

## **Written evidence submitted by the Northern Ireland Policing Board, relating to the funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland inquiry (FPC0031)**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your Enquiry on the Funding and Delivering of Public Services in Northern Ireland.

As the Policing Board has primary statutory responsibility for securing sufficient resources for policing in Northern Ireland and then ensuring those resources are used to meet the key priorities set out in the Policing Plan for Northern Ireland, we welcome the opportunity to offer the Committee our views on the impact of the current budget environment on the policing service that will be delivered in Northern Ireland.

You will have received detailed inputs from PSNI on the cuts being made to the policing budget in 2023/24 which sees PSNI facing a gap of £107m. And they will advise of the steps and measures they would hope to take to reduce that gap.

The first point we would wish to highlight is that when faced with single year budgets, it is impossible for PSNI to make the savings expected of them due to a lack of investment, contractual commitments and absence of practical mechanisms. To effect the change of the magnitude required by these cuts takes time and policing here continues to operate on one year budgets with no ability to carry forward any strategic reserves.

In terms of what can be done in-year to reduce this gap of £107m, the Board is concerned that PSNI is being forced to take steps which will have a significantly negative impact on the police service which the community in Northern Ireland will receive, and will have an impact on the officers and staff delivering that service.

PSNI officers and staff face growing levels of crime, increasingly complex crimes and a worrying upward trend in the level of assaults against officers.

The demands faced in policing are becoming increasingly complex. There were 106,621 crimes recorded in Northern Ireland in the last financial year, an increase of 12,390 (13.1%) when compared with the previous 12 months. The level recorded in the latest 12 months is the highest in the last 12 years.

Traditional, visible crime has given way to new types of crimes. Increasing vulnerability in our society also impacts upon policing with daily calls for service for mental health issues, missing persons. Domestic abuse figures are at a record high and there is concern about increases in crime associated with the cost of living crisis.

In an environment where all public services are facing financial challenges, and the cost of living crisis is hitting many homes, including those of policing families, police officers increasingly find themselves dealing with issues they are not professionally trained for, in terms of dealing with vulnerable people who require medical intervention and people with addiction issues. As a range of public services face budget constraints and move to a more reactive rather than proactive service, there is concern that PSNI will increasingly become the service of first [instead of last] resort.

These are issues facing many police services across the UK, but unlike other police services, PSNI deal with these challenges against a backdrop of a continued terrorist threat which manifested in February in a particularly brutal attack on a senior officer, and then in early March a dissident grouping declared that family members of PSNI officers, as well as officers themselves, were now also legitimate targets. At the end of March, the threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism was increased from SUBSTANTIAL to SEVERE, meaning an attack is highly likely. It is estimated that around 30% of resources are directed towards dealing with this threat.

As a Board we are worried about the level of threat, risk and harm facing communities and the ability of the police service to respond.

Almost 80% of the Police budget is payroll related. Significant cost savings can only be delivered by reductions to headcount. There is no mechanism to reduce police officer numbers, other than through natural attrition. Due to the budget cuts, by March 2024, police officer numbers are projected to be at 6,459 – a record low. And the reality is fewer police officers means less policing to address the policing challenges highlighted above. The reduced investment in policing seems counter-intuitive when the threat, risk and harm to the community is demonstrably increasing, and when neighbouring jurisdictions (such as in England and Wales and in the Republic of Ireland), are actively increasing and investing in police officer numbers.

We worry that the decisions being made to live within budget will be enduring for years to come.

It is obviously incumbent on the Policing Board to ensure that against an extremely challenging budget situation, everything possible is being done to maximise operational effectiveness, including through robust attendance management policies and procedures, and through continued investment in staff health and wellbeing. We will continue to challenge the service to maximise the number of officers and staff available for duty each day.

But as a Board we are concerned about the cumulative impact the budget cuts are having on the service which the Northern Ireland public will receive, and on the officers and staff within PSNI.

We are worried that PSNI could become a reactive service only, when so much has been invested over the lifetime of the PSNI and the Policing Board in developing a policing with the community ethos. Continued cuts will lead to fewer police officers, which means less visible policing, slower response times and a more reactive service, and the PSNI's ability to flex to deal with unplanned events is compromised.

While the Board appreciates that all Government Departments in Northern Ireland are under pressure, the risks of policing being under-funded are particularly critical. It is worth noting in this context that the NI Fiscal Council report shows that policing and justice in Northern

Ireland have received the least favourable budget over the last two years, and that the budget for Justice has been decreasing over the last ten years. [NI Fiscal Report on 2022/23 revealed that Justice is 23.9% worse off in real terms since 2019/20 compared to the similar Whitehall Department. All compared to an uplift of £2 billion in England & Wales across the same 3-year period to grow officer numbers by 20,000].

Policing investment is needed to deal with the [recently increased] threat and investment of police officers working in local communities is central to tackling the threat. Policing demands are increasing, and as a Board we are particularly concerned that the legitimacy of the Service will be impacted by losing the police community connection.

There is unanimous NI political support for investment in policing because it is vital for economic prosperity so that Northern Ireland remains a safe place to live, work and invest in.

The Policing Board considers the financial situation and the impact it is having on officer numbers to be a significantly relevant issue. Board members are concerned about the expectations on the remaining officers and staff, about the impact on potential recruits to PSNI should recruitment recommence, about attrition levels, and about the potential negative impact on efforts to transform policing.

The 'cost of living crisis' facing people generally is also having an impact on police officers and staff with many seeking secondary employment. There are currently around 900 officers in the PSNI who have registered either an outside business interest or as having a second job.

In December 2022, a local policing survey on Engagement, Welfare and Wellbeing showed that 95% of respondents were concerned about the cost of living with vehicle fuel costs (86%) and household bills (82%) being the top concerns. Such was the scale of the concern within PSNI that a Cost of Living Gold group was established at which consideration has been given to what support the Service can provide to its staff, including the use of food banks and financial support.

The Board has had a particular concern around the number of police recruits who leave the service. Data showed that 49 probationary constables left in the past financial year - up from 25 during the previous 12 months. At the January 2023 Resources Committee, PSNI outlined the impact on Officers sickness absence due to additional demands contributing to stress and mental health issues and the likely impact on numbers leaving the Service. With the investment made in recruitment and training, this is a significant cause for concern.

In the current financial climate future recruitment will be limited and police officer numbers will reach the lowest ever level. The Board acknowledges this has an impact on efforts to ensure the Service is representative of the Northern Ireland community which is critical to confidence and service legitimacy.

Over the course of the last year the Board has made a series of representations to the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Office on the issues outlined above. As noted at the outset, policing in Northern Ireland still faces unique challenges and a normal society free from serious threat has not yet been achieved.

Policing has underpinned the peace process and is central to the future success and stability of NI society and growth of the economy. The gains of the last 22 years are at risk if policing is not properly resourced and that lessons learned from reductions in local policing following the last austerity measures are not repeated.

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