**Address by Liam Kelly, Chair, Police Federation for Northern Ireland (PFNI)**

**Check against delivery**

Chief Constable, PSNI Senior Executive Team colleagues, honoured guests from the Department of Justice, Northern Ireland Policing Board, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, fraternal guests, PSNI colleagues and last, but not least, Federation delegates….

You are all very welcome to this, the 51st annual conference of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland.

I don’t propose to sugar-coat the year we’ve just had.

I will tell it as it was – and it was grim.

Unfortunately, the year ahead looks no better. In fact, it may even get worse for a Service that’s already under deplorable pressure.

My first duty today is to acknowledge a colleague who is facing a long road to recovery.

DCI John Caldwell was targeted, ambushed and shot by terrorists for no other reason than he is a meticulous, effective and dedicated police officer.

Today, we say loud and clear to John, his wife Jacqueline and son Jack that the rank-and-file stand united in total support with you….

….that your brother and sister officer colleagues will not let up until those who planned and carried out this cowardly ambush on you in Omagh in February are placed before the courts and sent to prison where they belong.

John Caldwell is one of our own.

What happened was harrowing and heart-breaking for the family.

It was also acutely felt by John’s detective colleagues in Crime Operations Branch, Number 5 Federation Board, and indeed, colleagues throughout the Service.

There is no place in Northern Ireland for the thugs and gangsters who seek to harm officers and turn communities into lawless fiefdoms.

The police are the bulwark to prevent them from turning our estates, towns and cities upside down through their criminality…

Their drug-dealing….

Extortion….

Racketeering….

Money-lending….

And blatant and callous disregard for human life.

We have the full support of the right-thinking members of our community in our honourable mission to rid Northern Ireland of the poison of these organised crime gangs and paramilitary bullies.

**Let me turn to RESOURCES**

The one vital piece of the jigsaw we don’t have in place is the resource that is desperately needed to continue the job at the level that is required.

I’m talking about a shrinking PSNI.

I’m taking about draconian budget cuts.

I’m talking about a recruitment ‘freeze’.

At the rate we’re witnessing right now, coupled with an inadequate budget, we could feasibly deplete to around 6,000 officers by the end of the financial year.

That will be a new low, bearing in mind we are already at the lowest number of police officers since the PSNI came into existence in 2001.

It is unsustainable. Dangerous. Irresponsible.

In the absence of a devolved administration, we are forced to look to the UK Government to step in to fix the problem.

Not talk about it, procrastinate or dither, but actually FIX what has to be fixed.

Bluntly, that means significant investment and setting a recruitment target over the next eighteen months of **at least 1000** officers.

Ministers must ensure they lift the devastating stranglehold on financial resources.

Deficits certainly do not deliver good policing.

Give our police service what it needs without it having to worry about a dire financial situation.

Let’s not be deflected from doing what we are more than capable of doing by scrimping and short-changing on budgets.

Delaying the replacement of vehicles no longer fit for purpose or equipment that is past its sell-by date will save little but cause angst to our officers.

Let’s not forget - this is a people business. Our colleagues continue to give their all, but there’s a limit.

They are being asked to plug gaps left by too few officers on the ground.

They are unable to take leave when they need to and want to.

Rest days are cancelled and personal and family time is adversely impacted.

Working the hours that are required is already taking a heavy toll on officers both physically and psychologically.

Add to that, there’s the increased risk of injury when fatigue takes hold.

The job we do is dangerous. The upward trajectory of assaults causing injury continues – the latest figures show an **increase of 7.6%** **this year to 971** – that’s approaching 1000 officers being kicked, punched, knocked unconscious, spat at and left with injuries that include broken bones, lacerations, and bruising.

So what can be done? Externally we need our courts to start to impose effective deterrent sentences on those who attack and assault our officers. This federation has called for the introduction of bespoke legislation to enable our judges and magistrates to send a strong message that assaulting a police officer is unacceptable and certainly not ‘part of the job’.

This Federation has been lobbying for the wider roll out of Conducted Energy Device’s (such as the Taser) and the provision of enhanced training. These matters will be discussed further by conference later this afternoon.

Assessment of the data shows that Local Policing and Neighbourhood Policing Team officers are at a substantially higher risk of assault that anyone else within the organisation. In our view this is a foreseeable risk and the appropriate control measure***must*** be made permanently available as part of a safe system of work.

It seems perverse that a less lethal weapon system is being denied to the very officers who need it most. It is incumbent on the PSNI to provide these officers with a variety of tactical options when dealing with incidents where there is a real expectation for conflict and potential serious injury.

The Human Rights Advisor to the Policing Board expressed concerns that officers will resort to using these devices more. Well, I say maybe the perpetrators need to be effectively deterred and stopped from attacking our officers with weapons, knives, and swords. Though it doesn’t always feel like it, police officers have human rights too! We need our oversight bodies to support and advocate for us to have access to the proper equipment to keep both our officers and the public safe.

The PSNI’s personal safety training also requires to be enhanced and targeted where it is most needed. It is expected that this conference will be formally requesting that Police Officers in Local Policing and Neighbourhood Policing Teams must have the ability to attend at least two days PSP training each year – one day to refresh skills and one day of scenario-based training.

**It is my view that better legislation, wider access to taser and enhanced training would greatly assist in reducing the deplorable number of assaults and attacks on our officers.**

Our officers are also badly let down by protracted disciplinary investigations. This Federation has previously requested and will continue to lobby that statutory time limits be put in place on both PONI and PSD so to ensure that matters can be investigated and concluded more quickly. The PPS also need to be held to account on the time being taken to deliberate on criminal recommendations. It is simply unreasonable and unconscionable for cases to drag on for months and years – particularly when the final outcome reached is not career threatening.

For too long the vast majority of officers under investigation from both PONI and PSD are left with the spectre of potential misconduct dominating their personal and working lives for indeterminate periods of time.

Their work, careers and personal lives suffer, with professional development being hindered and specialist selection and promotion opportunities delayed. Confidence and reputation are tarnished and the impact of their mental health damages relationships both inside and outside the workplace. That is not good for them, the Service or the public. Putting time limits in place will focus the investigators and set clear timeframes for bringing matters to speedier conclusion.

To assist with this, our Sergeants and Inspecting ranks have also got to be trained, empowered and supported in expeditiously dealing with quality of service and minor misconduct matters at local level. Words of advice, a rebuke or warning could effectively and efficiently conclude the vast majority of issues enabling both the officer, the complainant and service to move on from a low-level infringement of the Code of Ethics.

PFNI and the Police Ombudsman’s office have had a few high-profile public disagreements over the years. It would be remiss of me not to point out that PFNI have invited the Police Ombudsman herself to attend our conference and, for the second year in a row, she has regrettably failed to attend.

Our PFNI officials continue to regularly meet and liaise with both PSD and other senior management within the Ombudsman’s Office so we continue to have a formal mechanism to raise issues and concerns on behalf of our members.

From the Ombudsman’s latest statistics it would appear to most observers that the overall number of complaints has risen. However, closer inspection shows some 59% of these complaints were not progressed to ***any*** form of investigation at all. Of the 41% remaining only one in ten [11%] of that figure resulted in any finding where a recommendation was made to PSNI relating to performance or discipline proceedings. What the final outcome of those recommendations is not clear at this point.

What that ultimately equates to is around 95% of all complaints received by PONI do not result in any recommendation. From their own figures some 9 out of every 10 officers who were subject to an investigation were not found to have committed any disciplinary or performance offences. Perhaps PONI need to look at the internal decision making when launching investigations so they can reduce this wasted effort and focus instead on the cases where tangible evidence of wrongdoing actually exists.

You would think our officers would be recognised and properly rewarded for the work they do. Not a bit of it!

Faced by a swingeing cost-of-living pressures, delayed pay awards and inflation running at 10.4%, our men and women were left in a painful financial trap.

It’s worth remembering that police pay at the lower end of the pay scale has declined in real terms by 28.7% over the last decade. Last year’s pay increase of £1,900 across-the-board failed to come close to correcting the imbalance.

In the current round, along with colleagues in England and Wales, we’ve made the case for a meaningful increase of 17% to start to effectively address police pay erosion. I fear the PSNI deficit budget for this year will make any pay award very challenging. Should the pay parity link be broken we could end up being the worst paid police officers across the entire United Kingdom which would have a devastating impact on morale, recruitment and retention.

Government know full well that we have no industrial rights to press our case for a fair, meaningful and realistic pay award. They know they have us over a barrel!

For as long as this iniquitous situation remains, police pay will remain a play-thing….a one-sided business where the dealer always holds all the aces.

We are being disadvantaged and treated disdainfully.

The police service is in rapid decline. Valiant efforts by our members – the rank and file – will no longer be enough.

We are holding back a surge in all forms of criminality and terrorism, but we’re close to having the ramparts breached.

There will be a heavy price to pay for having too few officers on our streets and not enough in the budget to ensure we can keep the community safe.

The PSNI has been restrained, patient – far too patient, in my view – but when the Chief Operating Officer told the Policing Board that she didn’t think it was doable to balance the budget, it was clear that PSNI had effectively reached the end of the road.

Our frustration is now their frustration.

A shortfall of some £120 million will cripple the Service. Losing 6 to 700 officers by the end of the financial year is akin to being expected to run a marathon with a broken leg.

It simply cannot be done.

And anyone who says that it can is deluding themselves.

Living in cloud cuckoo-land.

In November 2022 I wrote to the Secretary of State requesting an urgent meeting about the pay award and budget issues following our caretaker Justice Minister having to relinquish her post. The reply I received left a lot to be desired but I got no meeting offer. Last month, I again wrote to the Secretary of State asking for another urgent meeting to address the impact of a further reduced budget for 2023-2024.

Initially I received a holding reply. As I did to the invitation I sent him to join us today.

Then came a ‘thanks, but no thanks’ letter in reply to both.

It’s a real pity he’s not here today. It’s a pity because I would have liked for him to hear at first hand our disappointments, frustrations and anger.

His absence didn’t come as a surprise.

His failure to meet, or attend our Conference, is testament to an out-of-touch UK Government and Secretary of State who seemingly couldn’t care less…..

…..or care about our policing service

…..or care about you and your colleagues who do what you do every day of every week.

When push comes to shove, it seems obvious that if the policing crisis doesn’t impact on Conservative seats, it doesn’t make it on to the political Richter scale.

Colleagues, to be clear I’m not personally singling out the Secretary of State and blaming him for all our ills.

Even when we had an Executive, it too failed to deliver on policing.

PSNI sought a three-year budget to give stability and allow for forward planning.

It didn’t happen.

We were promised an increase to 7,500 officers under New Decade, New Approach.

It never materialised and now we could quickly end up with 6,000 officers.

The track record of local Ministers is every bit as disappointing as their Westminster counterparts.

Policing is **way** down the priority scale. Arguing for what is necessary. Having our backs. Implementing the New Decade, New Approach commitments by going to His Majesty’s Treasury to ensure that our police service was effectively funded and uplifted along with our colleagues in England and Wales.

Stormont isn’t working. There has to be a better way of sorting out difficulties over the Windsor Framework and the Northern Ireland Protocol and, before all that, other crises such as RHI, without throwing the toys out of the pram.

Selective withdrawals from the Executive can no longer be tolerated. If that means going back to the drawing board to remove vetoes, then so be it.

Northern Ireland cannot afford to be held back by this crude device.

If there is a problem, sort it out across the table. Walking away isn’t the solution.

We want real and effective Government.

A realistic and effective three-year budget for the Service.

An end to stop-start local government that results in our inability to maximise, locally, nationally and internationally, the promises, future and hope envisioned from the 1998 Agreement.

In this, the 25th anniversary of the Agreement, prove to all of us that it was worth it by getting back to work and building the new Northern Ireland.

There’s nothing further to be gained by continuing your squabbling.

Instead, apply yourselves to providing solid, good government for all. Where your constituents and our society come first. And work up innovative ways to maximise the opportunities that are there.

Letting the cobwebs take hold in Parliament Buildings and in all Government Departments will merely serve to further alienate and make people feel despondent.

Colleagues, you don’t need me to tell you that the reality and challenges we confront right now are the greatest in a generation.

We are being assailed on all fronts.

As an organisation, this Federation will adapt, react and not be found wanting.

We will not be deficient when it comes to making our case and fighting our corner.

As some have already discovered we certainly will not quietly acquiesce!

Our Federation will continue to work with and hold the PSNI and others to account and expose issues and seek solutions when matters need to be addressed and fixed.

And we will stand four-square with others when it comes to campaigning and arguing for the proper tools and resources to do the job.

Policing, in general, and our colleagues, in particular, demand no less.

Right now, we face an uphill battle. We’ve been there before.

But we are resilient and up to the challenge and I’m convinced that in the end, we will eventually prevail for the good of policing and our society.

Thank you.