



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mr Jon Boutcher,
Chief Constable, Police Service
of Northern Ireland

25 April 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Joanne Bunting (Chairperson)
Miss Deirdre Hargey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Sinéad Ennis
Mrs Ciara Ferguson
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Chief Constable Jon Boutcher Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Chief Constable, I apologise for the delay and for keeping you waiting. Our session with the Minister overran. Thank you for your patience. You are welcome to your first time in front of this Justice Committee.

Chief Constable Jon Boutcher (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I caution members that the Committee is not the Policing Board.

I have got you, Alex. Thank you. Chief, lest there be any misunderstanding, I should say that Stewart and Doug will need to leave at some point in the briefing. Do not take offence. It is just that some folks have other places to be.

Chief Constable Boutcher: No worries.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I invite you to make your remarks, after which members will have questions for you.

Chief Constable Boutcher: Thank you very much for inviting me to the Committee. It is good to be here and good to see the Committee up and working. We are in a much better place than we have been in recent times.

Earlier this week, I wrote to a number of key stakeholders, including the Committee, setting out — this is obviously extremely timely at the moment — the financial position of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). I have made a number of remarks publicly about this, but, because this is my first

appearance before the Committee, it is important that I set out that landscape. It is the cause and effect of everything that we can or cannot do.

In 2010, the budget for the PSNI was £903 million. In 2010, the budget for the Health Department was £3.5 billion, and the Education Department's budget was £2.7 billion. The PSNI budget has gone down in real terms — in excess, with inflation, of 30% since that point. I begin to wonder whether there is a correlation with the committee that oversaw the recommendations of the Patten commission possibly providing some level of protection to the PSNI on funding, as it operated for some 10 years after the commission's report in 1999.

Patten, of course, said that the PSNI should have around 7,500 police officers. That was on the basis that Northern Ireland remained peaceful and that the peace process remained in place. It is often missed that that assessment also allowed for 2,500 part-time officers and support, which we do not have now at all. The Patten report calculated that as being the number that should provide the organisation with the resourcing resilience that it needed for some 10 years.

Since that report and since 2010, when our budget was £903 million, we have seen our budget decrease but our demand broaden considerably. When I joined the police, our strapline was always about fighting crime. The front-line officers of the PSNI — the rank and file — join the police, of course, to keep people safe from crime, but so much of our demand now is about safeguarding and public protection. We operate significantly in the space that the health service cannot provide for, particularly with regard to emergency response to people going through mental health crises and chaotic episodes, often through no fault of their own. I do not criticise the health service, because it is equally in an extremely difficult position. The reality of the position is that we have public services that cannot deal with the current demand in Northern Ireland. However, the Health budget advanced to £6.6 billion, which is an 89% increase. As I said, the Education budget has increased to £3.4 billion, which is a 23% increase. That is since 2010: different figures are quoted from different periods.

All the other policing budgets in the United Kingdom have gone up since 2010, so all other forces have recruited more police officers and staff. We are an outlier, in that our numbers of police officers and staff have decreased. We are now at circa 6,300 police officers, which, in any layperson's interpretation, is extremely concerning. As Chief Constable, my professional judgement is that it is unacceptable.

With regard to the broader profile of work that we now do, we do around 500 ambulance calls a month. We are working with the Ambulance Service to see how we can address that. What I seek to achieve here is a collaborative approach to ensure that we can provide a service for demands that are not core police responsibilities without exposing other public services. We get around 42,000 calls a year for concern, if you like.

Recently — the week before last — I was talking to two young police officers who had attended an address after the health service contacted us to say that there was significant concern for the well-being of a lady who might be going through some mental health crisis. The lady had had a difficult life and had a history of mental illness, but she was safe in her own home. She had food in the house; she was not going to go out; and she was not presenting as self-harming. The officers phoned the doctor who had done the telephone assessment that required us to go there. The officers asked what the plan was for the lady, and the doctor said, "Well, you are our plan". Now, that cannot be. Those officers are not trained to deal with those issues. I understand the concern for the lady's well-being, but, if we had taken that lady to a hospital because we were concerned about her, we would probably have been waiting there for a considerable time. That is just an example of the incidents that we face more and more. It obviously means that we are distracted from doing what would be more traditionally seen as our core business.

I sit before you today knowing that budgets have been broadly announced this afternoon. I do not know how accurate some of the information is that I was given before I walked in here. There are indications — they may be correct, or they may not — that the Health budget has now gone to £7.7 billion, which would be an increase of 120% since 2010. If my information is correct, there is an increase in the Justice budget, but I do not know how much of that will come to policing. A figure has been mentioned in the media — there is a health warning here because this could be incorrect — that suggests that, again, we will not get the support that we need, so we are in a really tough place.

In summary, I would say that none of the police organisations in Great Britain have had to endure or face this. Let us not forget the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland. The threat level here has been at "Severe" for most of the time since 2010, except for around 12 months before the murderous

attempt against John Caldwell in February last year. Thankfully, we have just returned to a "Substantial" threat level, which is slightly lower. However, mainstream policing in Great Britain has not faced such issues. The Garda budget has increased in the last three years by 23%. I will say that again, because it sometimes shocks me: 23%. They are recruiting a significant number of officers because of the broadness of their demand now, which matches ours. We are being left behind, and I can do only so much with the staff that we have, notwithstanding their effort and the incredible vocational public service that they provide. We have the highest levels of sickness in policing in the United Kingdom, and there is a direct correlation there with the level of demand and work that the officers and staff are doing. I am often rightly challenged at the Policing Board about what we are doing about sickness levels. If we can recruit the right number of officers to deal with our demand, the sickness levels will come down. Much of the sickness is simply tiredness, exhaustion and stress because of the nature of the caseloads that officers carry.

Only in the last couple of weeks, I am very sad to report, an officer took his own life. The consequence of that for the health of the PSNI worries me significantly. I think that some of that is because of the amount of responsibility and the workload on people who care so much about their jobs. They do not want not to be able to do the job that they joined the organisation to do. That, because of the thinnest of blue lines that we now are, is having more and more of a detrimental effect on the health of the organisation. It is not good. We need, collectively, through the Committee and the Policing Board — I welcome the Justice Minister's support in trying to address this — to arrest the decline and give the PSNI the resources that it needs to do the job that needs to be done in Northern Ireland, in the same way as every other policing organisation, including the guards, is provided with funding for its core function as well as to meet that broader demand, as we are now asked to do. I close my opening remarks there, with the reality of where we are, and I welcome questions.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thank you very much, Chief Constable. I convey our condolences to the family and colleagues of the officer in question in what is a very sad circumstance, if what you have outlined is an accurate reflection. None of us wishes to see that, and we record our condolences and sympathy for everybody involved.

Chief, we have your document. We also have an alarming letter — that is the only way that I can describe it — from the Police Federation. You have indicated that you are hitting 70% availability of your cars and that neighbourhood policing has been decimated by abstraction. We have seen the closure of enquiry offices. There is a dearth of detectives and, consequently, a loss of experience. You have had to revise your operating model. It is not for the Committee to usurp the Policing Board — we are acutely conscious of that — but we are conscious that you hold 65% of the budget of the Department that we scrutinise. I have not seen today's announcement about the Budget, but, strategically, with what you have already done and the consequences that you may face, what are you planning for? What will your organisation look like? What will be the impact on the public, and what can the public expect from the PSNI?

Chief Constable Boutcher: First, there is a health warning on the figures that have been reported today. We do not know whether they are accurate.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): You were in a bad situation before, so, even before this, you were planning.

Chief Constable Boutcher: Yes. The caveat is just that we need to wait and see what the figures mean and whether they are accurate.

In answer to your question about what we are doing, we have been working since I arrived to understand exactly where all our resources are, what they are doing and whether that fulfils the core functions that we aspire to deliver for the public — the communities — of Northern Ireland in keeping them safe and preventing crime. We are now looking at how we optimise the number of officers that we have — the 6,300 — in the existing operating model, ensuring that, where we can, we take out bureaucracy and remove burdens and any activity that does not go to the heart of the core functions of the organisation.

We also seek to plan for recruitment in the organisation at relatively low levels. There are challenges in the recruitment process — I welcome that challenge — to do with how many recruits we can bring in in a year, because of the capacity of the college. We cannot just push a button and switch it on; we have to do certain work to ensure that we can bring in the numbers in the right place. We are looking at the operating model through work that has been going on for three if not four months. The challenge

for us as an organisation in the next two or three months is to know that we have leaned everything that we can and that all our resources are in the right place to deal with the ever-broadening demand in the best way that we can.

If we were to get support for the small uplift that I asked for in the letter that I sent earlier this week to the chair of the Policing Board, the Justice Minister, the Northern Ireland Office, the Secretary of State, the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Committee, we could at least go "Back to the Future", as the film title suggests, to 2010 and our £903 million. That would give us a small opportunity to effect an uplift of about 150 officers so that we would move slightly up from the 6,300 in this calendar year. That is the ask. Subject to understanding the information that will come out today and in the next few days and weeks, we will understand whether we are able to go on that journey in this calendar year.

In the longer term, I will speak to a number of stakeholders, including the Committee, now that it is sitting, about trying, through something akin to a comprehensive spending review, to secure sustained funding for the PSNI so that we can bake in pay awards — that is required not just for policing but for all public services in Northern Ireland — and plan for the organisation. I think that everybody would accept that, given the size of the PSNI and the budget that is allocated to it, it is wholly unacceptable to have one-year budget settlements. How can we plan preventative schemes in our communities, and how can we look at any of the specialist elements that we need to deal with, including short- and medium-term threats, when we do not know what our budget will be in years 2, 3, 4 and 5?

We seek support from across the stakeholder network for having a new conversation. I am alive to the fact that there will be an election later this year, which might present an opportunity to discuss how the Budget in Northern Ireland is allocated. Can we ring-fence the money that is intended for policing? I am exploring, in the Budget that is provided from Westminster, what is expected to go to policing in Northern Ireland and what actually does. I am fairly clear that, when that money comes to the devolved Assembly, an amount of it does not come to the PSNI. What is the decision-making rationale around that? Is there something that we can do collectively and cohesively with partners to ensure that we protect that funding for policing? We are, in effect, the insurance policy for so many public services. I always defer to Health because of the significant challenges that it has. When it cannot deal with stuff, it is, by and large, certainly in the community, the police who get called. However, we are not resourced or trained for that. Can we have some conversations, not necessarily behind closed doors, about trying to protect the services that we and Health provide?

As I began the answer to this question, I mentioned how we could incrementally increase our numbers over the next two, three or four years and how we could then change our operating model to optimise it. It is not about optimising the resources that we have; it is about having an optimal operating model. That is the transition, working with Health, that I want to see. That will involve very heavily the "Right care, right person" work that we do currently.

There are so many elements to the answer to your question. The Committee will be very aware of the "Right care, right person" approach. That was started by Humberside Police in England, and different forces in GB now apply it. Health is in such a difficult place here that it would not be right to take the approach that the Met took. I am sure that there has been a lot of work behind the scenes in London, but, when it comes to mental health issues, the message from the Met was, "From this date, we're not going to do these calls". We will not do that. If we can go to the calls, we will, but we have only so many resources. Through the "Right care, right person" planning, we now have a board in place that is chaired by Assistant Chief Constable Ryan Henderson. We are looking at simple things, such as whether we can have handovers within an hour, as opposed to multiple hours of waiting at hospital, to enable us to hand over the custody or responsibility — the safety of a patient — to Health. We are doing a number of things to optimise the model that we currently have and to come up with the optimum model, working with our partners across public services so that we can protect the organisation over the next handful of years. The final thing that I will say about what we are doing is that I do not want to be just another whingeing chief constable or chief executive who says that they do not have enough money. It is now time to look at the PSNI and have another health check. I will have a conversation with stakeholders in the coming weeks and months about what that might look like. We had Patten in 1999, but where are we now, post 1999? What have we done well since the Patten commission and the introduction of the PSNI? What are we not doing that we should be doing? How does the funding mechanism work, and is it right? I will have that conversation to try again to have a body of work, following the inception of the PSNI, that will help to future-proof the organisation for the next decade or two. We are very much at a tipping point and cannot just continue in this fashion.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): We certainly understand that. I have a few more questions, and a list of members want to ask questions. We need to be conscious of time, and I appreciate that you have given us plenty, especially as you had to wait a while.

Chief Constable Boutcher: Not to worry.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): One question occurred to me about what you said, and I asked this of the Justice Minister at the previous evidence session. You outlined some elements of this, and I know that ACC Henderson is working on it, but can you outline for the Committee the work that is being done to ascertain the extent to which the PSNI is engaged in tasks that should be for health practitioners and health bodies? Honestly, to hear that the PSNI is taking 500 ambulance calls a month is extraordinary; that is an extraordinary number. Can you give the Committee an indication of that ongoing work?

Chief Constable Boutcher: We are doing some work to get more sophisticated data on that. We in the PSNI are not good at collecting health data in situations where we do health work, and I have to say that the health services do not easily or traditionally collect data about when they call for police assistance. We are focused on a three-month period of trying to extrapolate in a more sophisticated way information about what that demand looks like. That will help us to present the arguments for what we are doing. Ryan Henderson is leading that work. That will be an emerging picture, almost, by which to present our business case for what we need and what we need to do in order to change.

I want to make it clear, however, that there is no criticism of the health services in what we are trying to achieve with the work that we are doing to identify the broader demand that we are encountering. That work is a result of the reality of some of the challenges that we face in Northern Ireland, where people are going through crises. We are taking a more sophisticated look at exactly how much time we spend and how much time we are kept waiting. Everybody in the Committee will be conscious of the number of times that police cars are stuck at accident and emergency. I have encouraged ride-alongs whereby people get out of their offices just to experience for themselves how much distraction there is for officers who do that work, and I very much invite members of the Committee to go on those ride-alongs. That work is under way and is led by Ryan. As we get more information on it, I will happily share it with the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): It might be useful for Ryan to give a presentation to the Committee at some stage.

Chief Constable Boutcher: Yes.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thank you. My next question was to be on the culture audit, but it would be helpful if you would give us a status update on that in writing, including the key issues. That would save us some time.

I am conscious that there were decisions on pay reviews and so on but not in the budgets. Can you give the Committee an update on the staff pay and environmental allowance situation?

Chief Constable Boutcher: We were asked to submit a remit on staff pay, with an uplift of 5%, yesterday. That remit was ready to go, so we will provide it to the Department of Justice. I must comment that the delays in all this are unhelpful for all public services, including the police staff in Northern Ireland. It would cost us around £1.3 million a year to provide the revised environmental allowance (REA), which was first promised as an uplift to police staff in 2019.

Of course, £1.3 million is a lot of money, but, in the scale of budgets, it is not a huge amount. I have made a commitment to do everything that I can to provide that uplift — it had previously been undertaken — to the staff in the PSNI. Understandably, the Minister of Justice and the Department of Justice want us to show the affordability, and this is where we have a cart-and-horse situation in that we have not yet got our budget for this financial year. I am determined to find that money, but I have to demonstrate, in my accounting officer role, the affordability of that REA. As with the police pay awards, which I was clear and uncompromising about, I am determined to pay that REA, but I have to find that money and demonstrate that paying it is affordable for the organisation. I am now engaged in that work, and that is why the announcement of budgets, which we are waiting for, is so important to us.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thank you very much for that update. I presume that you will keep us apprised.

Mr Easton: I will start by thanking the Chief Constable for all the work that he and his officers put in. I praise the team in North Down, which is doing an absolutely amazing job, especially Johnston McDowell, who is the superintendent down there.

My questions are budget-related. I am keen on the recruitment of PSNI officers and worried about the number of officers that you have. I think that you are about 900 officers short; in fact, I read that a case can be made that there should be 8,500 officers. What discussions have you had with the Justice Minister about getting ring-fenced funding specifically for recruitment? Have you approached the Treasury to see if you could get more funding, as well as using the Assembly to do that for you?

Chief Constable Boucher: I will deal with the question about officer numbers. Obviously, Patten suggested 7,500 officers, and that was with 2,500 part-time officers. There are two elements to the work that we have had done. There is a calculation that a consultancy firm expert in policing provided that is used broadly in Great Britain for a police force where there are no exceptional issues. The Metropolitan Police has exceptional issues — capital city issues. Greater Manchester Police has challenging issues, such as those related to the urban environment and national security threats. It is the same with West Midlands Police. Of course, the PSNI has all that. We have unique challenges with policing in Northern Ireland, not least that we are the only armed police force in Great Britain, which brings additional costs. Our buildings still have to be fortified, so there are a lot of challenges for the PSNI.

That calculation for the number of officers is 3.88 officers per 100,000 of population. That is a rudimentary equation. It would basically take us to about 7,400 officers, but it does not include the specialist nature of policing in Northern Ireland and our national security responsibilities. That calculation is for a small shire force. We then brought in a company called Leapwise to do the additional sophisticated work. The chairman of the National Police Chiefs' Council independently recommended that company to me, and it did some work, which I am happy to provide to the Committee, that suggests that we need between 8,005 and 8,500 police officers. That company compared our position with how funding has progressed elsewhere, such as with Police Scotland, policing in England and Wales and our most similar forces. We are in a table of most similar forces, and there are five forces in that. That is how that company came up with the figure of between 8,005 and 8,500 police officers. It has also done some comparison work on that figure or it has started to with the Garda. That is where we get those numbers. They are based on the independent evaluation of our specific responsibilities in Northern Ireland.

You asked about ring-fenced funding. I have had conversations in Westminster with key stakeholders to try to socialise that concept. Of course, I do not want to overreach. I have a responsibility towards the Policing Board, and then there is the Department of Justice, the Department of Finance, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State. There are so many stakeholders that I am trying to lobby carefully in order to explain the reality of the PSNI's position.

I know that the Minister shares my concern about police funding. We have not had any protracted discussions about ring-fenced funding, but I know that we will discuss it and try to come up with a way in which she and I can achieve the levels of funding that, we both know, the PSNI requires.

Mr Easton: My final question is about something that I am deeply concerned about, which is the closure of old enquiry desks. Is it fair to say that, if you had the budget, those offices would stay open?

Chief Constable Boucher: This is about money. We want to be in our communities. We want to be accessible and visible. Those closures are the tip of the iceberg, by the way. Closures will not stop at the numbers that I announced; there will be more, because we are in a direction of travel. I do not want to commit to saying that we would leave the desks open if we got the funding, because it would depend on how much funding we got, and I need more police officers and police staff, but I would hope to be able to leave them open.

We did some work to choose those places carefully. When we did some data analysis, we found that, for a number of them, there was only something like an 8% demand from people walking in to the front counters to report crime. A lot of the other foot traffic, if you like, which is the requirement for the counters to be open, was from our statutory partners and visitors who were coming in. The desks were not being used nearly as much as front counters were used in the past.

I will branch off quickly to mention reporting crime online, which we need to do something about in the organisation. Obviously, our world has changed, and our phones dictate our life. We received half a million 101 calls last year. A lot of those were to report crime incidents. We got just under 30,000 online reports, however. We need to make sure that we educate people, promote the online reporting mechanisms and make them easier to use so that people do that rather than calling 101, which ties up staff who listen to the calls and report the crimes.

Shutting front counters is another element of making sure that we make best use of our resources and get the biggest bang for our buck. If we had the money, I would certainly look to leave some of the front counters open but only where there is demand and where people are using them.

Mr Easton: OK. Thank you very much.

Miss Hargey: Thanks very much for the update so far. My question is about the Budget. We had the Minister in just before you. She set out the fact that it is a difficult Budget for all Departments, as you know. We have heard through all the briefings that the Committee has had about the complexity of cases that we are dealing with, which you touched on, and about the need to collaborate more across Departments and agencies. The Minister gave examples of what the police are doing on that, and you outlined it on health.

The Budget is not great across the board, and Naomi said that. What engagement have you had with the Minister and the Policing Board on those issues? What engagement has been planned for the coming weeks as the outworkings of the Budget start to become more open? The Minister said that there will be a collective effort by the Executive, through the Finance Minister, to go back to the British Government to have a conversation on the overall Budget settlement, given that, by the British Government's own admission, the settlement falls below the basis of need. How do you see yourself feeding into those discussions in order to look at a more sustainable funding arrangement? Have your discussions until now included, or will they include the data breach payments, holiday pay and other issues?

Chief Constable Boucher: Having come into this role six months ago, I have established that everything is very much within year, which we spoke about. That is not the way to run public services of this size. Until recently — I am talking about a couple of months ago — we had a £61 million gap in the financial year that I had no way of addressing. Forget the next financial year for a moment. Given that the Assembly came back, which I was obviously delighted about, we managed to get that gap addressed and were able to pay our police officers. They still have not got their backdated pay from September, which their colleagues got last year in a pay award, although they will get that money this month. As I said in response to an earlier question, we are now able to address pay for police staff. My primary focus was on closing that gap and getting that money.

We are now into a new financial year, and we have a gap of £130 million to £140 million. As the Chair mentioned, we have not got any money for last year's pay award. We were — this includes all public services — told to plan on the basis of last year's budgets without the uplifts. We immediately had a gap of around £50 million. That almost hand-to-mouth way of dealing with funding is utterly wrong. It is unfair on staff; it is unfair on the infrastructure that is supposed to support public services; but, overwhelmingly, it is unfair on the communities who expect those public services to be delivered.

Moving forward, the Justice Minister and I intend to have regular face-to-face meetings. I know that it feels as though the Assembly has been back for a while now, but it has not been long. We intend to have regular meetings between us and with the Northern Ireland Policing Board in order to come up with a collective plan. The Patten commission report recommended that the Policing Board should have a role in making sure that the PSNI has a sufficient budget to police Northern Ireland. We need to make sure that we — the Justice Minister, the Policing Board and I — work collectively to do that.

Since I have come into office — obviously, the Assembly still was not sitting then — I have had a close relationship with the board in trying to address last year's gap and plan for the future. We have a new chair and deputy chair. We had one meeting a couple of weeks ago. We have to reset what it expects from us in how we deal strategically with some of the challenges. The Minister and I want to align with the rhythm of meetings so that we are all joined up on that, which I very much welcome. Given that the Assembly was not sitting and that last year was an extremely difficult year for the PSNI, the planned, careful, methodical thinking about the future and how we can get funding, which will be by doing everything that we can and presenting a unified position, simply had not been happening. We have agreed that we need to do that.

Your question links into the previous one. I speak to people in Westminster as much I can, because it feels to me as though there is ignorance and a lack of awareness about some of the challenges here, particularly in policing. That is why — I mentioned this to the Chair — we need to do something on looking at where the PSNI is today. It is the most remarkable organisation. I have been in policing for 40 years, and I have to tell you that it is the best policing that I have seen. I have tried to work out why that is. I think that it is partly because there is more of a vocation in policing in Northern Ireland. Given the history here — what happened to John Caldwell last year was a stark reminder — you make a life choice to join the police here. You do not do so because you see a TV programme and think, "Oh, that's exciting. I want to join the police", or because a relative says, "Why don't you try the police?". There are security consequences for you and your family, particularly if you are from the nationalist community. Obviously, for people from that community who make that decision, it is even more of a life choice. I just think that, overall, that means that they are more vocational. I think that they care; they have thought more about doing the job. That is why we need to support the officers. We need to resource them properly, pay their pay awards on time and make sure that the entire infrastructure of the organisation is fit for purpose, which, because of the decline in funding, it is not. We rely on amazing staff, and we cannot keep relying on them, because they are breaking.

Miss Hargey: I suppose you are feeding into the engagement process that the Minister will have with the rest of the Executive in order to make a case to Westminster on the funding gap that we have or that you will do so over the coming weeks.

Chief Constable Boucher: I am happy, from a policing perspective, to show the PSNI's unique challenges. Even my colleagues in Great Britain would say that the PSNI is an outlier. The PSNI is an organisation of policing that has to be funded properly and has suffered in a way that other police forces and mainstream policing in GB have not in recent years. The National Police Chiefs' Council recognises that. I was with Drew Harris yesterday. He, obviously, has an emotional tie to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and policing in Northern Ireland, and he recognises that. They are all looking with concern at how we have been left almost to wither on the vine. I know that it is hard for public services, but they have had increases. We have not, yet we pick up a lot of the demand that they cannot deal with. It is not rocket science. We need some help: we really do.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): It is not for me to speak for the Chief Constable or the PSNI, but it is important for members to understand that the PSNI is different from other police forces across the rest of the UK and, presumably, the Republic, in that it is not allowed to have a deficit, borrow money or hold reserves. That puts the PSNI in a unique and difficult position. It is important that, for complete understanding of the PSNI's position, members are aware of that and that it is recorded.

Deirdre, have you finished?

Miss Hargey: Yes, thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): We will hear from Sinéad, Ciara and Justin.

Ms Ennis: Points on the Budget have been well made by other members, so I will raise an entirely different issue, which is about some of the disused barracks. I appreciate that the Chief Constable may not have this information to hand, and I will add a caveat to that by saying that I have regularly engaged with the Policing Board on the matter. The Chief Constable is aware that a number of those disused barracks were held behind and not put through the D1 process because of post-Brexit uncertainties. I think that that was the reason that was given.

One of those barracks is in my constituency; it is in Warrenpoint. It has been vacant, disused and a general eyesore for a number of years. I am not overstating it when I say that it is a blight on the town. I appreciate that it has recently been through the D1 process. A housing association expressed an interest in it, and I think that the process of engagement with the housing association started.

Obviously, we have a severe housing shortage. There is a housing crisis across the North but particularly in South Down, so it was welcome news when the Housing Executive and, subsequently, the housing association expressed an interest in it. However, I am led to believe that that process recently collapsed and that the housing association has withdrawn its interest in the barracks. I appreciate that the Chief Constable may not have to hand the information specific to the matter, but I am curious about the reasons behind it. Is it a cost implication? If so, we would be keen to work through that and see those difficulties overcome. Will the Chief Constable furnish me with the information regarding the disused barracks in Warrenpoint? Will he also commit to proactively working

to resolve any issues with the Housing Executive or any subsequent housing association that expresses an interest in order to ensure that the site is returned for community use and fills the real housing stress and need that there is in South Down?

Chief Constable Boutcher: I cannot answer you as I sit here today. I received something of a briefing on the matter a couple of weeks ago. If you will allow me, I will provide you with a written response to give you an accurate and up-to-date position.

To reassure you on our estate, on Monday, we had a senior team planning day at which we had a presentation on some work that was commissioned to look at every part of our estate. We need to understand whether our operating model is optimising the entire estate. Do we need it all? Some of our buildings are extremely expensive to maintain. That strategic work has looked at a medium- to long-term plan that would overlay our operating model. For example, there has been discussion about whether we have one control centre as opposed to three. All of that work, which is necessary to future-proof the organisation, is now being done. In fact, Monday's presentation was extremely forensic on the details of the estate, its costs and its future costs.

I will specifically answer your question about Warrenpoint in writing. I give you a reassurance, however, that we are very aware of our estate costs, as well as our fleet costs. We have an extremely old fleet because we cannot afford to purchase new vehicles in the way in which other police forces have done. We have been maintaining vehicles, and more and more are not usable. Beyond the workforce, that factor is often missed, and it is the other requirements of running a business of this size and the finances needed to run the business efficiently, particularly the efficiency of buildings. I will provide a written response.

Ms Ennis: I appreciate that, Chief Constable. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Sinéad, you may need to speak to the housing association about why it decided to pull out. It is probably not for the police to answer that question. I am sure that you have local contacts so can find out. Do you have anything else to ask?

Ms Ennis: No. Chair, we have engaged with the housing association, but the details of its reasons for withdrawing from the process are scarce. That is why I took the opportunity to raise it with the Chief Constable today. I appreciate that he will respond to me in writing.

Ms Ferguson: Thank you, Jon, for coming to the Committee today. From the papers that you provided, what stood out for me is the grave concern, which very much depends on the Budget, about the front-line safeguarding role that your officers play. I liked your mention earlier of the "Right care by the right worker" approach.

I have experience of working in family support hubs in neighbourhoods and communities where the police have had to be the first point of contact. Even when we have taken someone by the hand to a local GP in a health centre, the police have had to intervene. As you say, that involves time and resources and is critical work. We have care in the community, and we are seeing more of that. The work is not reducing but increasing, because vulnerable people live in neighbourhoods and communities. From your awareness and knowledge of other areas, who is the right person for that? Is there any innovative work being done on a collaborative approach that the police have looked into in order to support vulnerable people?

Chief Constable Boutcher: Only yesterday, I witnessed an Ireland-based project in Dublin through which a private organisation provides a service to convey people to mental health assessments. It is a collaboration choreographed with health professionals in a vehicle who manage the assessment period and the care of the individual as opposed to the police doing it.

In England and Wales, there are multi-agency capabilities. We had this where I previously worked, but it relies on ongoing collaboration with and funding from different organisations. There is a paramedic, a health professional — normally a psychiatric nurse — and a police officer in a bespoke vehicle, all of whom have access to the relevant information and data sets for their specific organisations, such as health records and police records, which give an address. That helps inform those going to the response to deal in a far better way with the individual who is going through a crisis. We have looked at doing that here, and we have some aspects of it in our control rooms.

This point is relevant here. When our police officers turn up to deal with these issues, two police officers often turn up. We are an armed organisation, and the very optics of dealing with people who are going through an extremely difficult time in their life are not helped by that visible response. Having a specialist response with a softer look often sets a far better tone for dealing with people who are going through episodes for which expertise is needed to deal with them. Our officers are often just in a holding position until that expertise is available.

I was with a lady today, a nurse, who is a relative of one of my officers who unfortunately passed away, and she was saying that, sometimes, they have to wait days and days for beds but cannot send people home, because it is not safe for them to go home. They are better waiting for a bed at the hospital. People are facing challenges, and, if they have mental health challenges, we are sitting there with them. I have been given examples of how some staff have been sitting with people for well over a day. Our shifts then have to pass on the responsibility. That is not the right person, and it is not the right care.

Those multi-agency responses are often so much more cost-effective, and they are so much more efficient in dealing with the issues. That is the sort of stuff that we are looking at, and the people whom I spoke to yesterday in Dublin are going to come with their bespoke vehicle. It is kitted out with all sorts of medical provisions to deal with such situations. There are no restraints in there. It is a very soft approach that is taken to de-escalate any position. They are going to come up to Belfast and do a bit of a show-and-tell to see whether we can get similar capability up here. We are looking to do all that sort of stuff, and Ryan — ACC Henderson — is working with the Department of Health to explore any good ideas like that to try to reduce our demand while providing the "Right care, right person" approach to the calls for help that we are currently dealing with, when we should not be.

Ms Ferguson: That is good. With the likes of the Complex Lives initiative in Belfast, there are probably multi-agency reference points that the police could use as well to learn how that approach could be expanded on and developed. There are now multi-health teams in our GP practices. It is about where you can connect. That is critical, because I am conscious, from my experience, that the individuals whom you support, safeguard, bring to hospital and sit waiting with are repeat cases.

Chief Constable Boutcher: They are.

Ms Ferguson: We have individuals in neighbourhoods and communities for years in and out of the system until, unfortunately, they pass away.

Chief Constable Boutcher: Humberside Police did work on the evaluation post the introduction of the "Right care, right person" approach and said that its demand was reduced by just under 10%. I do not know what that would look like here, but that is a significant reduction in demand just by introducing a different approach to dealing with that caseload. A reduction of just under 10% would help us significantly.

Mr McNulty: Chief Constable, how are you? I wish you a hearty ádh mór ort [*Translation: good luck to you*] in your new role. Good luck to you in your new position. I am sure that it has been a baptism of fire, but there is no better man.

I will start with the south Armagh policing review, about which Sinéad asked a question earlier. A recommendation from that review was that Crossmaglen police station be closed and Newtownhamilton police station be upgraded to become a police station befitting the 21st century. Both of them are not. Crossmaglen police station is highly militarised, as is the one in Newtownhamilton, and they are not reflective of the times and possibly perpetuate the uneasy relationship between nationalism and the Police Service. They are symbols of a past that should be gone. Where does that recommendation stand? I would appreciate your feedback on where both police stations stand. When can Crossmaglen police station become available to Crossmaglen Rangers and the community of Crossmaglen and be a beacon of hope for the future as opposed to what it is currently? Do you have a perspective on that, Chief Constable?

Chief Constable Boutcher: I cannot give you details now, but I will give you a written answer. What I will say is that I endorse entirely what you said about the nature of Crossmaglen police station, what it looks like and its fortification. We want to move away from that type of estate. That is one of the conversations that we had with the estate strategy team on Monday. It is very much part of our thinking on resetting the PSNI moving forward. There is so much that we want to do and are planning to do. Listen, money does not solve every problem. A lot of this is about culture and attitudes towards

policing and about its being successful, but we need to be properly funded to be able to do some of the work that we want to do with the estate, not just in Crossmaglen. I will respond to you in detail about where we are with timings.

Mr McNulty: Over the past four years, there have been 20,000 deprivation of liberty authorisations. That must place a huge and challenging burden on your officers.

The PSNI's legacy investigation branch (LIB) is working overtime. It is five days now until we reach the cliff edge. People are waiting with bated breath to get convictions over the line before that cliff edge arrives. Perpetrators are waiting with bated breath, knowing that, once that deadline passes, they are in the clear, scot-free, for their evil deeds of the past. What is your perspective on that? Will the resource currently in the LIB, which is working day and night to bring convictions, be reallocated? Will that lessen the burden on your officers?

Chief Constable Boucher: In the medium term, there will be a reduction in resources for the legacy investigation branch. We also have a legacy inquest unit that has significant resources. It has been working tirelessly to deal with the collapsing time frame for all the legacy cases, researching and obtaining the information that is relevant to those cases and providing it to the coroner. As you are aware, we have a few days until 1 May, when any ongoing legacy investigations for the period up to the Good Friday Agreement will cease. Any decisions that are made about prosecution will continue to be made in the normal way, but, if a prosecution decision has not been made, those matters will stop, and, in simple terms, everything gets handed to the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR).

There is an element that I should mention about legacy. I cannot go into specific cases, because various legal challenges are going on, but I want to reassure the Committee. When I arrived in October, I was conscious that we had around six or seven months left until the date for the end of legacy inquests. I commissioned an end-to-end review by an independent barrister to look at how, through our own process map, we were dealing with providing legacy inquests with the information that the PSNI holds and at how we could effectively maximise the prospect of finishing as many inquests as we could before 1 May for those families, because they have been let down and given false promises so often.

Three categories of legacy cases were all about to conclude anyway. There was the first category of cases that, as I looked at it in October, could finish. We needed to make sure that we did everything that we could to ensure that they finished. There was a second category of cases that, because, even with six months to go, there was clearly so much to do, were unlikely to finish. They had run out of time. There was then a third category of cases that had been reported about in the media recently for which, because of public interest immunity (PII) as a result of sensitive information, the legacy process does not have a legal framework such as there is in civil cases — known as the "closed material procedure" (CMP) — to manage sensitive information. You do not have that at an inquest.

It is often referred to as the "Litvinenko scenario". When Mr Litvinenko died, everybody was very aware of who he was and of what had happened. An inquest was opened. It became clear to the coroner that he would not be able to fulfil his responsibilities and establish the how, where and who when it came to responsibility for Mr Litvinenko's death. That was because of the amount of sensitive material involved, the relationship between Mr Litvinenko and the British intelligence services and the involvement of the Russian state. The coroner therefore had to collapse the inquest, and he recommended a public inquiry. The family applied for a public inquiry. That was declined, but the family appealed the decision, and a public inquiry then took place. We have a number of such cases that PII is causing not to finish because there is no mechanism to deal with the PII application.

I say that because we try to be clear that we have done everything that we can to deal with those cases with full transparency for the families. I have to be careful in what I say, but there are ongoing judgements now around what we have tried to do to demonstrate that transparency and the provision of information for those families. For all the cases in which inquests have not been able to finish — I know that this period will be difficult for those families: imagine if it were our families — we will give the ICRIR all the information, absolutely unfettered access and unredacted material so that, if those families go to the commission, Sir Declan Morgan and the commission can work with them to provide the information through the commission. That is a clear undertaking that I have given to those families. I know how frustrated a number of them have been because the inquest timeline is about to come to a conclusion.

The LIB will still deal with a number of cases that are not Troubles-related during the period of the Troubles. There are some such cases. It will also, of course, continue to deal with a number of cases that post-date April 1998 that are outside the remit of the commission. Moreover, there are a number of inquests that post-date Troubles-related cases, in that they post-date April 1998. Again, we will continue to deal with those cases.

An earlier question links to legacy, and I probably did not deal with that element. I was asked about cost implications for the PSNI, about trying to sort it out strategically for the future and about making sure that the organisation is structured in such a way that we can deal with funding challenges. There is a challenge around the data breach and its cost. There is a challenge around holiday pay and its cost, and there is a challenge around civil cases for Troubles-related matters and their cost. What I say about each of those three categories is that we are not funded to police Northern Ireland properly out of the budget that we have got today.

Dealing with those issues will cost significant amounts of money, and we have no budget to deal with them. That is a separate conversation again to be had with the Minister, the Policing Board and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and, indeed, with Westminster to try to secure funding to deal with the issues so that we can address them and move on from them. There are a significant number of civil cases for which the legal costs are going up and up. A number of those cases should be settled, but we do not have the budget to settle them.

Mr McNulty: Given your budget constraints and the challenges that you have mentioned, how soon will the police force be reflective of the communities that it serves?

Chief Constable Boucher: That is an impossible question to answer properly. I wish that I could answer it. I am extremely keen to get advertising for recruitment under way again. To be clear, we have started recruiting again, and the recruits who are now at Garnerville were selected under a recruitment process from last year. We have people who are already selected, vetted and ready to come into the organisation.

In the autumn, if we were to get the money that we need — it is a small amount — we would go back out to advertise to recruit. We are already doing a lot of work with the Catholic Police Guild. I am doing a lot of work with elements of the nationalist community to help us do everything that we can to attract recruits from the nationalist community. Rome was not built in a day. We have had great success with recruitment from diverse communities in England and Wales, where we have literally changed the face of policing. My old force had a diverse representation of police officers of 4%. We took that to 12% really quickly. It can be done. It does not necessarily need any sort of statutory requirement, such as 50:50 recruitment; rather, it is about trust and confidence, where people feel that it is safe to join and they want to join the organisation.

Last week, I met a young female officer from the nationalist community who has an incredibly personal story about why she joined the PSNI. I cannot put her out there as almost a poster girl for the PSNI because of her community background and story, but I wish that I could, because it would make everybody from the nationalist community want to join the PSNI. I am looking at ways of overcoming some of those challenges so that we can make a clear statement to people from the nationalist community that the PSNI is welcoming and safe for them. We need to be representative of all the communities that we police. There will be — we have started some of the work — a real drive to raise that representative element in order to get the organisation to reflect all the communities that we serve, including the emerging eastern European communities.

Mr Dickson: From what we see in the press today, the policing budget will be exceptionally challenging. Chief Constable, you are right to make your strong claim for the budget entitlement that the PSNI requires to deliver all its programmes and, of course, to keep our community safe. Do you recognise that, if you get into a situation in which organisations in the justice system start to compete with one another for the budget, you will end up robbing Peter to pay Paul? You are all moving parts of a very important system that delivers justice. That system includes the police, the prisons, the courts, the probation service and our legal system. You are part of an integrated, important movement. If the total budget fails it, the partners need to work together to make their case, rather than pull apart.

Chief Constable Boucher: I would go further than that and say that it is about all public services. It is an integrated framework. Look at the mental health challenges that are faced in the prisons. I have been in the prisons recently to look at the issues that they face. We need a whole-system approach. As was mentioned, there needs to be a cohesive position taken to lobby Westminster together on the

arguments and to show the rationale and evidence behind why we need more public funding here. The Committee will be alive to the work that has been done in the devolved space in Wales to show how much is required for the Welsh devolved Budget to provide public services in Wales that are equitable to those in England. That is the sort of work that we need to do here. I am, however, the Chief Constable of the PSNI. What I see every day is a workforce that is absolutely exhausted and will be increasingly unable to cope with what we face.

I have great relationships with the Prison Service and the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) here. I was talking to Stephen Herron only last week. He and I will have a meeting in the next couple of weeks about how we might speed up justice and improve file quality. We are already doing the pilot scheme on "No prosecution" files to try to remove a lot of the bureaucracy for the PPS, more than for the police. That frees up the PPS to spend more time on cases on which it should spend time.

I reassure you that we are doing a lot in the shared space, but I am particularly concerned about the policing budget, because of the broader nature of what we have to do. I agree, however, that an integrated approach needs to be taken across all public services, not just the justice sector. Policing overlaps with a number of sectors. I do not want in any way to disadvantage anybody else. The simple message that I have had and that I have given to the Policing Board is that, if we could get the budget that we should get from the Budget that Westminster provides, the PSNI would, I think, be OK. If we start from that point, we will be in a much healthier position, from a policing perspective, than we currently are in. I understand your point, and I am certainly not trying to disadvantage anybody else. We need to work together collectively, and I think that we are doing that.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Chief Constable. That has been helpful and, indeed, reassuring. From a political perspective on lobbying Westminster, I do not think you will find any disagreement from the Assembly about seeking to make and then making a proper argument, as Wales has done, that additional funding is needed across the board.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Chief Constable, in your answers to Justin, you mentioned the use of PII certificates and indicated that there was a degree of frustration among families who have not seen their inquests come to fruition or completion. It is important to note that that extends to some families who have had their inquests come to fruition. I was recently with the Kingsmill's survivor and families, and they have expressed frustration at the use of eight or nine PII certificates during that inquest, which has taken eight years to resolve. It is not just an issue for those who have had — yes, Deirdre?

Miss Hargey: I want to come in on that point in order to give a rounded view. It is not all for you to answer, but there is a concern about PIIs and rightly so. The danger is that being involved in legacy as a broader issue has tainted policing to some extent. The ICRIR, which you mentioned, does not have the support. The new mechanisms are being brought in over the heads of and against the wishes of parties, families and human rights organisations here, in comparison with mechanisms that could, and were, previously agreed through the Stormont House Agreement. It is important to make that point.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Chief Constable, thank you. You have been extremely generous with your time. In your letter to us, you make a number of asks. Some are not in our gift, as you will appreciate. One, however, is, and that is that the contribution of policing to society and public services be both recognised and prioritised. I think that everybody on the Committee would wish to recognise the contribution of policing to society in the broadest terms, because policing is now much more than dealing with crime. Whether that should be the case is questionable, but, nevertheless, we record our gratitude to your officers, who are under immense pressure and doing their very best in difficult circumstances. We recognise that.

We look forward to seeing you again, and thank you for your generosity with your time.

Chief Constable Boucher: Thank you.