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Chief Constable statement on institutional discrimination

Scotland's Chief Constable Sir Iain Livingstone QPM addressed the matter of institutional discrimination in policing at a meeting of the Scottish Police Authority Board today (Thursday, 25 May).

His statement is in full below.

I have been the Chief Constable of Police Scotland for six of our 10 years and have been a police officer, holding the office of Constable for over 30 years. As such, I have a deep and personal sense of duty and responsibility for leading, shaping and representing an institution of which all the people of Scotland should be hugely proud.

Police Scotland has grown into an organisation known to be compassionate, values based, and highly competent. It is well regarded nationally, extremely well regarded internationally, but I know it can improve, must improve.

Institutional racism, sexism and institutional discrimination have become iconic terms in the vital battle to tackle injustice. Police officers and staff, including police leaders, can be conflicted both in acknowledging their existence and in using such terms, fearing it would unfairly condemn dedicated and honourable colleagues or that it means no progress has been made since the 1990s.

Truly, I recognise and understand that conflict. I have experienced that conflict myself over a number of years.

The meaning of institutional racism set out by Sir William Macpherson in 1999 in his report on the appalling murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 is, rightly, very demanding.

The phrase, the terminology, however, can be and often is misinterpreted or misrepresented as unfair and personal critical assessments of police officers and police staff as individuals.

That is not the case.

Does institutional discrimination mean our police officers and police staff are racist and sexist? No. It absolutely does not. I have great confidence in the character and values of our people. I am proud of Police Scotland and I am proud of my colleagues, proud of my officers and staff.

So I know and have shared the reservations and concerns about acknowledging that institutional discrimination exists in policing.

However, it is right for me, the right thing for me to do as Chief Constable, to clearly state that institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and discrimination exist. Police Scotland is institutionally racist and discriminatory. Publicly acknowledging these institutional issues exist is essential to our absolute commitment to championing equality and becoming an anti-racist Service. It is also critical to our determination to lead wider change in society.

Prejudice and bad behaviour within policing, as highlighted by court and conduct cases, various independent reviews and by listening to our own officers and staff over recent years, is rightly of great concern and is utterly condemned.

There is no place in Police Scotland for those who reject our values and standards. Our vigilance as an organisation has never been stronger - rigorous recruitment; enhanced vetting; more visible conduct outcomes; and a focus on prevention.

Every officer in Scotland swears an oath when they take up the Office of Constable to do their duty with fairness, integrity, diligence and impartiality, upholding human rights and according equal respect to our fellow citizens, according to law. Such an oath rightly requires high levels of personal accountability.

Our officers and staff, my colleagues, do incredible things to keep our communities safe, to keep their fellow citizens safe. I know they take their duties and responsibilities incredibly seriously. Their success is illustrated by the strong bond of trust we share with the public of Scotland and our role as the service of first and last resort in times of crisis.

But we know, I know, people from different backgrounds or with different requirements don't always get the service that is their right. We know that, for the same reasons, our own officers and staff don't always have the experiences they deserve. When an organisation doesn't have all the necessary policies, processes, practices and systems in place to ensure that doesn't happen, it's an institutional matter.

A candid, clear, assessment of institutional discrimination means recognising our absolute duty to provide just and effective policing for all according to their specific needs and circumstances. It also requires identifying and removing the deep-rooted barriers to achieving this. These are necessary steps to progress the commitment that Police Scotland will be anti-racist; a personal commitment I made to my fellow citizens at the commencement of the Public Inquiry into the death of Sheku Bayoh. And, as a commitment to the people of Scotland, it is also a commitment to Sheku Bayoh's family and loved ones.

The onus is on us, the police service, to address gaps and challenge bias, known or unwitting, at every level, wherever bias occurs, to maintain and build confidence with all communities.

Recognising institutional discrimination, institutional racism, in my view, is a statement of reality. The real challenge, the real test, is how are we working to address it, what are we doing about it?

Our Policing Together programme identifies and co-ordinates effective and sustainable change right across Police Scotland.

We are actively, genuinely, listening to under-represented communities, inside policing and across our country and beyond, to understand how we can better serve them.

We are investing to give every police leader the skills and tools they need to build inclusive, effective teams. We are committed to increasing our knowledge and learning on inclusion. We are open, we want to know more. We are committed to regularly and actively challenging and changing our own policies and procedures to eradicate unwitting bias.

In my view, all organisations, not only in policing, should share and make those commitments to move beyond words and focus on action.

Our intention, my intention, is to move towards meeting the ambition set out by Sir William Macpherson to eliminate racist prejudice and disadvantage and demonstrate fairness in all aspects of policing.

A great strength of policing in Scotland is our diversity - anyone can be a police officer. We will attract, retain and promote a diverse workforce which reflects and represents our communities.

The police are the public and the public are the police and this is truer in Scotland than anywhere else.

Earlier this year, I appointed a chief officer dedicated to providing the sustained and visible leadership required to co-ordinate and drive this essential work.

Of course, our operational response to reports from women; from people with black or Asian heritage; people who have disabilities; LGBTI citizens; anyone from a minority group; is vital, crucial, in maintaining the confidence of all our communities. The confidence to come forward, the confidence to know you will be treated fairly, treated with respect and with assurance that Police Scotland will respond professionally and with compassion to your own particular circumstances, characteristics and needs.

Developing our policing response to violence against women and girls and hate crime will ensure we continue our vital role in helping build a society in this country where everyone feels safe and secure and is able to thrive and flourish and truly be themselves.

We know the onus is on us in policing to continue to earn the trust of all communities. Because that relationship is the foundation of police legitimacy and vital to our ability to keep people safe. It is our moral duty. It is an operational necessity.

Injustice and discrimination are insidious wrongs with deep roots in history and our work to address institutional discrimination will and must continue beyond me as Chief Constable, beyond any individual. Acknowledging institutional discrimination, acknowledging institutional racism will, I believe, act as a catalyst to drive and embed progress. The whole service must and will retain our resolve, our commitment and our focus.

Our success, the success of policing in Scotland, will be measured by the improved experiences of our officers and staff, and of all the communities, all our fellow citizens, who we serve.

Recognition that institutional racism exists within Police Scotland is a key step, a fundamental step forward towards being an inclusive Service which champions equality for all the people of Scotland. It is the right thing to do and will make policing in Scotland even more effective in keeping people safe.

Understanding and recognising institutional racism and all forms of institutional discrimination within Police Scotland can, and should, be a source of confidence and optimism for officers and staff, for our organisation, that, collectively, we can lead necessary change in the Service and, indeed, contribute to change across society.

And our progress, our commitments, should act as a challenge to other services, other agencies, organisations and institutions – whether in business; academia; political parties; media outlets; bodies across the public, private and third sectors - to look to themselves rigorously and honestly, as we have done, and join and support the mission to eradicate discrimination.

Scotland as a whole must commit ourselves to that purpose. The Police Service of Scotland is committed that mission, committed to ensuring our police service, your police service and institutions are, together with the people of Scotland, building fairness, equality and justice.

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