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Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford
BY EMAIL ONLY

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Dear Police and Crime Commissioner

I am writing to detail my budget proposal for the next year, and to seek your support for an increase in the police precept. The Government has now made the announcements on funding, allowing you to raise the police precept in 2024/25 by up to £13 per year for an average Band D property.

The support and confidence you and the Police and Crime Panel gave to the Avon and Somerset Constabulary last year is welcome and I believe well placed. We have continued to rebuild and strengthen our police officer ranks. After a period of rapid growth, we now face a new set of challenges.

We are both aware of the financial pressures on household budgets. These financial pressures are also a stark reality for public services, including policing. I believe we've shown how we've been prudent, driven efficiency, and delivered value for money. We are not immune to the pressures of inflation and rising costs, even with the maximum increase in the precept there will be tough choices to make.

Those choices are guided by what we now need to do to improve and build the trust and confidence of the people we serve. We've delivered our increase in police officer numbers with the growing pains I've described before. Despite a lack of officer experience, we're beginning to see evidence of improvement. But those green shoots are delicate and will only flourish with full delivery of our Uplift design, strong leadership and careful nurture.

In the face of financial pressures, we have already been compelled to pause some of our ambitions around our Uplift design, re-allocating officers destined for proactive neighbourhood and road safety teams and to grow our early intervention offer to offset the need to reduce police staff numbers in the most critical areas of the organisation to deliver a balanced budget. Our intent is that this is only a temporary measure, but this will ultimately be dictated by available funds, which the precept can materially influence.

Investment now in leadership is also crucial if we are to restore our relationship with the public. Leadership drives culture and I firmly believe that a strong culture will deliver positive outcomes for our communities. We've already started to deliver our new development programmes to our first-line leaders. Over the next twelve months, we will begin to develop training for our middle leaders. But it is clear to me that we need to go further and faster if we are truly going to turn our culture around.

These are the reasons I believe a precept of £13 per year is vital for our continued drive to build confidence with the public.

Our position is echoed by other police services across the country. National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Finance, Chief Constable Paul Sanford, said:

"We recognise that a 6% increase in police funding would appear significant given current economic challenges. We welcome further investment in policing and understand the challenges faced by Government, but this settlement is short of what forces require to progress and improve our service.

"The settlement does little more than part-fund our most recent pay award and cover additional employer pension contributions. This means that there will continue to be difficult financial decisions for every police force."

In June of last year, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary Andy Cooke set out some stark realities in his 'State of Policing' report. He described public confidence as hanging by a thread. While I share his concern, I maintain that the actions I am setting out in this letter, particularly the pace at which I want to invest in Avon and Somerset Police's leadership and preventative capabilities, are designed to meet that threat.

Where Are We Now?

Like other forces, we are seeing a rise in demand on our services, driven by increases in emergency 999 calls and digital channels. The 999 calls have gone up by 13% and digital forms are up by 18%. That demand is becoming more diverse and complex in nature and this, combined with our current levels of officer inexperience, creates a challenging environment; one that I believe has solutions in the full delivery of our Uplift design and in leadership development.

We've seen continued to see strong improvement in bringing more rape perpetrators to justice. We have seen large scale increases in charging volumes, up by 68% in the last 12 months, representing a rise of 246% since 2021 when our Operation Bluestone journey began. Moreover, the lessons we are learning can be applied wider across the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) continuum and likely wider still. We've also started our 'walk and talk' initiative. Launched in Somerset in September, where women arrange to meet with female police officers and PCSOs to show them areas in which they feel vulnerable and unsafe. The scheme is part of our ongoing work to increase women's trust in policing to tackle VAWG offences.

I'm sure you will share with me the recognition of the day-to-day heroism of our frontline police officers. Last week five Crown Court Commendations were issued for the 'selfless bravery' of officers involved in the prevention of individuals from carrying out a mass shooting. Reed Wischhusen planned to carry out the attacks disguised as a police officer, at his former school and at Avon and Somerset Police HQ. His plans came to light after he was shot by armed officers when he pointed a gun at them at his home in Wick St Lawrence, in November 2022.

You challenged us to engage and work with communities on issues they have. Our focus on dangerous and anti-social driving linked to e-bikes is one of these areas that resulted in national coverage through BBC News. The proactive work to tackle these crimes was the subject of a series of broadcast and online pieces, showing the first-hand experiences of our officers. To coincide with the coverage, we released details of an operation targeting crime and anti-social behaviour linked to motorbikes and mopeds, both traditional and electrically powered, which led to arrests and a reduction in reported ASB.

We know that communities are also concerned about knife crime. It is a key area where partnerships will help us towards solutions. We've been working with NHS England South West and HeartSafe to instal 144 live-saving bleed control kits across the region.

I am of course not blind to the challenges we face this year. Our HMICFRS 'Areas for Improvement' (AFIs) set us stretching targets. I, and my senior team, are addressing these with the urgency and focus you would expect. Our 101 call handling performance is one of those areas of focus, alongside the need to see improvement in our investigative standards and case file quality. Moreover, the timeliness of our response to immediate and priority incidents needs to improve.

The most recent data we have on response timeliness, from November, show some green shoots because of targeted leadership, improving resource levels as our new officers reach competency and concerted effort. We've seen some of our best figures for Immediate and Priority response in two years.

I am convinced that it is through strong, collaborative, and collective leadership at every rank and grade that we will improve in these areas.

Our Finances

We understand the importance of being prudent and continuing to drive efficiencies and deliver savings. These savings are important for us not only to balance the budget, but to continue to enable the investment into policing that will ensure we track the pace of change in criminality and wider society. Without this ongoing investment, we risk falling behind and never reaching the ambitions we have for our service and the safety of our communities.

Our position is compounded by the continued underlying funding inequality because of the way in which police grant funding is distributed. If Avon and Somerset Police were to receive the average funding per-head, we would see a £53 million increase to our budget. It would be more than double that if we were compared to other forces with major cities to police.

While a £13 increase in the average Band D precept for policing would not address this inequality, it would ensure we have maximised the funding available to us to help manage our financial pressures in 2024/25 and across the medium term. Even with a precept of £13 for next year we will still be making tough decisions about how we run this organisation and deliver policing.

At your request we have prepared plans on the assumption of a £10 increase in the precept. This means our plans are based on £1.8m less in funding than there would be if you were to increase the precept by the maximum £13 now offered to PCCs.

Our plans have identified £8.2m in savings in 2024/25, rising to £17.9m by 2025/26. Through these savings we can balance our 2024/25 budget, support some limited growth in critical areas, and set the groundwork for balancing budgets in future years.

Delivering savings on this scale has required, and will continue to require, reductions in headcount across our services. As police officer numbers are ring fenced, reductions are inevitably falling on the police staff establishment. In the first instance, we will look to natural attrition of staff to realise as much of these reductions as possible. Where this is not possible, we will ensure that we undertake management of change in line with our policies and procedures, giving every opportunity for those staff who want to remain employed in Avon and Somerset the chance to be redeployed into retained roles.

Our plans to deliver savings include:

- A pause in the recruitment of new PCSOs until the end of the 2024/25 financial year, thereby reducing our current headcount in PCSOs by c. 80 by March 2025. This is not a decision we have taken lightly but reflects the fact that we have protected PCSO numbers for the last 10 years while realising savings in every other part of the organisation. We are no longer able to sustain these numbers across the medium term, but this adjustment would bring us in line with the national average for PCSO numbers.
- A reduction in the number of police staff investigators we have in force. The officer uplift has enabled us to make investment into our detective numbers, and we are making strong progress towards those individuals achieving accredited status. Considering this, we will reduce c.86 police staff investigator posts over the course of the next 12 months.

- In January 2022, a police staff posts audit was conducted using detailed business analysis, which identified posts for further review. As a result of this audit, we have reduced our establishment by 44 posts through vacancy management, releasing £2 million savings to date. A further 36 posts have been identified for savings. We continue to work with a view to mitigating against impact on people and with the ambition that these will be realised through natural attrition of post holders, where possible.

In the context of these plans, our financial and strategic planning recognises the need for a measured approach to any organisational growth. As you know, we have already paused some of our ambitions for our Uplift, diverting more than sixty police officer posts allocated to create new proactive teams and to strengthen our early intervention offer, to offset the reductions in police staff posts to achieve a balanced budget. Our intent is that this is only a temporary measure, but it will be directly affected by the settlement that is agreed.

A maximum precept increase would generate a further £1.8m in funding, both in the next financial year and across the medium term. With this additional funding we would be able to relax the pause on our Uplift plan and bolster and accelerate our leadership plans by growing the number of Inspectors, Chief Inspectors, and Superintendents, and by accelerating development for this crucial tier of middle leaders across the force.

What Next?

We have spent much of 2023 developing and embedding our new Strategy, based around five imperatives: Inclusion, Innovation, Trauma-informed, Transparency and relentless Perpetrator-focus and creating the conditions for success for our medium- and long-term future.

Critical to such success is the discipline we're applying to our transformational change. In the last 12 months we have consolidated all our inflight change and improvement activities – hundreds and hundreds of them – into a portfolio of eight programmes which condense, focus and align our change work to deliver structured and visible progress towards achieving outstanding policing.

We have built a planning and change capability from scratch to power and guide us and we have grown our workforce planning team to make sure we have the workforce we need for our future and are building it now. We have also improved our governance to monitor the progress we are making and allow us to adapt and rectify where we need to.

We have built a new Target Leadership Model to describe the leadership attributes leaders need to have to lead for our Strategy, and we have developed and started to roll out a first line leadership programme to our first line leaders.

And, as I committed to you last year, we have delivered, even over delivered, our Uplift officer total. This boost in 'boots on the ground' is welcome, but it is also true that their full effect is yet to be realised, especially when we have had to make the difficult decision to pause plans to grow our proactive capabilities. I firmly believe that this aspect of our uplift design has the potential to make the greatest difference for communities because it enables prevention.

The high level of inexperience in our ranks puts pressure on our leaders. We're addressing that for first line leaders but there is more to do at every level of leadership if we are to drive the scale of culture change that will rebuild public confidence. Additionally, we've had a particular focus on rebuilding Investigations and are on target to achieve the numbers of detectives we need, however, this has been achieved through direct entry into the specialism, placing additional stretch on leaders in this discipline.

This is why 2024 is very much a year of Leadership. Developing our leaders, at every level in the organisation, is critical. Recognising that the first step into a leadership role can be the most challenging, we've launched our new First-Line Leaders programme in the last few weeks. The new

Target Leadership Model has been launched to help structure conversations that challenge and support consistently across the organisation. Furthermore, nearly 1,000 of our leaders are taking part in Leadership Time events, giving them the tools and authority to share our ambition and Strategy with the rest of the organisation.

At the start of this year, I brought together the Chief Officer Group, Senior Leadership Team, and our Superintendents with their Police Staff equivalents into a Strategic Leadership Group. Together, we'll embody our collective and collaborative leadership approach to the entire organisation.

I believe that our new Strategy combined with strong leadership will help us realise our ambitions for the force. Moreover, in the context of an inexperienced workforce and diminishing confidence in policing, improving our leadership capability is critical and urgent.

Conclusion

In 2022, we placed a five-year horizon on our Vision of Outstanding Policing for Everyone, and that timescale remains unchanged. Our commitment is to use this time to rebuild and strengthen public trust and confidence.

We've seen rapid growth, and a new generation of police officer; dedicated, enthusiastic, professional but lacking in street experience. I believe our focus on leadership at all levels in this organisation will be key to unlocking the benefits of that growth.

We continue to have a robust Uplift design, which balances bolstering our reactive capabilities with new investment in proactive, problem-solving and prevention. Unfortunately, in the current funding context, we have had to pause some of our plans in the latter area, which will delay the benefits our communities want and deserve.

Our resilience has been tested, but we are resolute. Our vision is clear. Outstanding policing for everyone won't happen through short-term, reactionary measures. Lasting change, lasting engagement, and an enduring relationship with our communities will take time to grow.

This is why I am asking for the precept of £13. I believe I have set out our ambitious plans and our pragmatism on what is achievable. I see investment in achieving our full Uplift design as soon as possible and in building our leadership capability as critical and urgent in our path to our vision of Outstanding Policing for Everyone. As you are aware, we will still have hard decisions to make about our funding priorities, but, as always, our decisions will be founded on how we can best serve the public.

I want to thank you for your steadfast support throughout this year. Your honest challenge and wise counsel are valued by me and everyone in my team. I am sure you will join me in recognising that the officers and staff of Avon and Somerset are shining examples of what modern policing in the UK stands for. I know how impressed you have been on your regular visits to our bases around the West. I too am deeply honoured and proud to count myself as one of their number.

Yours sincerely



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