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- Staff shortages see troubled police call centre pay £4k a week in overtime

17 Feb 2017



Police Scotland have forked out more than £4000 a week in overtime payments for a troubled call-handling centre since it absorbed the work of two other facilities.

The Bilston Glen centre, which was at the centre of the M9 tragedy controversy, took on the work of other facilities in Stirling and Glenrothes in April 2015.

And since then, more than £350,000 has been paid to police staff working overtime to fill gaps in the rota and deal with the increased demand.

The Scottish Conservatives, who obtained the data through Freedom of Information, said it proved the centre has been inadequately resourced from the start, and another example of bad forward-planning by the SNP.

It reveals overtime payments at Bilston Glen reached £289,728 in 2015/16, and £60,852 so far in 2016/17.

John Yuill and Lamara Bell died in 2015 when the car they were travelling in crashed off the M9.

And despite the car's location being reported to the single force's 101 number, it took three days for officers to arrive at the scene.

The delay was blamed on problems with logging calls at Bilston Glen, where staff complained of a lack of resources and insufficient training.

The Scottish Government was also accused of ignoring warnings about resources in call-handling centres for up to 18 months before the tragedy hit.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:

“Everyone accepts some overtime payments will be necessary in facilities the size of Bilston Glen.

“However, the sheer scale of these points to a major problem with staffing and resources there.

“If the Scottish Government had ensured these facilities were properly staffed to begin with, there wouldn’t be a requirement for additional payments of this magnitude.

“The SNP was warned about this in advance of centralising these units, but as usual ignored them completely.

“Now we see the financial cost of that, not to mention a reduction in performance which has resulted in extremely damaging publicity for Police Scotland.

“This is something the Scottish Government needs to get under control as a matter of urgency.”

To see a copy of the Freedom of Information request, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/17-0045-Data.pdf>

Resources at the Bilston Glen facility came under the spotlight following the M9 tragedy:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2015/09/ruth-snp-ignored-call-centre-warnings-for-18-months/>

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2015/11/report-reveals-police-call-handling-failings/>

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16 Feb 2017



The SNP government was warned about business rates increases last year – but did nothing to help.

Leading business groups wrote to finance secretary Derek Mackay as early as October 2016 spelling out the damaging impact the revaluation would have on hotels, pubs and businesses in Scotland.

The British Hospitality Association said it would have a “severe impact” and

“likely lead to an increase in rateable values, and rates payable, by hotels of between 30 and 50 per cent”.

And in November, the Scottish Retail Consortium warned a Holyrood committee: “It will be very difficult to absorb some of the potential costs.”

Cosla even offered to help the Scottish Government do some modelling work on the rates rise, an offer it said “has not been taken up”.

However, the SNP’s response was to insist the revaluation had nothing to do with the Scottish Government – and is still refusing to act in order to help.

The Scottish Conservatives are today repeating their call for Mr Mackay to make a statement to Holyrood next week, and to order an immediate review of the revaluation before it comes into effect.

The party has also slammed Mr Mackay’s comments in the press this morning, when he insisted it was for councils, not central government, to respond.

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

“Business groups were warning about the impact of this revaluation last year.

“Yet, from the very start, the SNP’s response has been to pass the buck and insist it is nothing to do with them.

“It is a complete abdication of responsibility.

“Once again, we see a Scottish Government so obsessed with its campaign for independence that it has fallen asleep at the wheel on the issues that actually matter to people.

“Derek Mackay this morning has once again washed his hands of the matter and declared that it is for councils to act.

“This is from the man who has an extra £500m to spend next year, and who found nearly £200m down the back of the sofa two weeks ago in order to do a deal with the Greens.

“Mr Mackay should come before parliament to set out a clear statement that he will review this revaluation process before it is too late for firms which face going to the wall.

“Anything else will show that this SNP government has lost touch entirely with a crisis it knew was coming – but ignored.”

The SNP government was repeatedly warned by business groups about the crisis, most prominently by the British Hospitality Association.

British Hospitality Association

'The 2017 rates revaluation in Scotland is likely to lead to an increase in rateable values, and rates payable, by hotels of between 30-50%. BHA has challenged this with the Assessors and has made known to the Scottish Government its concern over the impact of this on the profitability and sustainability of hotel businesses' (*British Hospitality Association*, 18 October 2016, [link](#)).

William Macleod, British Hospitality Association

'BHA is concerned, from what is known about the impact on hospitality and hotel businesses of the potentially severe impact of the 2017 revaluation that TR is likely to be required in the hospitality sector to allow businesses to cope with significant (between 30-50%) increases in rates' (*William Macleod, British Hospitality Association – Consultation Response: 2017 Non-domestic rating revaluation – consultation on possible transitional arrangements*, [link](#))

Councillor Keenan COSLA

'More than a year ago, we made an offer to the Government that we would do modelling work on business rates, because we realise that there would need to be some equalising factor across areas, as some industrial areas can raise much more. We would look to do that work but, because that opportunity has not been taken up, we are probably a year or so behind where we could be. If that joint work was going on, we would have an indication of where the figures are.' (Local Government and Communities Committee Official Report, 28 September 2016, [link](#)).

David Lonsdale, Scottish Retail Consortium

'Committee members will know some of our gripes about business rates, the large business supplement and the apprenticeship levy—I have a large list that I can bore the committee with at a later date, if you like. There will be some genuine challenges if retailers are to absorb some of those costs, so they will be looking for sharper deals with suppliers to see whether they can get a better price. They will also be shopping around, just as we advocate that consumers do, to see whether they can get the same quality of produce at better prices. As I said, it will be very difficult to absorb some of the potential costs, but it will be difficult to pass them on to consumers, given the current climate and the stiff competition out there.' (Official Report, *Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee*, 24 November 2016, p18, [link](#))

Scottish Retail Consortium

'It is far from clear why firms operating in Scotland should pay more in rates than firms in comparable premises elsewhere in the UK, particularly when many have options over where to invest elsewhere in the UK or indeed abroad. Next year's rise in the headline poundage rate for all other firms should also be shelved. After all, stimulating business investment is more difficult when costs are rising as it means diverting cash and resources away from growing the business The SRC supports the principle behind the new

local discretionary rates relief in the interim period prior to fundamental rates reform. It is a welcome acknowledgement of the need to keep down costs for business. However, we remain to be convinced that its use by councils will either be widespread or substantive enough to be effective' (Scottish Retail Consortium, *retail industry recommendations for the Scottish Government for its Budget & Spending review* 1 August 2016, p6, [link](#))

[Half of Scotland's courts now taking longer to process cases](#)

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15 Feb 2017



Half of Scotland's sheriff courts are taking longer to process cases than they were a year ago, new figures have revealed.

In total, more than 30 per cent are now failing to hit the 26-week target from issuing a caution or charge to reaching a verdict.

That compares to 73 per cent for the same period the previous year, with eight courts failing to even get 60 per cent of cases concluded on time.

Only two facilities – in Portree and Stornoway – managed to get all cases wrapped up within the six-month timeframe.

And of Scotland's 40 sheriff courts, 19 are performing more poorly than a year ago.

It suggests courts across the country are struggling to cope with a series of closures embarked upon by the SNP in recent years.

One in five sheriff and justice of the peace courts closed, despite warnings of an increased workload for those remaining and inconvenience for victims and witnesses.

The statistics were revealed following a parliamentary question by Scottish Conservative chief whip John Lamont.

They show, in November 2016, 69.8 per cent of cases were dealt with in time, compared to 73.24 per cent for November 2015.

The Scottish Conservatives warned against court closures, arguing delays like

this would occur, while lawyers have also been critical of the decision.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:

“This is another example of the SNP being warned against making a decision for a number of reasons, but blundering on anyway.

“Now it’s taking longer to get cases through court, and many will feel that’s a direct result of the SNP’s closure programme.

“This doesn’t just have an adverse impact on the staff left to sort this out, but it also creates inconvenience for witnesses and victims of crime.

“Now that the SNP has shut these courts right across the country, the least it could do is ensure those remaining have sufficient resources to see cases through to their conclusion in the target timeframe.”

Notes to editors:

To see a copy of the data obtained by the Scottish Conservatives, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Copy-of-Court-cases-PQ.xlsx>

The Scottish Conservatives have consistently criticised the SNP for the programme of court closures:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2015/09/sheriff-courts-less-efficient-in-wake-of-snp-closure-programme/>

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2013/03/snp-hasnt-thought-through-court-closures/>

Shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross quizzed Michael Matheson on the issue at a recent Holyrood justice committee:

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10723>

[Hard-pressed businesses urged to appeal unfair rates rise](#)

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15 Feb 2017



Businesses facing massive rates rises in Scotland have been urged to lodge appeals following a controversial revaluation.

The Scottish Conservatives said any business which feels it can't afford the increase should make those views known to ministers by formally objecting.

The more firms which do so, shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said, the more likely it would be for the SNP to have a change of heart.

Businesses right across the country have warned they will go to the wall if the rates hike is applied, with some facing increases of more than double.

They say the system for revaluation is flawed and needs to be reviewed.

It comes as new figures revealed Scotland continues to lag behind the rest of the UK when it comes to employment, with the jobless number rising by 6000 in the last quarter.

And that will only get worse, the party said, if more businesses are forced to close as a result of the punitive changes.

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

"Businesses facing these extortionate increases could send a very clear message to the SNP on this.

"By formally appealing these increases, finance secretary Derek Mackay would soon realise just how severe a problem this is.

"He's refusing to listen to opposition parties and experts, but he might listen to the individuals affected.

"Latest employment figures again show Scotland is trailing behind the rest of the UK, and this is becoming a stubborn and worrying trend.

"If the Scottish Government doesn't heed warnings about firms going out of business as a result of these rises, the unemployment queues are only going to get longer north of the border.

"Derek Mackay seemed able to find tens of millions squirreled away for budget negotiations, so perhaps he could find some extra cash for hard-up businesses too."

Notes to editors:

For more information on how businesses can appeal, visit:

<https://www.mygov.scot/business-rates-appeals/>

Today, it emerged Scotland continues to lag behind the rest of the UK on employment:

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15 Feb 2017



The British Transport Police makes thousands of arrests every year, including hundreds for assault on staff and alcohol-related offences, new figures have shown.

A Freedom of Information request by the Scottish Conservatives revealed more than 13,000 arrests have been made since 2011 on trains and at stations in Scotland.

It comes as the SNP attempts to incorporate the BTP into Police Scotland, despite warnings from rail bosses this week that officers dealing with transport incidents could end up getting called away on other duties.

Now the Scottish Conservatives have questioned whether the single force is ready to deal with the dozens of additional incidents which occur on trains every week north of the border.

The FoI statistics showed the BTP made 2023 arrests last year, as well as 110 arrests in the first few weeks of 2017 alone.

Of the incidents in 2016, 221 related to alcohol, while 197 arrests followed allegations of verbal or physical assaults on a staff member.

In total, since 2011, there have been more than 1000 assaults on workers.

Last week, Scotrail said it feared a loss of expertise from the proposals, while officers themselves have pointed to a number of potential pitfalls that could occur as a result of the move.

The Scottish Conservatives have repeatedly questioned why ministers want to take one of the UK's most successful policing departments and merge it with one of the poorest-performing.

Scottish Conservative transport spokesman Liam Kerr said:

“The sheer numbers involved here show that taking away a dedicated service like the British Transport Police is a bad idea.

“What’s more, these are serious cases involving physical assault on staff and the abuse of alcohol.

“Passengers and staff alike respect the BTP and the job they do.

“Many suspect the motivation behind this move is for the SNP to get rid of the word ‘British’ from Scotland’s railways, and replace it with the word ‘Scotland’.

“If this move jeopardises the safety of workers and passengers, as these statistics suggest it might, then it must be resisted.”

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:

“The move by the SNP to have Police Scotland take over the BTP’s work is misguided and unpopular.

“It will cause all kinds of confusion, not least when it comes to cross-border services.

“The BTP itself has set out perfectly reasonable alternatives, but the Scottish Government doesn’t want to listen.

“If this move results in trains being less safe for staff and passengers, it will be another mark against Police Scotland’s name in the eyes of the public.”

Notes to editors:

To see a copy of the FoI response, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FOI-Response-0080-17.pdf>

To read more on Scotrail’s concerns, visit:

<http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scotrail-warns-transport-police-merger-plan-could-lead-to-delays-1-4362864>