forces

UNISON Scotland believes that there is scope for further civilianisation within Scottish police forces. Transferring duties to police staffs will allow more police officers to return to operational duties more suited to their particular training and experience. This will also assist the Scottish Government in attempting to achieve its target of an additional 1,000 police officers.

Further civilianisation could be achieved through a more consistent application of civilianisation across all police forces in Scotland. For example, call handlers and dispatchers in Dumfries and Galloway are 100% police staffs compared with no police staff dispatchers in Central Scotland.

There may also be a number of duties which do not require the specialist training of police officers, i.e. they do not require the powers contained within Section 17 of the Police (Scotland) Act 1967. Already there are some pilot projects under way using civilian investigators, these and other pilots could examine the best use of resources within police forces.

Police staff can also bring their own particular specialist skills and training, whether this is in IT or Forensics, which would allow the release of more police officers for front line duties. Police staffs are often simply regarded as cheap option or substitute for police officers. This is not the case in many police functions where properly qualified civilian specialists are the most effective way to deliver complex functions unsuited to the generic police officer training.

Further consideration should also be given to the role of community support officers or their equivalent. For instance, Police Community Support Officers now constitute 6% of the total workforce in English police forces. The use of community wardens in Scottish local government has given a valuable insight into the positive role these staff can play in improving community safety, to complement not substitute for police officers.

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