# **EMBARGO: 11:55am Wednesday 21May**

**Check against delivery**

# **Address by Liam Kelly, Chair, Police Federation for Northern Ireland**

Minister, Chief Constable, guests, and colleagues.

You’re all most welcome to the 53rd annual conference of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland.

This is the first time we have held our conference in Fermanagh, and the welcome, like the weather, has been warm and deeply appreciated.

What I have to say to you today contains a mix of good news and bad news. We find ourselves for the umpteenth year, staring austerity in the face. At the same time, we celebrate and acknowledge the actions of our men and women who work selflessly in the most testing of circumstances.

Let’s start with the good news.

In March, we held the third PFNI Bravery and Excellence Awards.

An indication of its growing popularity was seen in the fact that this year, 180 people attended the event. We were honoured and humbled to mark the courageous and extraordinary deeds of 28 colleagues from all five Board areas. If you wanted to see and hear what professionalism and commitment looked like, it was there in abundance.

Better still, it was low cost to this Federation to run, given the most generous support we received from our sponsors and business partners. They are collectively owed a deep debt of thanks for making the evening the success that it was.

Fast forward to today.

These same colleagues, indeed all 6, 224 officers and 150 part time colleagues, are left scratching their heads, wondering why they’re at the back of the queue …..for everything.

The Service has been elbowed out of the mix when it comes to receiving a realistic budget. And let’s not forget, if the Service doesn’t get what it needs, it’s **our** men and women who shoulder the full weight of doing more with less.

They’re demonised for sick leave rates when a big part of their absence is down to a combination of burn out with being overworked, being assaulted and attacked, and not receiving timely and effective medical support for both physiological and psychological injuries.

And they’re in the eye of the storm when response times to calls for help are delayed because we simply don’t have enough officers to do everything.

All the time, we are left to pick up the pieces when the stretched Health Service is unable to cope with vulnerable individuals.

We’ve become the ambulance service when there are no ambulances available.

We’re the ‘go to’ service when the vulnerable see no future for themselves or threaten others.

And, as we saw in Dungannon recently, our officers regularly battle through dense smoke to save lives in house fires.

If that wasn’t bad enough, we have a Police Ombudsman who was told by a High Court Judge that certain statements issued by her Office may require ‘significant health warnings.’

At an earlier hearing, the Judge ruled she had exceeded her legal powers. Her role was to investigate rather than adjudicate.

This was a grave embarrassment for the Ombudsman and one that undermines that Office’s ability to investigate and report appropriately, objectively and fairly.

Right now, the Ombudsman is in ‘negative equity’ and appealing the judgement. If this appeal fails we’re not quite sure how she can re-build both her reputation and officer trust in her and her office.

NUMBERS

This time last year we had 6,396 officers. We now sit 172 officers fewer at the frighteningly low number of 6,224 – a historic low that brings with it big questions:

* About how we deliver services
* Who fights our corner
* Why no one is listening
* And how bleak will the future be if this downward trend isn’t halted.

We know the Budget is finite.

That said, we’re not seeking preferential treatment at all, just what’s fair and necessary.

We have an inadequate one-year Budget that is the epitome of crisis management. The Service received £910 million leaving PSNI with an initial opening deficit of some £14 million.

The financial woes were exacerbated when the UK Government announced a 1% increase in National Insurance. In the June monitoring round, it will provide £3 million to offset the financial pain the measure would inflict, but that still leaves the Service facing an additional budget shortfall of another £7million. So, we now have a £21 million deficit.

This is yet further evidence of the scandalous disregard shown by both this devolved administration and the main ‘paymaster’ in London.

This isn’t loose change…..

It can’t be found down the back of the settee.

No, what it will mean is further erosion of financial capability and that will have an inevitable adverse impact on our resources and services.

Bad enough that Stormont ignores the parlous state of police finances, but it’s ten times worse when the UK Government fails to recognise the gravity of the crisis facing us in Northern Ireland.

The PSNI has more than evidenced that they need some £200 million more over the next few years to enable the Chief Constable’s Recovery Plan to reach fruition and come close to re-building the PSNI to an operational figure of 7,000.

**I take no pleasure in telling you today that the Recovery Plan has been effectively shredded.**

**It will not be happening unless there’s a last-minute re-think by the Executive.**

**The Department of Finance has recently informed the Chief Constable that it cannot find the money to support the Plan.**

**To say there is disappointment would be a gross under-statement. It would be more accurate to say this Federation is appalled by this decision. It is a slap in the face to our officers.**

**It’s also the abandonment by an elected administration whose solemn duty and responsibility is to safeguard the entire population and give us the tools to combat crime and terrorism, stamp out a multi-million-pound drugs trade, deal with the people traffickers, investigate general crime and make our roads safer.**

**The Recovery Plan was such a vital component in steadying the ship. But let’s remember, it was just the beginning of a strategy to get us to the first few rungs of the ladder.**

**According to research conducted by Leapwise we actually need up to 8,500 officers to reflect our rising population. Right now, we’re 2,276 shy of that and nobody in Government seems to care or give a damn.**

I have to say, the Chief Constable has not been found wanting – he has done all in his power to convince, persuade, cajole and even embarrass our administration to provide him with the finances he requires to do the job. I know this latest setback won’t dampen his mettle.

This Federation has been, and will continue to be, alongside Mr Boutcher as we collaboratively fight our corner for sustainable funding.

Recruitment requires a hefty financial commitment. And it’s here I have grave concerns.

The stark truth is that without the finances in place we will fail to reach the 7,000 officer mark by 2028. In fact, in the absence of proper funding, we’ll be fortunate to see small growth to about 6,700.

At the end of the financial year in March we lost a total of 427 officers – this included 199 left due to ill health, 142 retired and we saw 65 leave the service voluntarily for alternative employment.

Years of hard-won and invaluable policing experience walked out the door. Men and women with ten, twenty years at the ‘coalface’ opted for often less stressful and more rewarding careers.

Recruitment re-started but even operating at maximum capacity – and that is not a racing certainty due to being in deficit - we’ll be hard-pressed to process 450 student officers this financial year. Last year, we could only bring in 327, so our baseline actually reduced again.

This is ruinous for policing.

Demoralising for our officers.

Dangerous when too few can respond to emergencies.

Downright irresponsible when it comes to protecting the public we serve and countering terrorists and organised crime gangs.

From this podium today, I renew my appeal to our Executive to change course and recognise the desperate need for urgent positive intervention before there is any further shocking damage done to our police service.

There is something odd about the way our police service is being treated in the United Kingdom.

In England and Wales, the Prime Minister recently announced an investment of £200 million and the creation of 3,000 posts, 2,500 of them in neighbourhood policing. He understands and appreciates the value of a recognisable, go-to officer in communities.

Here, Neighbourhood Policing is in reverse. We’re down 400 officers which is precisely the same number we could create if we didn’t have to meet the bill for legacy.

Here, our administration also recognises the value of neighbourhood policing. Oh, yes, that’s important. We hear from politicians that police officers must be visible and be readily available in our estates and rural communities.

However, in Northern Ireland, there is neither a willingness nor a determination to invest in policing the same way the Government does in England and Wales.

We are the poor relation.

We’re expected to be everywhere, do everything, avert, divert and problem solve with an operational deployable total of around 4,500 officers.

Minister, it cannot be done.

We are at breaking point.

We need a lifeline.

That means you, Minister, and your Executive colleagues, need to re-establish policing as meaningful priority. You said at our Bravery Awards that you felt policing was ‘turning a corner’. Since then, we’ve seen no tangible evidence of that.

The only corner we see is one that will force us further down the road of demoralisation and deterioration in service delivery.

Now, I could be wrong. But if we are about to turn a corner, maybe you, Minister, will share with us today how you see that revival taking shape.

Our men and women are brave, committed and professional.

They vehemently don’t want to let the public and their colleagues down.

Which is why so many sustain injuries at work. Over-stretched, pulled from pillar to post, many have reached burn-out.

Far too many are walking away from their careers. They are demoralised.

Disconsolate.

Depressed. They survey the political landscape and believe the Executive doesn’t care. Isn’t interested!

The lifeline I want to see has to be expressed in a realistic financial settlement for the PSNI.

Not just a decent, practical and badly-needed one-year bailout but a three-year budget settlement that allows the organisation to regroup, restore, plan and recover. To date our Executive has categorically failed us.

The long legacy of our past also continues to be a drain on the Service.

We recently heard how thirty legacy cases came in at a staggering cost of £25 million. Of that total, claimants only received £7.5 million. The rest - £17.5 million – swelled the Profit and Loss accounts and Balance Sheets of law firms.

The Chief Constable told the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee that he’d prefer to use what he has to earmark yearly in his budget for legacy – some £20 million – on the creation of 400 badly needed officer posts.

We agree.

We are told there are a further 1,100 legacy cases in the pipeline and a reappraisal of how this is to be done and paid for is urgently required.

It is totally unacceptable and without justification that legacy costs should be borne by the PSNI.

I would urge the UK Government to look again at this issue and to recognise that it is patently unfair to expect our Police Service to pick up the tab.

The UK government is shirking its responsibilities by conveniently passing the buck to our Service.

It must be confronted once and for all in order to give the Service some relief from a crippling financial millstone. For the avoidance of doubt, that doesn’t involve recouping the £20 million in the legacy budget. No, there has to be a guarantee that that money will be retained and spent on recruitment and reallocated for other uses.

Assaults have continued unabated. Our colleagues are being singled out in towns, villages and cities across the country.

Mindless thugs think it’s ok to have a go. To take a swing at someone in uniform. To break a nose….a hand….an arm.

Headbutt.

Punch.

Kick.

Spit at.

Ram a police vehicle.

Hospitalise.

Well, I’ve got news for them – it is far from ok. It is wholly unacceptable to lash out at an officer doing their duty.

In the last year, there have been a total of 2,810 recorded assaults on our colleagues. 881 of these have involved injury – a 9.9% decrease from 2023/2024. This is the first yearly reduction we have seen since 2018/2019, which we welcome.

However, over the last three years, there has been a staggering total of 9,415 assaults. 2,826 of these have involved injury.

Many officers recover, dust themselves down and return to duty. Some are left so badly traumatised that they suffer flash backs and a range of debilitating psychological conditions.

The effects on the individual officer and their family cannot be over-stated. It imposes heavy pressures on home life with lengthy recovery times and damage to confidence and self-belief.

A measure of just how bad it is can be seen in one statistic. Last year, there were 199 Ill Health Retirements. Physical injury or psychological trauma do great harm to the officer, the Service and, ultimately, the community.

Not unexpectedly, morale takes a nose-dive.

We need deterrents. Meaningful deterrents.

We have to see a new, no-nonsense approach being taken by our Courts.

Attempts by defence lawyers to explain away violent actions as something out of the ordinary, brought on by excessive consumption of alcohol or bad company are transparent and weak and deserve to be rejected by the Magistrate or the Judge.

Our officers have helped fill our prisons. I make no apology for saying that the Courts should put more attackers away for striking out at our officers.

We must see strong minimum sentences and longer terms of imprisonment for more serious attacks on our men and women.

The suspended sentence, measly fines and strong words of condemnation aren’t enough to deal with a growing problem. Stiffer penalties produce results.

I would like you, Minister, to take a look at what happens in Malta.

Between 2017 and 2024, following the introduction of heavier fines and longer custodial sentences, violent offending against police officers in Malta decreased by 67 per cent.

However, following a sickening attack on two officers last year, our Maltese police federation colleagues succeeded in getting their Government to introduce legal amendments to strengthen sentencing laws.

The Judiciary rightly retain the discretion to decide on punishment. However, they are now legally precluded from handing out suspended sentences or conditional discharges to offenders, and fines and custodial penalties were also enhanced.

Crimes against police involving insults, threats or minor injuries carry a **minimum** fine of 2,000 Euros and **maximum** fine of 7,500 Euros.

Where the assault or resistance with violence involves one of two persons the **minimum** prison sentence is one year, with a maximum penalty of four years. Associated fines range from a minimum of 6,000 Euros to a maximum of 15,000 Euros.

Where the attack involves three or more persons it’s a **minimum** of 18 months imprisonment up to a **maximum** of 6 years. The associated fines rise again from a minimum of 7,500 Euros to a maximum of 22,500 Euros.

Where a weapon is used against an officer during the attack, it’s a minimum period of imprisonment of 18 months with a maximum of 6 years. The minimum fine rises to 12,000 Euros up to a maximum of 30,000 Euros. If the offending includes a public violence element, the minimum prison sentence is 3 years with a maximum penalty of 7 years.

Our Maltese colleagues expect the assault and attack figures on their officers to be at an all time low this year.

Public disorder has all but disappeared. It’s clear to see why – the Maltese government are on record that any attack on police is totally unacceptable and these words are backed by affirmative action by the ongoing strengthening of their laws, sentencing guidelines and fines to eradicate this problem.

**Minister, it is deterrent sentencing and fines like these that we require in Northern Ireland. In fact, they long overdue. A clear, strong, no-nonsense message has to go out, that the days of a verbal rebuke, a suspended sentence or a derisory fine are over.**

**The culprits need to face serious jail time, and this Federation would like to see our growing prison population swelled even further by putting violent offenders out of circulation for a meaningful and wholly appropriate period of time.**

We’re not just talking about assaults, but actually doing something about them.

Next month, this Federation will launch a major awareness campaign on assaults.

During the campaign, you will hear from officer victims on the heavy toll they have to pay and the negative impacts on families, colleagues and the police service they provide.

We want the public to understand and appreciate that an attack on our officers has a knock on consequence for them. We want the public to join us is condemning such behaviour and encouraging our legislators to introduce more stringent penalties against offenders.

Colleagues, we are not in a good place. If we were a commercial business, we’d be asking our professional advisers to arrange a soft landing.

The Service continues to innovate – such as the new Virtual Officer Attendance initiative that will offer victims of crime a video-call service alternative to a telephone call or a visit by officers to their home. It should free up officers to be re-deployed elsewhere.

We’re not afraid of change – in fact, we embrace it when it makes sense.

Like much of our vehicle fleet, an eclectic mix of the new and the old, we’re under all manner of pressures, as never before.

We’re badly served by our political masters who have been deaf and indifferent to our pleas for sufficient funding.

But, colleagues, we will continue to lobby and make what I believe is an irrefutable case to properly resource us.

We cannot allow ourselves or this Service to be forced into a straight-jacket where we are restricted, because of deficiencies; denied the tools to do the job and pushed down the pecking order of Public Sector organisations, where expressions of support for policing ring hollow and empty without affirmative action.

This federation will never give up striving for what is best for policing and we will never allow ourselves to be left feeling we’re not a priority! We are the glue that holds our society together and the sooner that fact is properly recognised by our politicians the better!

Thank you!