



# policebeat

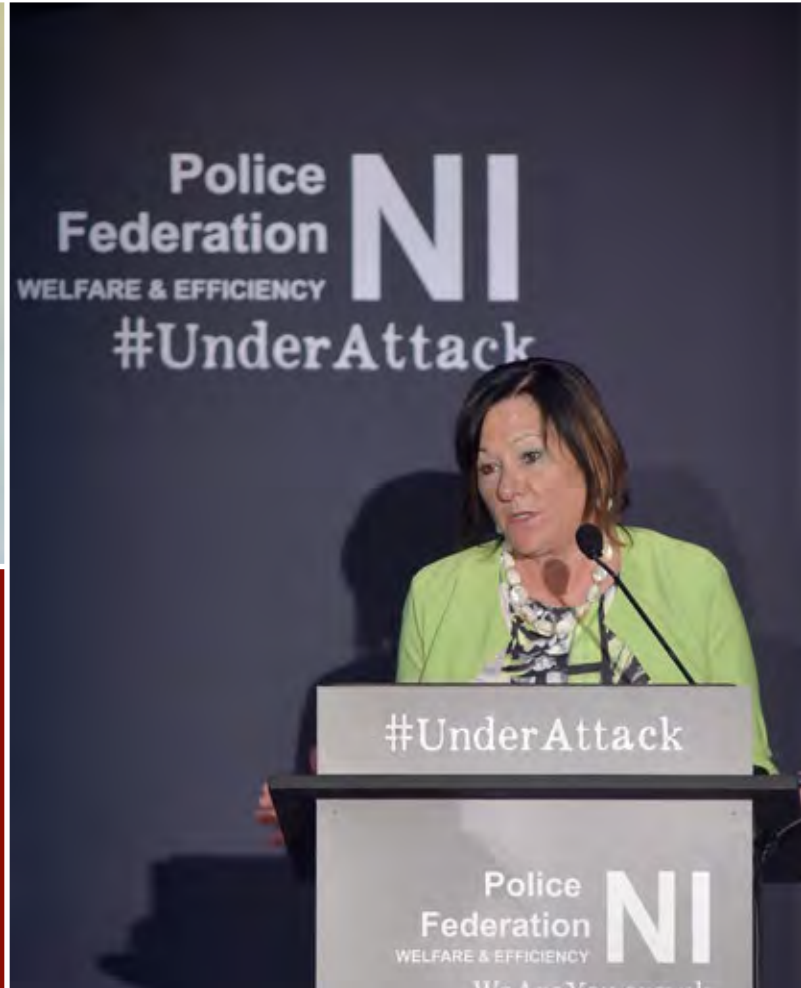
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The News Magazine of The Police Federation for Northern Ireland



**All change at the top as politics, the past and policing the present dominate the scene**



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## EDITORIAL

## A Spring and Summer of change for policing

Policing is in a perpetual state of flux. There are challenges on all fronts with the spotlight never too far away from every decision that is made, and every action that is undertaken.

In coming months, we will see significant and potentially far-reaching changes in leadership roles. A new Chief Constable will be selected to lead the PSNI. There will also be a new Police Ombudsman to exercise oversight and the Northern Ireland Policing Board will get a new Chair.

George Hamilton, Ann Connolly and Michael Maguire have left their mark on policing in recent years, some of it commendable, some not. This organisation had a professional working relationship with two of the three and a less than harmonious one with Mr Maguire.

Policing and politics are inextricably linked, and we saw that played out with the unhelpful words of the Sinn Féin President, Mary Lou McDonald, who told journalists that she didn't think any of the senior officers in the organisation could succeed Mr Hamilton as Chief Constable.

These unwise and ill-advised comments threw up a serious question mark about the impartiality of a major stakeholder in the selection of a new Chief Constable and potentially undermined an open and transparent selection process. If the party leader didn't think any local candidates were good enough for the job, how then could her representatives on the Policing Board be expected to exercise objectivity and fairness in an open competition?

The PFNI wasn't impressed, and neither was the Equality Commission. Political parties weighed in with stinging rebukes. For his part, Mr Hamilton didn't mince his words when he said: "I think Mary Lou McDonald was wrong, I think she was inaccurate and I think it was an act of poor leadership and it has a very detrimental impact on policing and on the peace we are all trying to build."

"...I think the comments were the antitheses of all Sinn Féin say they stand for. They say they stand for equality, for fairness, for integrity and I can't think of anything further away from those qualities in what the party president said."

So, even before the ink is dry on an Application Form, the selection of a successor to George Hamilton is mired in controversy. It has been tainted and besmirched, and that does a great disservice to all of us who have a genuine interest in seeing policing depoliticised. Maybe next time, Ms McDonald will seek advice from her Policing Board colleagues before making such remarks.

Finding a successor as able as Ann Connolly will be difficult to achieve. Even though the Board hasn't met for the best part of two years – a casualty of the Stormont stalemate – Ms Connolly made a worthwhile contribution to policing. She was candid, forthright but always constructive and this organisation thanks her for engaging so willingly with us during her time in office.

The same cannot be said of the outgoing Police Ombudsman. Issues too numerous to enumerate have bedevilled any attempt to have a reasonable working relationship with OPONI. Oversight of policing is essential but OPONI approached its work with a determined zeal and over-exuberance that inevitably set it on a collision course with this staff association and which has been detrimental to policing in Northern Ireland.

We look forward to engaging constructively and positively with the new individual who will be in charge and to help develop relationships. Impartiality works both ways and we are ever cognisant of the need to have public confidence in the office of PONI, but also that confidence has to be replicated by police officers. Unfortunately that has not been the case. Our hope is to see an end to what many might regard as a confrontational relationship, which has made it virtually impossible to engage in a meaningful manner.

We will meet regularly with all three incumbents in order that the views of those who are at the sharp end of policing society are heard. We will be honest, forthright and pragmatic and hope that we can forge good working relationships with all three.

## 'Appalling and unacceptable catalogue of assaults on officers'

It is an appalling and unacceptable catalogue of assaults on officers.

The litany of shame includes an officer who had a little finger bitten off, broken teeth, fractured ribs, broken fibia and a facial slash wound.

And that's before you count the fifty-one bombing and eight shooting incidents where officers were the specific terrorist target.

These are deemed 'security' attacks with Belfast topping the list with 27 incidents followed by Londonderry/Strabane with 22.

These stark figures cover the period 2013/14 to 2017/18 when more than 14,000 assaults on officers were recorded – an average of 2,832 per year!

Newry, with the eleventh highest population, had the fourth highest number of assaults while Enniskillen, with the 19th highest number of residents, was fifth.

More than a quarter of the 14,000 assaults led to officers sustaining injuries. On sixty-three occasions, officers were seriously hurt.

Arm fractures, tear to liver, extensive facial bruising, damage to lung, head split with a bottle and a wide range of abrasions were some of the other injuries inflicted.

**Officers were spat at 660 times. They were bitten in 347 incidents. Punched, 131 times. Kicked, on 479 occasions.**

In the kicking incidents, 54 involved the groin and 15 explicitly described contact with genitals.

The grim statistics were provided in a PSNI Freedom of Information (Fol) response to digital publisher, 'The Detail', which has allowed us to reproduce the figures here.

In a separate Fol, the PSNI told the BBC that in 2017/18, that assaults overall – that's with and without injury – stood at 2,664. This is an increase of 152 on the previous year.

Assaults with injury totalled 618, down 12 on the year, and the lowest they have been in twenty years.

The Chair of the PFNI, Mark Lindsay, said: "This is an appalling and unacceptable catalogue of assaults on our men and women. They represent an indictment on society and show a dreadful lack of respect for officers who are working on behalf of the entire community.

"Because of the severity of their injuries, some of the officers listed in these figures have had to go off work for lengthy periods.

*"We are not society's punch bag and deserve better."*

Many are left scarred, both physically and mentally, as a result.

"Even though the injury figure of 618 is lower than the previous nineteen years, it is still far too high and simply has to be addressed.

"I know that many of our officers who sustain more minor injuries on duty don't bother to report them, and that distorts the official figures, but I would appeal to them to have all their injuries recorded.

"The PPS and the Courts have a vital role to play in addressing this problem. Our officers are not fair game for assault on our streets simply because they are patrolling in uniform.

"We need to get to a position where the threshold for prosecution is lowered; an assault, no matter how minor, should not be tolerated or dismissed by the people who decide whether or not to proceed with proceedings.

"In the Courts, too, we need to see a more robust approach being taken. The sentencing regime ought to more adequately reflect the seriousness of the attack and send a clear message to would-be thugs that they will pay a heavy price for targeting our officers.

*"We are not society's punch bag and deserve better."*

## Federation extends best wishes to Chief Constable

The Police Federation for Northern Ireland has extended warm wishes to the PSNI Chief Constable George Hamilton on the announcement of his decision to retire at the end of June.

Chairman of the Police Federation for NI, Mark Lindsay, said: "Mr Hamilton has been Chief Constable at a time when budgets have been under pressure and there has been an unprecedented focus on legacy matters. His stewardship has been widely recognised and I'd like to wish Mr Hamilton well for the future.

"There are several serious challenges in the immediate future such as what happens around Brexit at the end of March and the continuing 'severe' threat that is posed by dissident republicans. I know in the time remaining the Chief Constable will continue to give the direction and leadership that is needed."

In a statement, Mr Hamilton said: "I am privileged and humbled to have led the dedicated officers and staff of the PSNI and to have worked in partnership with so many people committed to public service in Northern Ireland and beyond.

"Our society today is a much more peaceful and progressive society than it was when I joined policing over 33 years ago. The PSNI has been part of that transformation, as it has focussed on delivering Policing with the Community at the same time as modernising its service delivery."

