

**Northern Joint Police Board
Finance and Policy Working Group**

Minutes of Meeting of the Finance and Policy Working Group held in Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Friday, 22 February 2008 at 10.15 a.m.

Present:

Representing the Highland Council

Mr I Ross
Mr G Smith
Mr M Rattray
Mr A Millar
Mr N Donald

Representing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Mr N M Macleod
Mr I Mackenzie

Representing Orkney Islands Council

Mr R Leslie

Representing Shetland Islands Council

Mr A Duncan (Substituting)

Also in attendance:

Representing the Scottish Police Services Authority (SPSA)

Mr M Rolfe, Chairman, SPSA Board
Mr D Mulhern, Chief Executive
Mr T Nelson, Director of Forensic Services
Mr R Kirkwood, Head of ICT

Officials in attendance:

Mr I Latimer, Chief Constable
Ms E Ward, Northern Constabulary Head of Finance
Mrs R Moir, Assistant Clerk

Mr N M Macleod in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received on behalf of Mr B Murphy of the Highland Council and Mr A Cooper of Shetland Islands Council.

2. Scottish Police Services Authority (SPSA)

At its meeting held on 8 January 2008, the Finance and Policy Working Group had raised a number of concerns in relation to the impact that forthcoming changes to be made by the SPSA might have on Northern Constabulary.

Thereafter, at its meeting held on 18 January 2008, the Board had noted the presentation made by Mr D Mulhern, Chief Executive, on the work of the SPSA and also the invitation extended by the Convener to Mr Mulhern and Mr M Rolfe, Chairman of the SPSA Board, to attend this meeting to discuss further the Board's concerns.

In this connection, there had been re-circulated for information and reference Minutes of Meeting of the Working Group held on 8 January 2008, previously approved by the Board at its meeting held on 18 January 2008; and also circulated for reference copy of the PowerPoint presentation given by Mr D Mulhern, SPSA Chief Executive, to the Board meeting on 18 January 2008.

The Convener welcomed the SPSA representatives and the opportunity presented for dialogue. He emphasised the Board's expectation that the SPSA would deliver best practice and an equivalent if not enhanced service, and underlined the Board's ongoing responsibility and accountability for ensuring best value.

The meeting addressed a wide range of issues.

Service Standards & Finance

The Convener drew attention to the excellent performance record of Northern Constabulary, its high detection rate and public satisfaction ratings. Neither the Board nor the public wished to see any drop in standards. He urged the SPSA representatives to recognise the particular impact on the needs of the Northern Constabulary area in terms of peripherality, rurality and sparsity of population. A "one size fits all" national approach to service delivery would not meet Northern's unique needs.

The Convener emphasised the importance of best value and of receiving at least an equivalent service to that currently available without the need for additional financial payment by the Board or its constituent authorities. The Chief Constable expressed his concern that the level of Northern Constabulary's draw-down from SPSA resources should not be limited to its GAE formula share. In relation to ICT in particular, the Board had been investing a higher than GAE percentage in its ICT systems and would not want to see investment drop below that which it would itself have provided. There was also concern as to how figures would be adjusted in future years.

Mr Mulhern and Mr Rolfe assured Members that it was the intention of the SPSA to deliver a service at least equivalent to that already enjoyed by Forces from their in-house resources and that indeed it was their aspiration to deliver enhanced services, thanks in part to the advantages of economies of scale. While the SPSA believed it could deliver Best Value, experience would show whether it also delivered satisfaction. The organisation was working closely with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland (ACPOS) to ensure a successful change process. SPSA management were sensitive to the particular circumstances in Highland and the Islands. It would be important that these factors and the costs issues raised were thoroughly examined in dialogue with the Force and properly addressed in the Service Level Agreement between the SPSA and the Force.

Concern was also expressed about the SPSA being subject to VAT. Mr Mulhern gave an assurance that discussions were continuing to address this.

Accountability

Board Members questioned the mechanisms in place for scrutiny of the SPSA and its accountability to Boards, which should be seen as SPSA customers. Mr Rolfe clarified that the SPSA was answerable not only to the Scottish Parliament itself, but also to the Scottish Ministers, the Parliament's Justice and Finance Committees, Audit Scotland as the SPSA's external auditors, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. In addition, the SPSA Board included both Chief Constables and Conveners of Police Boards. The SPSA also published its annual report, its three-year plans and its Performance Indicators, all of which contributed to its public accountability. The relationship with ACPOS and a mechanism for dealing with national issues had still to be fully worked through. It was hoped that local issues could be addressed locally and the SPSA was happy to enter into dialogue on these matters.

Another communication/accountability route could be via the Scottish Police Authorities Conveners Forum. Boards would also be able to receive reporting on local SPSA delivery from their Chief Constable. Whilst content to report on relevant issues to the Board, the Chief Constable questioned whether this would suffice as a mechanism to provide Members with the necessary information and assurances. He advised Members that ACPOS would like to see the establishment of an SPSA Customer Services Board.

Staffing Issues

Reference was made to the issue of morale among staff who had already transferred from Northern Constabulary to the SPSA (Forensics staff), or were about to transfer, with effect from 1 April 2008 (ICT staff). Whilst periods of change were always accompanied by fears and uncertainty, some perceived negativity among staff who had already transferred appeared to have exacerbated morale issues among those about to do so. The Convener welcomed the fact that Mr Mulhern had taken the opportunity earlier in the day to meet some of the staff, as personal contact could go a long way to alleviating concerns.

The SPSA representatives assured Members that they were keen to address any concerns or negative perceptions, highlighting the importance of a positive and motivated staff to good service delivery. They emphasised their respect for the skills and dedication of the local staff, whose positions were not under threat; nor should staff fear a centralisation of specialised posts. The SPSA was keen to retain talented staff. Indeed, a spread of specialised staff, together with the lower turnover in more local areas, would enhance the robustness of the organisation. SPSA management were also keen to learn from good local practices and to roll these out throughout the organisation.

Training and Recruitment

SPSA recognised and appreciated the value and status of the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan and had no wish to undermine its role and activities. SPSA was however mindful of the pressures the College would face in light of the current recruitment drive for additional police officers under the Capacity Project. SPSA therefore anticipated a requirement to source its training more widely, with perhaps a Northern contribution.

Whilst a national training strategy was required, it would also be important to minimise the disruption to individual forces. The Chief Constable agreed the value of national delivery and the importance of consistent standards.

The importance of all necessary posts being filled by 1 April to ensure continuity of service was emphasised.

ICT and Forensics

In relation to ICT, in addition to the comments above, Mr Kirkwood, while confirming the absence of any intention to centralise, nevertheless underlined the importance of common standards of working and also of Forces being “intelligent clients”. The Chief Constable supported the importance of nationally integrated systems but pointed out that Forces were starting from different pre-transfer stages of development. He emphasised the level of past Board investment in systems appropriate to Northern’s needs and the importance of goodwill and of maintaining confidence in ongoing investment and delivery.

In response to a question as to whether a speedy local maintenance response would be available in all areas immediately, it was acknowledged that further work on this was required, with a focus on the potential role of broadband and of enhanced local training.

In relation to Forensics, particular concern was expressed about the proposed closure of the Grampian Police Forensic Science Laboratory in Aberdeen, with which Northern Constabulary currently had an excellent working relationship, and its effective replacement by a new custom-built facility in Dundee, which would result in only two specialist laboratories in Scotland. In response, it was emphasised that this was not a criticism of the calibre of the Grampian scientific work, nor indeed of the work produced in other smaller local units, but rather reflected the need for modern quality facilities that would be fit for purpose. The Chief Constable emphasised the need to ensure the maintenance of a high standard of service delivery to Northern.

Conclusion

The Convener and Vice Convener thanked the SPSA representatives for their attendance and commented on how beneficial the meeting had been. They reiterated the importance of maintaining a high quality of service and of ensuring adequate reporting mechanisms. Mr Mulhern thanked the Working Group Members for their input and their positive support. He reiterated the SPSA’s aspirations to deliver a quality service to all Forces, including Northern.

The meeting ended at 12.25 p.m.