



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Thursday, 07 December, 2023

PRESS RELEASE

Police Culture in Scotland Needs to Improve

The culture and ethos of Police Scotland has improved markedly since the single service was formed a decade ago, states a report published today (Thursday, December 7, 2023).

Organisational culture in policing is an area of significant public interest and Police Scotland is on a journey of change and improvement to address many issues relating to equality and diversity, training and wellbeing.

The report from HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) recognises there are examples of good and effective practice across different areas of the service, especially in the policing of significant events and day to day operational functions, with officers and staff who want to do a good job and give the best possible service to the public.

The current risk averse style of management is an unintended, but understandable, outcome of the early style of leadership in Police Scotland and has led to an over emphasis on governance and meetings. The result is a disconnect between senior leaders and the frontline with much requiring to be done, in the near future, in terms of the cohesiveness of the top tier and the overall culture of the organisation.

The HMICS Thematic Inspection of organisational culture in Scottish policing contains eleven recommendations designed to enable Police Scotland to improve culture, address inequalities, define effectively what is valued and how it is measured, streamline processes and enhance communication, training and guidance.

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Mr Craig Naylor, said: “Many of the aspirations for Police Scotland have been achieved with specialist service access to all postcodes, improved investigative capabilities and significant cost savings of in excess of £1 billion, to name a few. These are evidence of the value and benefit of the creation of the single service.

“But the speed of change was a challenge with many under pressure from an initial autocratic leadership approach and a performance driven culture. It was only in the past few years that the style and tone has stabilised while maintaining a focus on the delivery of effective operational policing. Resourcing and budget pressures remain with a resultant lack of investment in improvements which would benefit service delivery to the general public.

“Reform of this scale in Scotland has not been attempted beyond police and fire and while the funding and workforce in most public sectors has grown, in policing it has shrunk”.

Mr Naylor pointed out that poor standards and behaviour can, and do, affect public trust and confidence in policing. “The culture of Police Scotland is defined by many factors, but its leadership should be actively championing areas of good practice and excellence to improve the way it feels to work in the service, so that all staff and officers feel they are being treated equitably and fairly, and that the organisation is listening and responding effectively to the issues raised by the workforce and their staff associations.

“Only by doing so can Police Scotland realise its full potential, maximise the wellbeing of its people and ensure it delivers the best and most efficient service for the persons, localities and communities in Scotland.”

The aim of the inspection is to make an assessment as to whether Police Scotland has a healthy organisational culture and ethical framework and whether the appropriate values and behaviours are consistently lived across the organisation.

HMICS found the service is not yet able to demonstrate culture change, the factors influencing that culture, nor the impact they are having on service delivery.

During the review period, the inspection team spoke to officers and staff from a sample of areas and on all ranks and grades. The overwhelming feedback was that the size and scale of the organisation hampered its ability to treat them as individuals, there was a rush to introduce initiatives, core policies were poorly applied and often without guidance, a reluctance to challenge unacceptable behaviour, lack of trust and confidence in the misconduct, grievance and promotion processes, a blame culture, a sense of disconnect with the leadership but praise for divisional commanders, line and middle management.

A casualty of reform of Police Scotland was investment in all training, other than in the operational sphere, which has negatively impacted on the overall culture of the organisation and resulted in a generation of leaders not receiving adequate development while operational skills are prioritised. HMICS observed a clear association between risk aversion and internal governance with the scale of the latter now inhibiting the service from operating effectively.

Mr Naylor said that the removal of the mandate for 17,234 police officers is an opportunity for the service to rebalance the workforce and ensure that roles are matched with those with the best skill set.

“Current demands are leading to increasing pressure on the frontline. There needs to be a re-evaluation of all that is being done and a focus on what is a priority, with re-investment in core operational policing at the top of the list,” he said. “The admirable ambitions of the service are not matched with its ability to deliver. Building a target operating model that defines the shape and functions has been ongoing for some time, but never realised. This can lead to conflict over what is prioritised and delivered.”

The inspection found financial and resource constraint adversely affects culture change, particularly at the frontline, in terms of driving behaviours as well as impacting on capacity, motivation and wellbeing. Response policing is considered the most challenging of environments while national crime division enjoys better working hours, facilities, training and support. Officers on the frontline reported difficulties in securing time off, constantly changing shifts and no time for reviews and well being checks with managers.

Civilian staff, like response officers, feel particularly undervalued and less respected than their officer colleagues with their professional expertise often disregarded. They however benefit from relative constancy in their managers, unlike police officers where the regular movement of managers, often to aid their promotion prospects, created instability. HMICS was told there is a lack of organisational justice in the promotion processes which fails to demonstrate fairness and transparency.

Probationers have a strong sense of belonging while undergoing training but once on the frontline feel ill-equipped for the challenges of their role, a disconnect between their training, the actual job and disillusionment with the reality of supporting the vulnerable and those with mental health issues rather than fighting crime.

No specific aspects of culture which prompted misconduct are identified by HMICS, but there is a general lack of trust in the misconduct and grievance processes which are viewed as lacking openness, transparency, fairness and pace of resolution. "We found individual performance issues are unlikely to be challenged due to the likelihood of counter grievances, or lack of support, and consider there to be under reporting of misconduct concerns while it is clear to us that officers and staff remain to be convinced the grievance process is fit for purpose," said Mr Naylor.

HMICS supports the statement from the former Chief Constable, Sir Iain Livingstone, on institutional discrimination, but it received a mixed response with some welcoming it and others clearly not recognising the description of the environment in which they work. This statement and an earlier one on anti-racism left many feeling disempowered and disenchanted.

Mr Naylor added: "The challenge is clearly organisational, but we also recognise that an organisation is not simply about policies and procedures but, fundamentally, about its people. Police Scotland has a responsibility to those people and the public it serves, to ensure it delivers its commitments and maintains focus on the cultural change required. This will take time and perseverance."

There is evidence that wellbeing within Police Scotland is being affected by elements of policing culture, although pride in the job is still strong as is positive workforce motivation particularly at a local and team level. Future scrutiny by HMICS will look at the related areas of wellbeing, training and development, conduct, HR processes and governance as well as follow up on any specific cultural issues identified.

Ends

FOOTNOTE

Police Scotland was formed in April 2013 to provide a national service designed to deliver an operationally competent police service which improved access to specialist capabilities across the country.

Policing in Scotland is defined by both legislation and a code of ethics which describe and promote the values and behaviours expected of officers and staff.

Understanding how culture influences or directly affects service delivery is essential if an organisation is to make cultural change to improve outcomes. Research indicates organisational culture can influence performance and a strong culture inspires people to do their best work, as well as having an impact on their productivity and efficiency.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The HMICS Thematic Inspection of Organisational Culture in Police Scotland will be available to download at the HMICS website www.hmics.scot from 00.01hrs, Thursday, 07 December 2023.

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