



policebeat

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July 2020

The News Magazine of The Police Federation for Northern Ireland

Policing 2020 - officers deal with challenges of Covid-19 pandemic



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EDITORIAL

Dealing with the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned everything on its head. Normal, everyday routines have been set aside. Society was forced to hit the 'pause' button as it came to terms with a deadly virus and new lockdown restrictions.

Policing isn't immune from the 'new normal'. Crime, albeit at a reduced rate, remains a problem with fraudsters preying on the vulnerable. Shootings, attacks on property and drug seizures sit alongside the more mundane tasks carried out by the police.

As our front cover illustrates, we have become used to seeing some officers in full PPE kit to protect themselves, and others, from contracting this lethal disease. Amazingly, some people objecting to the presence of the police, threatened them with the virus by coughing and spitting at them. This is intolerable and unacceptable behaviour.

Thankfully, fewer than expected numbers of officers have fallen victim to Coronavirus. Up to the beginning of June, there was a total of sixteen confirmed Covid-19 cases and three officers were still off work as they continued their recovery. Obviously, this was a worrying time for all of them, and their families, and we extend every best wishes to them.

Like offices all over the country, the Police Federation for Northern Ireland has scaled back its activity at its Garnerville headquarters. A 'skeleton' staff, observing social distancing, maintain a front-of-house service for members. Other staff work from home and a rota system is in place for full-time officials.

These are trying times for all of us. We have had to come to terms with shop and business closures; school closures; no flights; lockdown restrictions; self-isolation; queueing; pub and restaurant shutdown and home deliveries. A prolonged and



most welcome period of good weather, delivering record-breaking sunshine and temperatures, brought some relief.

Throughout this unprecedented period, the Federation participated in PSNI Gold Command meetings which dealt with reactive and necessary measures and, of course, the range of issues associated with sourcing and equipping officers with the most appropriate PPE available. We believe that on the vast majority of issues around Covid19 that the PSNI have set the standard for other UK police forces and our reps have played their part in ensuring officers voices have been heard across a wide spectrum of issues.

Moving away from Covid, pay, pensions and legacy are three of the main issues on the agenda. All three have involved considerable work since the lockdown and the expectation is that they will continue to be a large part of the workload well into the summer.

On pay, we have submitted an evidence-based report which supports the case for a 5% increase. Given the enormous strain on national resources, and early worrying utterances of a Public Sector pay 'freeze', optimism of a successful outcome is in short supply.

Pensions, and the changes that have been imposed, are still contentious issues. This Federation is embarking on a legal claim on behalf of officers moved to less favourable pension schemes. Officers who are subscribers to the PFNI Voluntary Fund are eligible to join the claim. Potentially, there are thousands of eligible claimants. The case is based on injury to feelings over being moved from pre-2015 pension schemes to a new less favourable 2015 Police Pension Scheme.

The past is never too far from the here and now. Twenty-two years after the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, legacy remains unresolved. The Government has brought forward revised proposals to deal with unfinished business in place of what were wholly unacceptable measures advocated in the Stormont House Agreement (SHA) and we are fully involved in the consultation process as these proposals are developed.

Ahead of the expected publication of a parliamentary Bill to give legislative effect, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) has embarked on a second enquiry. The Federation has made a Submission which it believes is a sensible, fair, realistic and balanced way of closing a torrid chapter in our history.

PFNI 'heartened' by new legacy proposals but wants detail

The PFNI says it is heartened by new legacy measures set out by the Secretary of State which replace "deeply flawed" proposals in the Stormont House Agreement.

In a new Submission to the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC), the staff association hoped that draft legislation, when it is eventually brought forward, will be "more equitable" and realistic than earlier proposals.

The Submission said: "We have been heartened by the refreshing approach taken by the current Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis MP with indications that the Government will move away from the deeply flawed proposals contained in the draft Stormont House Agreement, to a process which the PSNI hopes will be more equitable and which seeks to put families first and obtain closure for them as opposed to the tit-for-tat political narrative which has so far failed to progress the legacy issue."

The NIAC asked for views on seven specific points. The first was whether the proposed approach would meet the needs of victims, survivors and their families.

The PFNI responded: "The definition (of a victim) should not include terrorists or those who were killed or injured as a result of their own illegal actions....

"....Our experience of legacy has left us fearful that more opportunities to rewrite history, at the expense of the police family, will be created and eagerly seized upon."

"....There is an obligation on the Government to ensure that the police family do not feel abandoned by the State by ensuring that their sacrifices and treatment are not ignored."

On the proposal of establishing a new legacy body, the PFNI stated: "There is no logical reason why investigations and recovery of information could not be dealt with by the PSNI," on the basis that the Police Service was adequately funded to do so.

It reminded MPs that the PSNI was supported by all five main political parties here and said that that should demonstrate "confidence in the PSNI to investigate historical matters effectively." Any suggestion there would be bias in investigations was offensive and inaccurate.

The PFNI said historic cases could be investigated under the command of a Deputy Chief Constable with sole responsibility for legacy and "an effective firewall" to keep the work separate from mainstream policing.

The Submission stated that it was a matter of grave concern that a separate body would have no provision for oversight.

Asked about the differences between the SHA and new proposals, the PFNI commented: "We believe new proposals.... have the potential to be more realistic in terms of a practical outcome" although it noted the lack of any detail.

It went on to welcome that there was now no mention of Non-Criminal Police Misconduct and sought clarification that such a "biased and unfair" provision would not appear in any future Government plans.

Asked if the proposals would promote reconciliation, the PFNI offered this view: "Throughout the history of policing of the past fifty years, the leaders of both the RUC GC and the PSNI openly and privately encouraged dialogue and understanding. They recognised the need to break the stalemate and publicly recognised the fact that policing, on its own, could not cure all society's ills."

As to the creation of a single organisation to tell the history of the 'Troubles', the PFNI once again expressed concerns around an Oral History Archive and Independent Commission on Information Retrieval.

"We do not feel that there is a legislative requirement for a body which specifically deals with oral history," said the PFNI.

The worry was the creation of institutions "which will focus on story-telling and reinforce a biased narrative which will be predominantly and disproportionately critical of the State."

Asked about the reinvestigation of cases, the PFNI restated its position. Any prosecutions or investigations should be based on criminal justice principles where there was a realistic prospect of a prosecution as a result of new compelling evidence. Cases which failed to meet this threshold would be closed and no further investigations or prosecutions would be possible.

It highlighted risks in attempt to reach the truth through current arrangements for coronial inquests. It reminded MPs that the Inquest hearing was inquisitorial and not an adversarial forum.

The Federation repeated its demand for a funding stream to be made available to serving and retired to ensure they are financially capable of mounting a proper defence should the need arise, whilst "those making often spurious and vexatious claims have the legal aid system at their disposal."