

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD

RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT 2024-2027

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD RESPONSE TO OUR PLAN: DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST. DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT 2024-2027

INTRODUCTION

As a Policing Board, we welcome the opportunity to provide a response to the **draft Programme for Government 2024-2027: Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most.**

The Board is responsible for the independent oversight of the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and has a wide range of legislative duties to deliver. Central to this is making sure that the service delivered by the PSNI meets the policing needs of the community, and builds community confidence.

An effective, efficient and impartial policing service is a core pillar of civic society and therefore underpins the successful delivery of the PfG, in particular supporting a society where people wish to live, work, visit and invest, vital for a **Competitive and Sustainable Economy**. Similarly, the importance of policing in terms of delivery of **Safer Communities**, and the missions of **People, Planet and Prosperity**, as well as supporting the ongoing commitment to the **Peace Process**, cannot be emphasised enough.

Policing has been a mainstay of our peace process. Whilst much progress has been made, we know that people's experiences of the benefits of peace are not the same across society. Proper investment and resourcing for policing, as well as NI Executive support for the Service, is essential if we are to achieve the safe society we collectively desire.

2026 marks 25 years since the establishment of the new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland. Society is not yet normal as envisaged in those early political agreements, and there are now also new crimes emerging that threaten the future safety and security of our community.

The Policing Board has been working with the PSNI on future policing plans whilst also considering the opportunities, challenges and risks faced. These are outlined in further detail in the responses below. Delivery will be contingent on proper resourcing.

OUR COLLECTIVE POLICING VISION FOR 2025-2030

The Board, in partnership with the PSNI, is currently conducting a public consultation exercise on a **new Draft Policing Plan 2025-30** ([Draft Policing Plan 2025-2030 Consultation Document | Northern Ireland Policing Board](#))

The draft Programme for Government mirrors many of the issues addressed in this Plan and support the overarching 3 outcomes we plan to set for policing: That:

1. PSNI is victim focused.
2. We have safe and engaged communities with confidence in policing.
3. PSNI have a representative, valued and enabled workforce.

This Policing Plan gives us an opportunity to turn our attention to the future, and how we hope policing and police oversight will serve the people of Northern Ireland and help create safer and more engaged communities.

To achieve these ambitions, and those set in the draft Programme for Government, we need to make sure that the PSNI as an organisation is properly resourced and enabled to deliver on the outcomes set so that the community can have confidence in the service being delivered.

This Plan focuses on the positive changes we can make to enable PSNI to deliver the service that the public expect and deserve. The Policing Plan is an important part of delivering a safer community in Northern Ireland, but it is not the only part. We must continue to work in partnership across all levels of society, to create the future we want.

Within the draft Programme for Government, we welcome the Executive commitment to **Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls**, as well as the broader cross cutting strategy on tackling **Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy**. These are areas that we specifically focus on in the Policing Plan.

In **Tackling Paramilitarism**, we agree that a clear and consistent message must be sent that those engaged in criminal activity have no place in our community. There is a need to reset the leverage such groups and individuals have in our community; and robustly deal with the crime and criminality that they perpetrate. Whilst legislative change has given policing additional powers, and positive work is ongoing with the National Crime Agency, it may be timely to revisit a recommendation to establish a dedicated Assets Recovery Agency within Northern Ireland.

As a Board we strongly believe that working to the outcomes set in the Policing Plan will enable the PSNI to deliver effective policing that is visible, accessible, responsive, victim-focused and continually improving.

INCREASED COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

We welcome the priority given to **Safer Communities**, a priority that cuts across all Government Departments. However, it is clear that there is a need for a **refocus on the collaborative and partnership approach** taken, whether that be in respect of safety on our roads, tackling hate crime, modern slavery, dealing with environmental and rural crime, tackling drugs, alcohol and mental health issues, securing a safe society so businesses, investment and tourism can prosper, or initiatives with local Government.

With reducing resources in other service areas, policing has become a service of first and last resort for many people in crisis, with the police increasingly spending time at incidents that do not primarily require a police response.

Recent figures from the PSNI suggest that officers are spending in excess of 1,000 hours per week attending such calls.

Policing has undoubtedly been innovative in its approach to dealing with the growing risks arising from vulnerability, mental health issues as well as drugs and alcohol addictions. Co-location of services, for example, through healthcare provision in Custody Care has proved hugely successful, as have initiatives to co-locate services to support victims of Domestic Abuse and Hate Crime. But there were and are frustrations in securing resources to support these.

Currently the Department of Health and the Department of Justice are working to support PSNI as it develops the new 'Right Care Right Person' model to ensure that people of all ages, who have health and/or social care needs, are responded to by the right person, with the right skills, training, and experience to best meet their needs. We hope this initiative can be introduced.

These examples illustrate the importance of partnerships and collaboration. We know that demands on policing are cross-cutting and effective responses touch every Government Department.

We also know that the demographic of Northern Ireland has changed significantly with increased diversity and representation in our society. This means that policing and other agencies working to deliver safer communities need to recognise this diversity in plans being made.

We believe a fresh look needs to be taken at the collaborative working relations between policing and Government Departments in the delivery of safer communities and responsibilities, and in the prioritisation and allocation of resources to support that.

RESOURCING

As previously stated, resourcing of policing is key to delivery of a safer society. As a Board we acknowledge and understand the fiscal challenges facing the Executive in the allocation of resources to ensure effective delivery of public services.

However, funding to the Department of Justice, as reported by the NI Fiscal Council, has been disproportionately affected and the resulting challenges of cuts to the policing budget have been acutely felt by the PSNI in operational capability.

We very much welcome and support the commitment in the draft PfG to return police officer numbers to NDNA commitments and particularly the opportunities this presents in terms of addressing representativeness in a society that is now much more diverse.

The Board supports the PSNI in its current Recovery Plan to increase officer numbers to 7000 and staff numbers to 2572 over the course of the next 3 years. This will mean a total additional funding requirement of £201m over 5 years.

As a Board we have discussed at length with the Chief Constable the real and serious societal risks if officer numbers are not restored. Evidence shows that overall day to day demands on policing are increasing through 101 and 999 calls for service, through increasingly complex crime investigations, through the prevalence of crime perpetrated online and using new technologies, as well as dealing with increased levels of vulnerability in the community.

Risks to confidence in policing and police community relations are heightened due to reduced levels of officers in local policing roles, alongside risks to victims of crime and the delivery of other key priorities listed in the draft PfG including tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, Tackling Paramilitarism and dealing with domestic abuse. Risks that were exposed over the course of the Summer in the need for outside support to enable the police to respond to spontaneous disorder and increasing numbers of hate crime incidents.

Increasing officer numbers is one critical element, and as noted above the Board believes there must also be a reset in the collaborative and partnership working arrangements. There are also other changes that can assist PSNI such as the ability to carry forward strategic reserves and the provision of multi- year funding streams which will assist delivery of strategic plans.

Policing does have a substantial budget but the evidence shows the serious consequences of not rebuilding officer and staff numbers.

As a Board we recognise that there are opportunities to increase effectiveness and efficiency in the service through reform, transformation, innovation and digitisation. There are also opportunities to be explored through new AI technology. We hope that the PSNI and Board will be able to tap into change and transformation funds being made available.

For policing this is particularly important in terms of technology and compatibility with the wider criminal justice system. As a Board we have also asked the Chief Constable to ensure revenue raising measures within policing in terms of charging for policing services are fully explored.

There also needs to be investment to increase the effectiveness of the wider criminal justice system as the current pace of dealing with cases has a very negative impact on overall public confidence in law and order, and justice being seen to be done.

As a Board we know that the current resourcing pressures and reduced officer numbers has had an impact on resilience and organisational effectiveness. Police officer and staff sickness levels are unprecedentedly high, but this is in large part as a result of pressures from reduced organisational numbers and increased demands and traumas directly attributable to their work.

This figure must also be viewed through the lens of increasing assaults and attacks on our officers whilst serving the community.

People in policing, along with colleagues across the public sector must be recognised and supported for the work they do. We very much support the position that police officers and staff should have pay parity with their public sector colleagues. Funding to ensure this needs secured year on year.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

Over the past few years legislative change enacted to provide police officers with increased powers to deal with criminality and give people who may be victims of crime more protection, are welcome.

There are also opportunities going forward to consider other legislation that will assist policing such as strengthening hate crime laws and definitions so that there is clarity as well as setting clear guidelines on responsibilities for issues such as the removal of 'hate material'.

The current Justice Bill will address some key areas of change such as providing legislation that provides the framework to deal with Biometric Retention. Whilst, new legislation is welcome, cognisance must also be given to the resourcing impact for policing to implement the new arrangements.

The Board has also called for new legislation to protect police officers and staff from being attacked or assaulted in the course of their duty. Assaults and attacks that continue to rise and a strong message must be sent that attacks on police officers and staff, and all emergency service workers, is completely unacceptable and those who perpetrate will face a custodial sentence. Ministerial commitments to address this are welcomed.

The Board has also sought changes which we consider will improve the process for medical retirement of officers as well as changes to speed up the police misconduct process. Both issues impact on organisational effectiveness.

Having an effective and adequately resourced justice system is central to confidence building in the community. People want to see justice being done and the speed and cost of 'delay' in the current system are undoubtedly negatively impacting on confidence in policing as well as confidence in the wider justice system.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we would like to acknowledge the commitment of police officers and staff to serving the community, and to working to secure a peaceful society. As a Board we want to support them in their endeavour and ensure they are properly recognised and resourced for the job they have to do.

Policing must have strong connection into communities, and be representative of the community it serves. There is still work to do in making policing a career choice for all, and one where officers and staff do not have to hide their choice of profession.

However, it is very much the case that the past and current efforts of the PSNI, working with people across Government, statutory and voluntary agencies have contributed to making Northern Ireland one of the safest places to live. We all have a vested interest building on and maintaining that accolade.

We look forward to inputting on tangible outcomes for assessing achievement of ambitions set in the draft Programme for Government as they relate to policing and the work of the Policing Board.

Ends

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD

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ONLINE FORMAT

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