

# MINISTER'S ADDRESS TO PFNI CONFERENCE

Good Afternoon

Liam, thank you for the opportunity to join you today and to address your members.

Unfortunately, we are here today in the immediate aftermath of recent dissident attacks on your members in Lurgan and in Dunmurry. We all would have hoped that as we approach the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the establishment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, we would be concentrating on celebrating the real achievements of the service through that transformation and that terrorist attacks such as those in recent weeks would have been a thing of the past.

Instead, as a service, you are continuing to deal with live terrorist threats, which unlike the threats in other jurisdictions are directly targeted **at officers and staff themselves and their families.**

I do not underestimate the impact that such attacks and threats have on the police family and your loved ones.

The psychological and emotional impact of these attacks is significant, and must never be minimised. The courage shown by officers in responding calmly and professionally in these circumstances deserves recognition and respect.

While these incidents are deeply and profoundly concerning and unsettling, they have also served to highlight the effectiveness and professionalism of the police response.

The ability of the PSNI officers to immediately and effectively respond, in such dangerous circumstances, protecting life and our communities demonstrates the commitment to the role. Your willingness to get back to business as usual in the immediate aftermath is testimony to your resilience. Public confidence is strengthened not by the absence of threat, but by the visible competence and bravery of those responding to it.

Those who engage in this futile violence have nothing to offer our community but destruction and misery. Their cowardice and reckless disregard for the people who live in those communities stands in stark contrast to your courage and your willingness to run towards danger to protect vulnerable people.

I want to thank you on my behalf and on behalf of the vast majority of people for your dedication and service even in the face of this threat.

Liam, you also spoke to some other key themes including:

- the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland;
- The pressures on the PSNI budget, recruitment and resources;
- the wide-reaching effects that assaults on your members can have and the need to address this

And I want to take the opportunity to respond to these matters.

As I've said, this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, a milestone that provides an important opportunity for reflection.

Over the past 25 years, PSNI officers have played a central role in supporting peace, stability and public confidence during a period of profound change. Policing in Northern Ireland has never been straightforward, and those who serve here do so in a complex environment shaped by legacy issues, a continuing security threat and intense public and political scrutiny.

Throughout this period, you have worked tirelessly to protect communities, disrupt organised crime and terrorism and support victims, all whilst responding to the growing range of challenges facing modern policing. You have done so while navigating the expectations that come with policing in a post-conflict society, where legitimacy, fairness and community trust are paramount.

The establishment of the PSNI marked a fundamental shift towards a policing model built on accountability, partnership and public confidence. Over the last 25 years, you and your colleagues have helped embed that approach on the ground through everyday professionalism, fairness and commitment to service. Much of that work goes unseen, but it has been essential in maintaining safety and confidence across our communities.

I, therefore, greatly welcomed the overwhelmingly positive public response to the recent BBC programme 'The PSNI for Real', which provided the public with a small glimpse into the often stark and complex situations officers face on a day-to-day basis, dealing with people who are often both volatile and vulnerable. But more than that, it demonstrated the human side to policing both in how officers engage

with the public and also the emotional and physical personal toll that it takes.

I also want to acknowledge the impact that the role can have on you personally. You each see things that most of us hope never to see, and engage with people at their lowest points – time of crisis, times of grief, times of chaos – and it is not easy to absorb and deal with that in a professional and compassionate manner without it leaving an imprint on you.

As we reflect on this anniversary, it is right to recognise the dedication, courage and resilience shown by PSNI officers over the last 25 years. Your commitment has been critical, not only to delivering policing and justice, but to the wider stability of Northern Ireland. It is on that foundation that the PSNI continues to serve today, supporting communities while adapting to new and evolving challenges.

But we cannot ignore the stark reality the physical attacks have on your members. Attacks on PSNI officers, and other blue light and front-line workers, remain a serious and deeply concerning issue. Every day, PSNI officers place themselves in harm's way to keep our communities safe, often in challenging and highly charged circumstances. No officer should be subjected to violence, intimidation or abuse simply for carrying out their duty.

I believe that violence directed at police officers is not only an attack on the individual - it is an attack on the rule of law and on the safety of the wider community.

For too long, there has been a perception that assaults on police officers are somehow an unavoidable part of the job. I reject that notion entirely. Violence against PSNI officers is completely unacceptable, inexcusable and the law must reflect the seriousness of these offences and the harm they cause.

That is why my department has been working to strengthen the legal protections available to officers and other frontline personnel. As part of the 2019 sentencing policy review, we examined whether existing offences adequately captured the gravity of assaults on police officers and whether sentencing powers were sufficient. The conclusion was clear - reform was needed. Despite the frustrations of stop-go, up-down, government (which I share with your Chairman!) I am pleased that this work has now progressed to concrete legislative changes.

On 3 March 2026, the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill was introduced to the Assembly. The Bill seeks to improve clarity, consistency and confidence in sentencing, ensuring that our justice system responds in a way that the public, and those who serve it, can trust.

A central provision of the Bill is the creation of a **new offence** of assaulting a person performing a public duty or delivering a public service. It will carry stronger maximum penalties, giving the courts greater scope to reflect the seriousness of attacks on PSNI officers.

In addition, where more serious crimes are committed against police officers, the Bill provides for a **statutory aggravator** so that the fact the victim was a serving officer is clearly recognised during sentencing.

While sentencing decisions rest with an independent judiciary, it is my role as Justice Minister to ensure that the framework they operate within is fit for purpose. By strengthening the law, we are ensuring that assaults on PSNI officers are treated with the gravity they deserve and that the courts are empowered to impose sentences that penalise appropriately and deter future offending.

The Bill completed its Second Stage in the Assembly on 16 March and is currently under detailed examination by the Justice Committee. I remain confident that the Bill will complete its passage before the end of the current mandate and receive Royal Assent shortly thereafter.

This legislation sends a clear and deliberate message: violence against PSNI officers will not be minimised, excused or simply accepted as being 'part of the job'. Those who assault police officers should expect to

face firm consequences, backed by a sentencing framework that reflects the seriousness of their actions.

As PSNI officers you deserve respect, protection and the full backing of the justice system. Through this Bill, and through continued engagement with policing partners, I will continue to work to ensure that our laws stand firmly behind those who stand on the frontline for all of us.

An equally important issue that we must also address is of course funding. I want to be clear that policing has my full support as Justice Minister, and I will continue to press for the necessary resource that is needed to deliver the best possible policing service. Despite the significant financial pressures facing the Department, I have consistently prioritised funding for PSNI, whilst being mindful of the pressures elsewhere within the Justice System.

Through representations during recent monitoring rounds, we were able to secure additional in year PSNI funding allocations of £69 million in 2023-24 and a further £73 million in 2024-25.

In the last financial year, we also secured additional resource for a number of unavoidable pressures, including:

- £5m for policing costs associated with disorder in the summer
- Nearly £5m for PSNI through Programme for Government funding
- Executive agreement to a PSNI workforce stabilisation plan, with funding to allow recruitment to recommence
- Executive agreement to allocate £119m for data breach compensation

However, years of sustained underfunding have placed significant strain on services right across the system, and policing is no exception. When funding has not kept pace with demand it is frontline services, including policing, that have been forced to absorb the associated pressures. That position is unsustainable and since taking up the role of Justice Minister, I could not have been more robust in making that case to the Executive and I will continue to do so.

We run the entire Justice system on just over 8% of the block grant, down from 11% in 2011. That contrasts sharply with Health and Education which collectively account for over 70% of the block. And yet many of the issues which we collectively deal with are as a result of lack of provision within health and education – mental health, addiction, undiagnosed learning difficulties, speech, language and communication challenges. There needs to be a reset and we need to properly fund

justice in all its parts so we can keep people – including those who work within the system – safe.

In all of this, we cannot overlook the ongoing impact of funding investigations into the legacy of our past. While every member of society is entitled to truth and justice regardless of the passage of time, the cost of investigations place a strain on the current policing budget and impact on how you keep our communities safe today.

25 years ago no one could have predicted that we would still be shouldering the costs of legacy. The PSNI estimates the cost of legacy litigation alone to be £100million. That is funding that could be redirected elsewhere to ease some of the significant pressures being felt day in and day out from right across the justice system.

No other police force has to deal with these hangovers from the past and I am clear that we cannot continue to absorb these costs any longer. I have been robust in my engagement with the NIO and Secretary of State that the success or failure of the Government's legacy legislation, will rest on their willingness to adequately fund the police, courts and Police Ombudsman's office to support its work.

We must ensure we have adequate funding to support historic investigations and ensure that we can protect our communities in the

present. I do not accept that these costs are ours to bear and I am determined that it is the UK Government – not the Executive - that should provide proper and adequate funding to deal with legacy issues.

In terms of the Executive, as things stand, the prospective funding allocation within the draft budget is insufficient to support a sustainable justice system from the outset. In this coming year alone, we are projecting resource stabilisation pressures in excess of £100 million, and that is before taking account of further exceptional liabilities. To be blunt, I have never known the financial picture to be as bad as it is right now.

It is highly regrettable therefore, that the Executive has not yet been able to agree either a multi-year or a 2026/27 budget to date. The Department has been informed that in the absence of an agreed budget we must use a contingency planning envelope which is even worse than the draft budget.. This only stands to impede our ability to deliver on our commitments.

The PSNI continues to receive the clear majority of additional or earmarked funding within the DoJ, which reflects the importance of your role in supporting public safety and community confidence. This includes targeted investment to support workforce recovery and to strengthen

policing capacity, despite the wider pressures across prisons, courts, legal aid and probation services.

The earmarked allocations towards PSNI workforce recovery in the proposed Draft Budget demonstrate the joint efforts of the Chief Constable and I to push for investment in policing, and recognises the critical role the service plays in ensuring public safety. However, I am deeply concerned that the funding for PSNI Workforce Recovery will be of limited value in the absence of sufficient funding for PSNI to pay existing staff and running costs.

My strategic priority is to support the recovery and stabilisation of the workforce, enabling PSNI to recruit, retain and develop high quality officers while working to support morale, wellbeing and operational resilience.

I am therefore pleased to see the initial impacts of year one of the recovery plan with officer numbers standing at 6,315 as of start of this month up from a historic low of 6,190 towards the end of 2025. While there remains a great deal of work ahead, to achieve a fully recovery for police numbers, we are at least moving in the right direction.

I was also encouraged by the number of applications received in the most recent recruitment campaign, which demonstrates an impressive,

and continued, level of interest and it is promising to see so many who wish to pursue a career in policing.

Alongside officer numbers, wellbeing is critical. But it would be naïve to think the two issues are not linked. When resources are tight, workloads grow heavier, and fewer officers are asked to do more. Having enough officers available to deploy will inevitably reduce the pressures on your members. Achieving that is a work in progress, and I know it will not happen overnight, but work to recover numbers is a positive step in the right direction.

You are entrusted with keeping people safe in their communities, and I recognise that you feel the impact of financial constraint directly in the difficult, real-time decisions you must make every day about how resources are deployed. Despite this, you continue to demonstrate professionalism, resilience and an unwavering commitment to public service, and I want to acknowledge the dedication you show in keeping our communities safe under such challenging circumstances.

I want to see officers/you rewarded appropriately for the difficult job they do, and alongside work to provide evidence to the pay review bodies, I have also approved improvements to familial leave provisions in the last two years, as well as increases to annual leave entitlements, bringing

PSNI officers into line with England and Wales, and we will continue to explore further proposals.

Policing in Northern Ireland continues to face complex and demanding circumstances and that reality must not be underestimated. However, despite the challenges of the last year, I believe there remains a determination to deliver for our communities. There has been a sustained effort among policing and justice partners to define and recognise these challenges, with considerable progress having been made to both stabilise policing and to rebuild confidence both internally and externally.

The recent publication of the Katie Simpson Review, the Langdale Review and the PONI investigations into abuse of position for sexual purposes will have been difficult and challenging for the PSNI. I have no doubt that many officers within the service will have been shocked and disturbed by the failings identified and behaviours identified.

I am committed to seeing improvements arising from Katie Simpson's case embedded across policing, the justice system and, crucially, beyond justice, so that trust is restored and lives are better protected in the future. I am encouraged by the firm commitment of the Chief Constable and his senior team to learn the vital lessons arising from this tragic case and to embed the review recommendations to ensure this

never happens again. And I know that officers at all ranks are deeply committed to protecting people and in leaving no stone unturned when harm has been done to any individual.

I want to end on a positive note. I am immensely proud of what the Police Service has achieved in the 25 years since it was formed and that is down to the commitment of you it's workforce. The PSNI has been on a journey for the past 25 years and will continue to evolve and develop further in the years ahead.

I welcome every opportunity to visit with police and staff from right across the service and I am always humbled by the drive and commitment that is evident during these visits. I look forward to further engagements in the near future and to continuing to work together for fairness, justice and safety.

We do not know what the next 25 years will look like or what challenges lie ahead: however, as I stand here today, I have full confidence that the PSNI has the professionalism, the resilience and the commitment to constant improvement to rise to that challenge and continue to keep people safe.

Thank you again for allowing me to join you today.