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Statement on policing and security

Parliamentary speech by Justice Secretary Michael Matheson.

Presiding Officer, I would like to make a statement about Police Scotland's announcement of an increase in the number of armed police officers.

Let me be clear at the outset that today's announcement is about the number of armed officers – not the circumstances in which they are deployed.

Members will recall the controversy in summer 2014 when armed officers were deployed to incidents not involving firearms or a threat to life. Police Scotland then reverted to the policy of only deploying armed officers to incidents involving firearms or a threat to life. There is no change to that approach.

The threat we face from terrorism is real. The overall threat level in the UK from international terrorism is classified as *Severe* and has been since August 2014.

The events that we witnessed at *Charlie Hebdo*'s offices in January 2015; again on the streets of Paris in November; and the mass murders in Brussels, are scenes that we never want to see again. They brought home just how vulnerable major cities can be. And again in the last few days in Orlando we have seen carnage and terror caused by a lone gunman.

There is no specific known threat to Scotland but it is the duty of government to protect its citizens, so we must plan and prepare for any eventuality. Sadly, we know that Scotland and the UK are not immune from terrorism; previously we have seen attacks in both Glasgow and London. The criminal use of firearms also poses a threat.

This Government will always ensure that Scotland is well protected, that plans are in place to respond to such threats and that the risks are mitigated.

I can assure members that Scotland is playing its full part in the continuous planning and preparations that go on across the UK to protect our communities.

The Scottish Government and our emergency services continue to work alongside the UK Government in considering our preparedness against all threats.

We are committed to ensuring that Scotland's law enforcement and other bodies have all the tools they need to tackle terrorism and organised crime effectively.

The attacks in Paris and Brussels, as well as intelligence about organised crime, have informed the work undertaken by Police Scotland to review plans, and it has today announced an increase in the number of armed officers to help maintain safety and security in our communities.

The Chief Constable has briefed me and Ministerial colleagues on the case for this increase. This is an operational decision for the Chief Constable to make; and it is a decision that has the full backing of Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Police Authority.

Police Scotland constantly assess and review resources against the latest intelligence and have carried out a very detailed and robust assessment of capability and capacity to inform their decision to increase armed officer numbers.

There are currently 275 Police Scotland officers dedicated to armed response vehicles. The increase of an additional 124 officers announced today, including 90 officers dedicated to armed response vehicles, will be phased over a number of months as they are recruited internally and trained to the very high standards demanded for this specialist role.

The vast majority of Scotland's police officers are not routinely armed. We have made an unequivocal commitment that that position will not change.

Of our 17,317 police officers only a small proportion have standing firearms authority to carry weapons. This will now increase, but will still represent a small percentage. It will be fewer than one in 40 officers.

Police Scotland have written today to the Justice Committee to notify members of the planned increase which will take the percentage of officers with standing authority to over 2% as officers are recruited. This fulfils a commitment which was made by my predecessor in August 2014.

Police Scotland will continue to keep armed policing capacity and capability under review based on understanding of the evolving threat. This Scottish Government will fully support them in doing so.

As part of Police Scotland's engagement with communities, local commanders in all parts of Scotland will be meeting with local authorities and chairs of scrutiny committees to ensure that they are briefed. Senior officers have also briefed representatives of ASPs and the SPF whose members include most armed officers.

Police Scotland have made clear in their announcement today that there is no change to the current policy of only deploying armed response officers to incidents

involving firearms or threat to life. Armed response officers will also continue to be able to use their professional judgement as police constables to deal with any situation they come across during the course of their patrols. Armed police officers are, first and foremost, police officers, and they are expected to respond appropriately to keep people safe.

However, let me be clear that armed officers will not be routinely deployed to incidents other than those involving firearms or a threat to life. Members will recall that it was the fact of armed officers attending more routine calls – and therefore giving the impression that our police service was becoming routinely armed – that caused controversy back in 2014. There is no proposal to return to that.

The model of deployment of armed officers will of course continue to be kept under regular review by Police Scotland's Armed Policing Monitoring Group. This group advises the Chief Constable. However, I am clear that any proposed change to the model of deployment would have to take account of the views of the public, stakeholders and Parliament.

I want to recognise today my gratitude for the role that the men and women of Police Scotland play day-in day-out protecting the public. Their commitment and dedication to public service means often putting themselves in harm's way to protect others. That is especially true of the officers who undertake a firearms role.

Officers volunteer to become armed officers. They are then carefully selected for that highly specialised role, train long and hard to ready themselves for the responsibilities and risks that it entails, and put themselves in the frontline in many of the most perilous situations that police officers can face.

They are among the most highly trained officers within the service and they deserve our respect and support in the difficult and often dangerous work that they do across Scotland, work that they do on behalf of all of us.

All of this preparation goes hand in hand with our work to build cohesive communities, so that extremist messages do not resonate. We do so by building strong and enduring relationships with all of Scotland's communities.

We have a strong track record of working for an inclusive and cohesive Scotland, where diverse communities are valued for their contributions and a culture of respect and social justice is fostered.

As a Government we have always sought to build stronger, more resilient communities across Scotland and we will continue to do so. Respecting diversity and challenging hate are key to this.

This Government, Police Scotland and other agencies are strengthening protection of our communities, but the responsibility for our collective safety also lies with each one of us as citizens and neighbours.

The attacks in mainland Europe and Orlando caused shock and grief around the world. As a Government we are resolute in protecting the way of life that we enjoy and cherish in this country. The different threats that we face in our daily life and as a nation mean we must be prepared for any eventuality. That is precisely what today's announcement is about.

There is no specific known threat to Scotland. People are safe to go about their day-to-day business and should be further reassured by today's announcement by Police Scotland.