

Criminal Justice Committee

31st Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday 7 December 2022

Policing and Mental Health

Note by the clerk

Introduction

1. In September 2022, Committee Members met with six police officers from Police Scotland to take informal evidence about their experiences of working for Police Scotland.
2. The purpose of the informal meetings was for Members to hear about:
 - The advice and support provided to the officers when they asked for help with mental health issues, and the ways in which this support could be improved. This could be to deal with a one-off traumatic event and/or the ongoing pressures of their role as a police officer.
 - The types of work-related stresses which the officers experience. This could be specific to their role and/or when dealing with members of the public with mental health conditions.
 - The challenges that the officers face and how these impact on their health and well-being.
3. Notes of the evidence sessions are included in Paper 2. These notes have been agreed with the officers and published on the Committee's website.
4. Following the informal evidence sessions, the Committee agreed some initial actions to take. The Committee wrote to the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) to request that it undertakes an urgent review of the number of cases where officers and staff have retired due to mental ill health and where the administration of their retirement remains incomplete.
5. The Committee also wrote to the Chief Constable of Police Scotland about several issues, which include:
 - asking Police Scotland to consider undertaking a review of the Trauma Risk Management (TriM) policy;

- seeking details of the mental health training provided to officers and their line managers; and
- asking Police Scotland to consider undertaking a piece of work to understand attitudes and responses towards mental ill health within the organisation and how these may be addressed.

6. Responses to both these letters can be found in Paper 2.

Next steps

7. The police officers who gave evidence raised several issues around the support provided for mental health and stress, which are contained in their agreed notes. This paper collates some of those issues and sets out a number of recommended actions for Members to consider.

8. The Convener would appreciate your views on the recommended actions. Below are some suggested follow-up actions for Members to consider.

Police Scotland's policies

9. The police officers raised issues with some of Police Scotland's policies and how they had been implemented, in particular, when decisions are made that are contrary to the advice of a medical professional. These include:

- Officers are entitled to six counselling sessions. However, senior officers have the discretion to authorise more sessions, if this is required. One of the officers told the Committee that 12 sessions were authorised for him, as he had complex PTSD. However, when his counsellor indicated that more sessions were required, these were not authorised.
- Some of the officers indicated that they received letters informing them of the dates that they were to move to half pay (after six months) and zero pay (after 12 months). This caused them enormous stress. These letters resulted in some officers returning to work before they were ready, due to financial concerns. Some of the officers stated that there are special circumstances which can be taken into consideration, such as being injured on duty. The standard reduction in pay and timescales seems to be the normal procedure. However, the Chief Constable has discretion to continue paying an officer and this may be a more appropriate approach for those who are on leave due to mental health issues.
- The officers who gave evidence who have retired due to ill health said that they did not receive any correspondence from Police Scotland acknowledging what had happened to them and thanking them for their service. They find that incredibly upsetting. It may be common practice for officers to receive a formal thank you letter, which is general in terms. However, it seems the officers who gave evidence did not receive that.

10. Members may wish to raise these issues and ask Police Scotland for details of:

- **their policy for approving counselling sessions for officers; and what flexibility exists to tailor support to the individual needs of an officer, including extending the time offered beyond that set out in Police Scotland’s welfare policy.**
- **their policy on sickness pay rates and durations for officers who are signed off with mental health issues and any exceptions; and**
- **the exit strategy/policy that exists to ensure officers retiring following a period of absence receive both practical and emotional support in their transition out of the organisation, and that there are clear lines of communication to facilitate this process.**

Police Scotland’s HR department

11. Police Scotland’s HR department is the main point of contact for officers who are not able to work due to their mental health. The police officers highlighted several areas for possible improvement. These include:

- There is a ‘one size fits all’ approach which is not trauma-informed. Contact is impersonal and can have a detrimental effect on an officer’s mental health. An example is correspondence informing officers when they will be reduced to half pay and zero pay.
- There is a lack of communication with officers, with the onus on officers to keep in touch with their employer and to proactively seek progress updates.
- Officers are not provided with a single point of contact. Each new contact person does not seem to be aware of their circumstances. This means officers having to repeatedly talk about the reasons they are off ill. Some officers described the process as retraumatizing.
- Officers are asked to provide the same information multiple times over months and, in two cases, years.
- HR inaccurately recording key information, such as the views of medical professionals.

12. Members may wish to raise these issues with Police Scotland and ask them to consider undertaking a review of its HR department’s procedures for dealing with officers who are suffering from mental health issues, to ensure they are trauma-informed, efficient and there is an oversight mechanism.

Support for officers

13. An issue raised by some of the officers was the length of time they had to wait for an appointment with the Selected Medical Practitioner (SMP). The officers indicated that there is only one SMP in Police Scotland. However, the recent letter from the SPA confirms “the appointment of a number of additional SMPs”.

14. Officers gave examples of long waiting times. One example was 14 months for an appointment. The SPA, in its recent letter confirms there is a backlog in

processing ill health retirement applications. The waiting time to see a SMP has reduced from 21 to 12 months. The SPA also confirms that 39 of the 'live' cases have been in the IHR process for more than 12 months.

15. The SMP has to assess officers who are seeking retirement on the grounds of mental ill health. An injury on duty award cannot be progressed until this assessment is completed.
16. Another issue raised is that the Employee Assistance line is not just for police officers and the operators cannot always assist officers. One officer told Members that he called the employee assistance line when in crisis and was told to "phone back later". When he called back an hour later, he was told "we can't help you", as he did not meet their specific criteria. He stated that a specific helpline for police officers is required.
17. In their response to the Committee's letter asking questions about the support provided by line managers, Police Scotland did not fully address the Committee's concerns that line managers need to have the necessary skills, knowledge, understanding and training to identify that an officer may be suffering from mental health issues.
18. In his letter, David Page describes the TRiM model as "a proactive model of support", which officers and staff are expected to access by self-referral. Mr Page explains that, "Whilst it is accepted that supervisors have an important part to play in supporting officers and staff, individuals can also self-care". The evidence Members heard from officers is that their line managers play a crucial in identifying signs that an officer needs help and should have the skills and support to take timely and appropriate actions. Line managers also need to have the skills to ensure officers can speak to them in the first instance and feel confident of an appropriate response.

19. Members may wish to:

- **Ask Police Scotland for details of the role of the Selected Medical Practitioner (SMP), to confirm how many additional SMPs are in post, and whether the 39 cases which have been in the IHR process for more than 12 months have been prioritised.**
- **Raise with Police Scotland the issues officers have experienced with calling the employee assistance line and ask them to consider how these can be addressed. For example, consider introducing a dedicated line for police officers and staff, or amend the criteria to ensure that officers in crisis are given help when they call.**
- **Confirm what training is provided to first line operational supervisors to ensure they recognise changes in an officer that indicate deteriorating mental wellbeing and are able to respond effectively using clearly defined pathways to referral and support.**

Financial burdens

20. A key issue for police officers is the impact on their finances of having to pay 14% each month towards their police pension. This can be over £400 per month, which is similar to a mortgage payment. This causes officers' financial stress. To alleviate this, some officers regularly take on extra shifts to make up their salary or give up their rest days, whilst others have opted out of the pension scheme.

21. Members may wish to raise this issue with Police Scotland and seek their views on how it can be addressed.

Correspondence

22. Members may wish to seek the views of the Scottish Police Federation on the responses from Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Association (SPA).

**Clerks to the Committee
December 2022**