

Meeting	Authority Meeting
Date	19 August 2020
Location	Video-conference
Title of Paper	SPA Interim Chair's Report
Presented By	David Crichton
Recommendation to Members	For Discussion
Appendix Attached:	No

PURPOSE

To provide a further report on the Authority's continuing oversight of the Police Scotland response to the COVID19 emergency, and to emphasise the need for the Authority to continue its focus on the longer term challenges and opportunities for policing in Scotland.

Introduction

My reports to the last four meetings of the Authority have largely focused on the challenges facing policing during the COVID19 emergency and the Authority's approach to providing the appropriate degree of both support and oversight during this time. In fact my report to our last meeting on 30 June dealt exclusively with the Authority's conclusions on Police Scotland's performance during the most stringent phases of the national response.

The pandemic continues of course. The context for policing is changing both in response to the easing of restrictions and the consequent risks of local spikes in infection which, at time of writing, are materialising in Aberdeen. So it remains important to cover COVID19-related matters in this month's report.

However I also want to re-focus attention on some of the underlying priorities for the Authority which were in place before COVID19 happened, which remain vital, and which in some cases have become even more challenging.

COVID19

The Authority continues to support Police Scotland's proportionate and common sense approach to policing the pandemic, upholding the regulations while protecting the principle of policing by consent. The circumstances are evolving continually, in particular the risk that local spikes in infection require a rolling back of the phased easing of controls. There is an argument that preventing and dealing with localised outbreaks such as that being experienced in Aberdeen may require a greater degree of intervention and enforcement. At our last meeting, the Authority strongly commended the core approach of Police Scotland and there are risks in changing an approach which has so far worked remarkably well. Operational decisions on how regulations are best upheld are correctly for the Chief Constable to make. The Authority's position therefore remains the same. Experience since March has shown just how quickly circumstances can change however, and we are confident that the Chief Constable and his colleagues will keep the need for any tactical changes in the policing approach under continual review.

Diversity

This month's meeting includes a major item on the theme of diversity in policing. It is essential that the Police Scotland workforce is reflective of the communities it serves and that training, development, deployment, promotion and complaint practices respect the aspirations, needs and circumstances of the whole population. The Authority receives regular reports from Police Scotland on the make-up of its workforce, training and development programmes, and compliance with public sector equality duties. However I felt it was important to further review the position at a strategic level in full public session. I have confidence in the genuine commitment of Police Scotland's leadership to the principles of equality, diversity and fair work and the report being discussed today provides an opportunity to examine evidence on how those principles are being implemented in practice, what obstacles are in the way, where progress is being made and where improvements are required. I intend that it will be the first of a regular report on these matters.

Funding

Looking back at my earlier Board reports and those presented by former Chairs, there is consistent reference to the financial challenges facing policing in Scotland. Today's agenda includes the first quarterly financial report for the 2020-21 financial year, and Police Scotland and the Authority are currently looking ahead in detail to the outlook for the next three years and the next Spending Review later this year. The Authority has consistently highlighted the structural deficit in the policing budget. The combination of tight financial settlements with a continuing commitment to maintaining officer numbers at their current level poses a huge challenge.

The demand on public funds in the wake of COVID19 is understandably severe and growing, and we cannot assume that the additional resources for policing found in recent spending reviews will be available this time round. Meanwhile, the operational pressures on policing evident this time last year, including a potential no-deal Brexit and the COP26 event, have been deferred but not removed and there is no evident appetite for reductions in officer numbers. In those circumstances and with employment costs comprising over 85% of total costs, the structural deficit will increase. It is our responsibility as a governance board not just to continue doing everything possible to press for improvements in productivity and workforce planning- and we are doing so - but also to be realistic and transparent about the magnitude and persistence of the

underlying problem. Over the coming months, we will bring further detail on the emerging budget position to the Authority's Resources Committee and full Board, and will continue discussing it with colleagues in Police Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Transformational change

Following on from these comments on finance, it remains essential that Police Scotland's transformational change programme continues at pace, and releases operational benefits and efficiencies which can help put policing on a more sustainable financial footing in the longer term. At its February 2020 meeting the Authority approved a new approach to the oversight of change, one which would enable us to look across the full range of change initiatives, their connections, outcomes and sustainability. This month's meeting receives the first full report based on this new approach and from now we will be looking at these reports on a six-monthly basis. I am grateful to the Authority and Police Scotland staff who have cooperated in designing and producing this new form of reporting.

Other issues

Alongside the items I have highlighted above, the Authority continues to work on a wide range of issues and we will ensure that any which have inevitably been affected by the COVID19 emergency will be brought back on track as, hopefully, the immediate impacts of the pandemic begin to ease.

The Scottish Government published on 7 August Mr. Robert Black's independent report on the role of the Authority, its Chair and members. We welcome the report, we hope that it contributes additional clarity and stability to the overall system for scrutinising policing in Scotland and we will continue to support the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's roundtable in identifying the potential for improvements in that system.

The Authority will today receive a further report on the work of John Scott QC's Independent Advisory Group on the policing of COVID19 and I have been considering what we can learn from the experience of receiving valuable advice in real time from such an authoritative and representative group of stakeholders. It is one of the Authority's core duties to understand and articulate issues of public interest in policing and Mr. Scott's Group has provided insights into how our approach to that might be improved. We will be developing this further over the coming months.

OFFICIAL

Finally, a new round of recruitment for Authority members will be commencing shortly through the Public Appointments procedure. We will be advising and supporting the process throughout, and I will be part of the recruitment panel. My earlier comments on diversity in policing apply just as strongly to the composition of the Authority itself. We have a strong Board but cannot pretend that it is a diverse one. We have to ensure that the Board better reflects the composition of Scottish society, and we must make progress towards that during this recruitment round.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are invited to discuss and note the content of this report.