

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

CELG(4)-04-11 : Paper 6

Inquiry into Community Safety in Wales – GMB Union

Before I address the very specific questions outlined for the basis of the GMB presentation

- Impact of the public spending cuts on front line policing
- Details about the Welsh Police forces' reform programme designed to improve efficiency and reduce costs; and
- the implications for local communities and community safety policy in Wales

I want to set the scene as it were to put some context around that term “front line policing” by asking ***What is “Front Line Policing”?*** and outlining the role of the GMB and how we interact with the Welsh forces.

The GMB's main presence in the Police forces' of Wales is with the largest of the Welsh forces South Wales Police where we have been recognised 8 years or so. All our representatives within the force have “day jobs” from PCSOs to Project Managers in the ICT department so they have a good understanding of the workings of the Police Service. Turning now to addressing the question of Front Line policing...

It is often assumed that Front Line Policing is refers to the “bobby on the beat” but it is much more than that, there are many roles not necessarily seen by the public which should be considered as Front Line Policing these include the Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), Control Room operators and Station Enquiry Clerks to name a few. In fact the roles of Police Support Staff are generally classified as the “front line policing” and “back office” or “admin” functions. Without Police Support Staff we would return to warranted officers – well paid, highly trained in policing who should be out there detecting (and preventing) crimes working in the background doing the roles generally undertaken by Police Support Staff. When considering the question of “what is front line policing” the GMB believes that you should not ignore the Police Support staff whether they are visible part of the front line policing team such as PCSOs or doing the back office role as we believe there would be no Front Line Policing without these often unseen roles. Without staff working in the ICT departments supporting the IT systems, keeping the police radios working, maintaining the voice network or those in fleet keeping police cars serviced and on the road or even dare I say someone working in payroll – let me tell you without someone making sure front line police officers are paid there would be no front line policing!

The GMB supports members of Police Support Staff across the board – PCSOs to admin staff; technicians to mechanics

Impact of the public spending cuts on front line policing

South Wales Police are in the first year of their Project Reform, the predicted job losses are in the region of approx 700 – including both Police Officers and Police Staff over the next four years. The force has implemented the Police Regulation A19 allowing the forced retirement of Officers with over 30 years service, with the Police Staff reductions coming under the heading of Project Reform which aims to make the service more efficient and reduce costs. South Wales Police alone are facing a £47million budget reduction over the next 4 years.

Whilst the GMB focuses on Police Support Staff it is only right that we mention that forced retirement of Police Officers means the Police Service are losing valuable experience which at least in the short/medium term is bound to lead to a significant skills gap which will have a huge impact on front line policing. Furthermore, the long term implications are also of concern as a forced retirement policy is likely to have an impact on the younger officers and how they view their long term career within the Police Service.

Whilst the GMB has supported a Voluntary Early Retirement scheme for Police Support Staff, the same concerns regarding the loss of such valuable experience and the potential short term skills gap also apply for Support Staff roles.

Details about the Welsh Police forces' reform programme designed to improve efficiency and reduce costs

To date the main “workstreams” that have reported in South Wales Police Project Reform have seen a 24% resource reduction for the Administration Support Unit 46% for the Analysts workstreams and 46% for the Public Service Centre.. As GMB stated to the South Wales Police Authority meeting in May, on conclusion of the formal consultation period for these three workstreams *“The force proposal for a 24% resource reduction for the Administration Support Unit and 46% for the Analysts workstreams whilst regrettable, we believe are based on fairly sound business cases.”* However, the GMB reported then, and remain extremely concerned about the proposals to centralise the force’s 999 Control Rooms and Contact Management Centres into a “Public Service Centre” with the proposed resource reduction of 45%

We struggle to understand how the force can maintain an effective service to the community while reducing resources by such drastic numbers.

Whilst it is accepted that centralising this business function economies of scale would be realised the GMB remain extremely concerned with the force’s ability to continue to deliver a high quality of service to the public, given the drastic level of resource reductions proposed - a 45% cut (if you include the recently disestablished posts) in such a public facing, business critical area is frankly staggering. We did expect a centralised function but expected it to be implemented in a more controlled and measured way.

This concern focuses not solely on the number of jobs that will be lost but includes the impact for staff who will form the new Public Service Centre and indeed the impact on the public.

Our main area of concerns regarding the proposed new Public Service Centre include

- the automation of the switchboard and the loss of all Switchboard operators – we do not believe this will enhance our service and will not provide the public with what they expect or even want. Early evidence from our members resulting from the first phase of this implementation suggests that there are significant operational problems resulting from an automated switchboard
- lack of meaningful public consultation – the GMB do not believe that a 150 person sample from two supermarkets and an online survey is representative of our local communities , this after all is less than 0.02% of the local population
- lack of meaningful comparative data with other forces who have similar call/incident and crime volumes
- breadth of the new role of Public Service Centre operator – combining a 999 call taker/dispatcher with that of a Contact Management Centre Occurrence Investigator and a Switchboard Operator which demands very different skills is not as simple as has been portrayed in the force proposal for the new Public Service Centre. Again, early feedback from our members suggest as this is being implemented there are significant operational problems resulting in a back log of calls and concerns for the service being provided to local communities
- Impact on the public – we remain concerned that this proposal will affect the force’s ability to respond to 999 calls – and especially non emergency calls – in a timely and effective manner

We understand that the proposal is for a phased implementation but our concern is that if one or more elements of the proposal fails once we have let staff go then it is just not as simple as stopping the next phase and it will be too late and too difficult to undo the damage to the service and the force’s reputation.

Other Front Line areas currently being reviewed include the role of the Station Enquiry Clerk with particular reference to station (front desk) opening hours and even station closures

Implications for local communities and community safety policy in Wales

The GMB are deeply concerned about the impact on the local community.

The proposal for a “one stop shop” Public Service Centre resulting in a reduction in resource of over 45% is bound to impact on the force’s ability to respond to the needs of the

community. The biggest impact will not necessarily be on the 999 calls but that of the non emergency calls – the reporting of antisocial behaviour and the like.

The current reform of the Station Enquiry Clerk and Front Line Support Officer workstream has not ruled out the possibility of closing and/or reducing the opening hours of police stations. In our Western BCU, it is proposed that only Swansea Central and Neath will continue to provide a 24-hour front desk facility, allowing the public to walk in and see a member of staff. Morriston has cut its public opening hours to Mon – Fri 9 to 5. No details are yet available for other areas of the Force, but further permanent closures and the sale of police premises have not been excluded. The Taffs Well and Nantgarw Community Council considered cutting all ties with the local service in protest at a “lack of consultation” prior to the closing of its community police station. Public confidence in the police service is directly connected to the visibility of that service – an open and suitably staffed police station contributes significantly to that public visibility. If the public have confidence in the police service, they are more willing to engage with both the police and the wider criminal justice system.

While we accept that there are proposals to increase the potential methods of contacting the police e.g. e-criming, people who choose to come through the door of a station are often the most vulnerable ones, who prefer to talk face-to-face with another human being. This may be for a range of reasons including difficulties in speaking English, a fear of reprisals and a need for personal reassurance, discomfort with the use of, or indeed a total lack of other facilities such as telephones, personal computers and the internet. Some intelligence is gained from personal contact which would otherwise be missed – some people just open up more when they have the benefit of personal communication. In some cases this can be about matters not directly connected to the original purpose of their visit – they may intend reporting a fairly trivial matter and then, in conversation divulge more serious information. We have serious concerns about the possible erosion of our human face to the public.

A recent HMIC report “Demanding Times – The Front Line and Police Visibility” concludes that around two-thirds of the police workforce nationally is on the front line. It is impossible to see how the level of South Wales Police proposed reductions will not significantly impinge on that front line.