

FALKIRK COUNCIL

MINUTE of MEETING of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, FALKIRK on THURSDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 2014 at 2.30 PM.

COUNCILLORS: Allyson Black
Baillie William Buchanan
Charles MacDonald
John McLuckie
Baillie Joan Paterson
Provost Pat Reid (Convener)

OFFICERS: Fiona Campbell, Head of Policy, Technology and Improvement
Jack Frawley, Committee Services Officer
Colin Moodie, Depute Chief Governance Officer
Brian Pirie, Democratic Services Manager

ALSO ATTENDING: Moi Ali, Scottish Police Authority
Joe Andrews, Group Manager, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
David Flynn, Chief Superintendent, Police Scotland
Gary Laing, Local Senior Officer, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Amy McGregor, Performance Support, Police Scotland
Mandy Paterson, Chief Inspector, Police Scotland

S23. APOLOGIES

No apologies were intimated.

S24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

S25. MINUTE

Decision

The minute of the meeting of the scrutiny committee held on 14 August 2014 was approved.

S26. ORDER OF BUSINESS

In terms of Standing Order 14.2(i), Provost Reid varied the order of business from that detailed on the agenda for the meeting. The following items have been recorded in the order that they were taken.

S27. SCOTTISH FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE – FALKIRK & WEST LOTHIAN COMMAND PERFORMANCE REPORT

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services presenting the quarter 1 local performance report by the Local Senior Officer, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

In terms of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, the Council, through this committee, monitors the performance of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in the council area.

The committee asked whether cooking fires affected particular age groups, the Local Senior Officer advised they affect people of all ages.

Members acknowledged and welcomed the reduction in the number of deliberate fires and asked what caused the decrease. The Local Senior Officer suggested that one reason was the good work carried out by the Community Planning Partnership in tackling anti-social behaviour. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service work closely with partners to reduce deliberate fire setting and were carrying out extra patrols. The committee recognised that such work provided public reassurance.

The committee considered the future direction of the service, the Local Senior Officer stated that the service was examining new potential areas of service provision such as providing first response medical care.

Decision

The committee noted the report.

S28. POLICE SCOTLAND – FALKIRK AREA COMMAND PERFORMANCE REPORT

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Neighbourhood Services presenting the local performance report by the Local Commander. The report also provided information previously requested by members on road traffic collisions; armed policing; traffic wardens; and the impact of the Commonwealth Games on local policing.

Local Commanders are required, in terms of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, to report performance of local policing as measured against the Local Policing Plan and to provide information about complaints against the police or other information in regard to policing.

Chief Superintendent Flynn gave a summary of his report and drew members' attention to the new reporting format.

The committee discussed the forthcoming implementation of the digital road tax system and asked how the police service was making the public aware of the change. Chief Superintendent Flynn advised that the promotion and advertisement of the digital road tax system were part of the remit of a national campaign and that member's concerns would be fed back. Further, around the time of the change local advertising would be carried out through social media.

Members asked for clarification about on-going incidents involving lorry delivery drivers at the Scotmid store in Carronshore; Chief Superintendent Flynn stated Police Scotland would continue to monitor these incidents and encouraged people to report issues. Chief Inspector Paterson stated that there would be a focus on this issue and that a reply would be provided directly to members.

Members asked for information on the cause of the rise in violent crime, Chief Inspector Paterson stated that there had been a number of incidents in June in the Denny and Larbert areas. Police Scotland had put extra units in place, carried out appropriate stop and searches and had carried out licensing checks in the Denny area.

The committee asked if there was a link between the media coverage of high profile historic sexual abuse cases and the increased number which had been reported locally. Chief Superintendent Flynn cited a number of factors which had led to increased reporting by victims: improved support offered to victims from Police Scotland; societal change; a professional partnership approach; and the level of media coverage. Following discussion on a public perception that sexual crimes were increasing, Chief Superintendent Flynn stated that the number of physical sexual assaults had not increased. He did however highlight the increased number of indecent offences being committed online.

The committee discussed the increased demand on local officers' workloads during the Commonwealth Games. Chief Inspector Paterson stated that during the Commonwealth Games local policing had remained at the normal level. Further, as the Commonwealth Games and large amounts of annual leave were over it was stated that community policing meet and greets would take place in the Denny and Larbert areas in the near future. Chief Superintendent Flynn stated that he was keen for the community to have an insight into the challenge of policing. Members were advised that there was an open invitation to visit and see the work of the police.

Members discussed the proportion of violent incidents occurring in public and private places and questioned the role of town centre CCTV systems given that approximately half of violent crime takes place indoors. Chief Superintendent Flynn stated that CCTV is a very valuable asset and that its use was focussed on town centres and places where people congregate. It was further stated that the relevancy of camera placement was kept under review.

The committee asked if violent crimes occurring in private residences were reported to the housing department. Chief Inspector Paterson stated that this was the case in some instances but that where incidents involved a vulnerable person a different procedure is followed.

Members asked for information on complaints received by the police. Chief Superintendent Flynn described the complaints handling process; the appeal process as handled by the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner; and stated that the number of complaints upheld is low. However, it was stated that Police Scotland looked to these upheld complaints as opportunities to learn lessons, in particular to evaluate the way in which their service impacts on people.

The committee discussed the local provision of traffic wardens raising concern that there was not sufficient cover in place to enforce parking regulations effectively. Chief Superintendent Flynn advised that resources would be tasked to where they were needed and that information on problem areas should be passed to Russell Steedman, who is the lead officer for the council.

The committee discussed instances where sheds and lock-ups had been tampered with, Chief Inspector Paterson provided members with information on the occurrence of incidents, detection rates and outcomes.

Following the creation of Police Scotland there had been concerns that the local approach to policing could be lost amid national structures. Members considered however that this had not been the case making reference to the recent example of local policing at the Free Colliers march and Bo'ness Fair. Chief Superintendent Flynn advised that following reorganisation the local senior management team were officers who had served the former central Scotland police force which retained local knowledge. Further, police numbers would not be reduced in the local area.

Moi Ali, of the Scottish Police Authority (SPA), gave a presentation providing information on her background and describing the work of the board.

Members discussed the centralisation of back room services such as call centres and expressed concerns over armed policing. Ms Ali stated that it is the job of the SPA to hold Police Scotland to account and in that capacity had identified armed policing and stop and search as areas for scrutiny. Further, Ms Ali stated that the new call centre set up was working well and that she had seen first hand the way dispatchers work to respond quickly to calls. Members were advised that they would be welcome to visit the call centres. Ms Ali stated that centralised call centres were more appropriate for the modern era as mobile technology has led to increased reporting of incidents.

In relation to members' concerns about the closure of police front counters Ms Ali assured the committee that the SPA had asked for evidence that closures would not have a detrimental impact on service and ensured that there would be no closures where there was sufficient footfall. Chief Superintendent Flynn advised the committee that there had been no closures in the Falkirk area.

Further to previous discussion the committee discussed the role of the SPA in regard to the changes to the provision of traffic wardens. Ms Ali conceded that the SPA could have asked questions more thoroughly in advance of the changes but that lessons had been learned.

Members expressed concern about future cuts to police provision in order to meet savings targets, Ms Ali stated that there would need to be cuts such as those to front counters given that the Scottish Government had pledged that there would not be a cut to the number of police officers. Further, Ms Ali stated that voluntary redundancy within backroom staff would take place as the wage bill is a significant cost; this would also remove some of the duplication arising from the merge of the eight former forces into one. Police Scotland had also been advised that they could reinvest cash receipts from the sale of assets. Ms Ali advised that in looking at the future of policing the SPA would evaluate what a police officer was. The SPA would examine which duties must be carried out by police officers and which could be carried out by civilian staff.

Decision

The committee noted the report.

S29. SCRUTINY PANEL – APPOINTMENT OF ELECTED MEMBERS TO OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

The committee considered a report by the Chief Governance Officer which presented the scrutiny panel's recommendations in regard to elected member participation on outside organisations.

The committee discussed the panel's recommendations as set out in the report. Members highlighted the need for appropriate training and the impact of outside appointments on members' workloads.

The Convener suggested that consideration of the report be continued to the next meeting. He advised that the next meeting would not take place on the scheduled date in October and that a date later in the month would be arranged. Members advised that 31st October would be a suitable date. Members then discussed the frequency of scrutiny committee meetings. The committee discussed the benefits of moving to a six week cycle of meetings in order to better fulfil its scrutiny role. The committee agreed to recommend to Council that meetings of the committee take place on a six week cycle.

Decision

The committee agreed to continue consideration of the report to the next meeting to allow the panel to consider the report further.