



Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel
Hosted by Somerset Council Democratic Services



Annual Report

April 2023–
March 2024

*Providing effective Challenge and Support to the
Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner*

Bath & North East
Somerset Council



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Members of the Panel

Each of the Local Authorities in the Avon and Somerset Police area must be represented on the Panel by at least one elected member. It is the responsibility of each authority to ensure that the member appointed has the appropriate skills, knowledge and experience for their role on the Panel. The overall composition of all Police and Crime Panels should form a "balanced appointment" objective which takes account of, as far as is practical, both political and geographical proportionality. Reaching the balanced appointment objective is a collective responsibility of the component authorities and the Panel itself.

Each of the 5 Unitary councils in the force area are represented. North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire each have 2 seats. Bristol City Council has 3 seats based on the city's population size and comparatively high crime levels. Somerset has 5 seats following the dissolution of its 5 district councils on 1st April 2023 and the establishment of Somerset Council.

They are joined by three Independent Co-opted Members recruited through a competitive selection process, who have the same voting rights as the Councillor Panel Members. In total, there were 17 Panel Members in 2023/24:-


Bath and North East Somerset	Cllrs Andy Wait and Ann Morgan
Bristol City	Cllrs Asher Craig, Jonathan Hucker, Lisa Stone
North Somerset	Cllrs Peter Crew and Stuart Davies
Somerset	Cllrs Heather Shearer (Chair), Federica Smith-Roberts Nicola Clarke, Martin Wale, Brian Bolt
South Gloucestershire	Cllrs John Bradbury and Raj Sood
Independent Member	Richard Brown
Independent Member	Julie Knight (Vice-Chair)
Independent Member	Gary Davies

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Chair's Introduction

I am pleased to introduce the Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel's Annual Report for 2023/24 and reflect on the past year. Outside of the four-yearly election cycle, the Panel continues to provide the key support and accountability mechanism for the decisions and activities undertaken by Mark Shelford, the Police and Crime Commissioner.



Our communities want the best possible Police service and over the last year, I believe that we have applied our scrutiny powers to best effect. In doing so, I hope that we have reflected the views and concerns of our residents.

The challenges facing the Police service are complex and a variety of factors are at play including a long-standing inadequate funding formula and a workforce lacking in experience as efforts are made to recruit and offset the officers lost during austerity. As demand increases, the continuing ambiguity about the day-to-day role of front-line officers has only served to compound matters.

Our role is to both support and challenge the Commissioner's decisions and performance. In 2023/24, outside of our statutory responsibilities, the Panel's proactive scrutiny included an assurance report on Preventing and Fighting Crime, a review of the Commissioner's Estates Strategy and an assurance report on Business Crime. For the first time the Panel formed a small Budget Task Group to enable members to evaluate the effectiveness of additional Precept investment by reviewing quarterly budget reports across 2023/24. This enabled the wider Panel to make an informed decision on the adequacy of the Commissioner's precept proposal at the end of the year.

We also directed appropriate challenge by ensuring that the Commissioner is making adequate progress following the last assessment of the force by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). We feel strongly that unequivocal and consistent leadership is needed from the Commissioner and the Chief Constable as they manage the necessary change that will lead this force to be outstanding.

The Commissioner has highlighted his confidence in the Chief Constable and the robust plans in place to tackle the issues identified as areas of concern by HMICFRS.

It has also been a period of change for the Panel. Following the establishment of Somerset Council on 1st April 2023, the Panel now consists of 5 Unitary Authorities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the new members who have demonstrated

their willingness to participate in this important support and challenge role. I am grateful to all Panel Members for their invaluable contributions over the last year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Hshearer", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Heather Shearer, Chair.

Roles and Responsibilities

In each Police area, there is an elected Police and Crime Commissioner. The role of the Commissioner is to be the voice of the public and to hold the Chief Constable to account. The Commissioner is responsible for setting the strategic objectives of the Constabulary and deciding how funding for local policing and crime reduction activity is allocated. Mark Shelford was elected on 6th May 2021 and will stand for re-election on 2nd May 2024.

The purpose of the Police and Crime Panel is to support and challenge the Commissioner's decisions and performance. The Panel is made up of elected members from the 5 Local Authorities in the force area and 3 Independent members of the public who bring a variety of skills and experience to the role. Somerset Council currently acts as the Host Authority for the Panel and is responsible for its administrative and specialist officer support arrangements.

The Commissioner's plans and objectives are set out in a document called the Police and Crime Plan available here [Police and Crime Plan 21~25](#).

This is the most important document any Police and Crime Commissioner will produce during their term of office. The Commissioner is required by law to consult the Panel on the plan and other duties connected to his role. A summary of the Panel's core responsibilities is set out below :-

- Review the objectives set out in the Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan and monitor performance against his priorities.
- Scrutinise and vote on the Commissioner's proposed Policing Precept.
- Hold a Confirmatory Hearing for the Commissioner's proposed appointment of a Chief Constable and other senior officers (the Panel has the ability to veto the Chief Constable appointment if this is considered necessary).
- Resolve complaints that relate to the Commissioner's personal conduct.
- Scrutinise decisions the Commissioner makes in connection with the discharge of his functions and make reports and recommendations to the Commissioner in relation to the discharge of those functions.

Sarah Crew is the Chief Constable for the Avon and Somerset Police area, and it is important to note that the Panel does not hold the Chief Constable to account. If the Panel has a particular issue of concern, for example an increase in violent crime or a perceived deterioration in response to the public, the Panel's role is to establish how the

Commissioner is addressing this at a strategic level for the benefit of the public. In turn, the Chief Constable has responsibility for implementation of the Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan and for day-to-day operational matters in our communities. She is accountable to the Commissioner.

In carrying out the above duties, it is essential for the Panel to stay well informed on policy and strategic issues affecting Policing, and the Panel has dedicated officer support and appropriate developmental training to assist with this.

Key/Statutory Activities

Precept Proposal

One of the Panel's core duties is to annually scrutinise the Commissioner's proposed Council Tax Precept - the money collected from council tax specifically for Policing. As representatives of the tax payers of Avon and Somerset, the Panel's focus must be value for money and delivering outstanding performance.

In 2023/24, to retain appropriate oversight and ensure that the Panel made a tangible and practical contribution to the budget and Precept-setting processes, Panel Members formed a Budget Task Group. This aligned with the Panel's proposal following the last Precept to develop a mechanism that will enable members to make an assessment throughout the year of the effectiveness of the Precept investment.

Police forces are partially funded by central government. However, the continued use of an inequitable funding formula disadvantages this Police area, creating an on-going financial dilemma and the need to consider the extent to which local taxation should bridge the gap. The Commissioner's budget report set out a five-year financial position, outlining the specific service and funding issues over this period and specifying how priorities would be funded within financial constraints and ensure the financial sustainability and resilience of the force [see Agenda Item 8](#)

As in previous years, the Panel was required to reconcile the effect of the proposed increase against the hardship faced by many in our communities, and balance this against the increasingly complex demands of modern policing and the funding needed to deliver this. A growing but inexperienced workforce does not entirely overcome the disparity between demand and resources and inevitably this was one of the key factors that members were required to consider. It was also apparent that the service is not only required to be maintained, but improved upon in terms of operational capacity and capability.

Another determining factor in the Panel's decision were the assurances members received regarding Operation Hemlock, a force-wide response to crime led by the local Neighbourhood Team. The Panel heard that Operation Hemlock was a good example of how innovation and the effective use of resources could help to tackle the prevailing anti-social behaviour in our neighbourhoods. The Panel was therefore keen to establish how much better off neighbourhood policing would be with the extra £1.8 million that would be generated with a Precept increase of £13.00.

It was confirmed that the force would invest in Neighbourhood Teams to improve their visibility and communications network, and that the Panel's support of an increase in the Precept by £13.00 would enable the force to deploy similar operations across the force

area where required.

The Panel was ultimately satisfied that a Precept increase was justifiable at this time and should be supported subject to a number of recommendations. The Panel's formal review of the proposal can be found [here](#) on the Panel's publication page under Precept Review.

Recruitment and Retention

The Panel represents the residents of Avon and Somerset and understands that all communities want a low crime environment where people can feel safe and secure.

Recruitment falls under the Commissioner's Priority 3, Leading the Police to be Efficient and Effective. The Panel continues to retain oversight of Police officer and PCSO numbers by way of a timeline report to each of our meetings on recruitment progress and levels achieved. At the end of 2023/24, there were 3,352 officers in post, 41 fewer officers than at the end of the previous year (-1.2%).

For the last 10 years, PCSO numbers have been protected while savings have been realised in every other part of the service. In February 2024, the Panel was notified of a pause in the recruitment of new PCSOs until the end of the 2024/25 financial year, thereby reducing headcount by approximately 80 by March 2025. The Panel understands that this adjustment would bring Avon and Somerset in line with the national average for PCSO numbers but expressed concerns at the risk of further challenges to the service.

A reduction in the number of police staff investigators will take place over the next 12 months. This is because the uplift in Police officer numbers and the associated funding that comes with this has enabled targeted investment into operational detectives.

Complaints

The Panel is required to resolve complaints from the public that relate to the Commissioner's personal conduct. One of the Panel's Independent Member leads on complaints with advice, guidance and support provided by the Panel's Lead Officer throughout the process. The more serious complaints are referred to the Panel's Complaints Sub-Committee for consideration. However, the lead member role helpfully provides a filter for the less serious complaints and ensures that meetings of the complaints sub-committee are only held when necessary.

In practical terms, the Panel's objectives are clear and that is to ensure recording obligations are adhered to, delays avoided and appropriate resolutions to complaints reached as soon as possible.

A standing report on complaints is provided to each Panel Meeting and a copy of the Panel's Complaints Protocol can be found on the Panel's publication page [here](#) under Core Documents.

Performance Monitoring

National Crime and Policing Measures

Police forces are now ranked in league tables according to their success in cutting serious crime. Forces are measured according to their effectiveness in combatting six key areas - homicide, serious violence, the supply of drugs, neighbourhood crime, cyber crime and improving satisfaction for victims.

The Home Office requires the Commissioner to provide Panels with a narrative on force performance against the Government's crime measures mentioned above. The Panel was helpfully consulted by the Commissioner on the format for the presentation of the performance data and has been considering performance reports since December 2021.

The Panel's role is to make sure that the Commissioner is ensuring an adequate level of progress and improvement is being reached within these crime areas. We also monitor the Commissioner's performance against the priorities set out in his Police and Crime Plan. Minutes of Panel meetings and the robust lines of enquiry pursued by members can be viewed here [Minutes Police and Crime Panel](#).

In 2022, the Panel welcomed the Commissioner's introduction of governance arrangements which enables the Panel and the public to see him publicly holding the Chief Constable to account to increase public confidence and transparency. This takes place in the form of a Performance and Accountability Board which is a public meeting held via Facebook:-

<https://www.avonandsomerset-pcc.gov.uk/news/category/performance-accountability-board/>

The Panel will continue to provide feedback on the format of these meetings.

Proactive Scrutiny

This work has taken place in a variety of ways since 2012. It can take place outside of the core meeting cycle by individual members, as a dedicated Inquiry Day or as a whole Panel function by reserving part of a public meeting to a particular topic. Proactive scrutiny provides opportunity for greater insight and can inform the broader role of a Panel Member. It can also enable members to draw on their knowledge and expertise and contribute to the work of the Commissioner in key areas of business.

Budget Task Group

In 2023/24, a small group of Panel Members with interest and expertise in finance and accounting formed a Budget Task Group. It provided a mechanism to enable members to evaluate the effectiveness of additional precept investment by means of the opportunity to review quarterly budget outturn reports across 2023/24. The purpose of the group was to scrutinise the information made available by the OPCC and assist the wider Panel in making an informed decision on the precept proposal on 1st February 2024 (See Page 8 for the Precept process detail).

The group met on 4 occasions and held its last meeting on 26th January 2024 following the circulation of the Commissioner's final Budget report and Medium-Term Financial Plan. The Budget Task Group had the opportunity to consider papers in detail and submit detailed questions to the Chief Financial Officer on three occasions in response to budget monitoring reports, the first view of the budget shared with the Panel in December 2023 and final of the PCC's proposed budget for the precept meeting. The robust scrutiny and analysis undertaken can be demonstrated on the Panel's publication page under Proactive Scrutiny [here](#).

Public Trust and Confidence Sub-Committee

Policing both nationally and locally is feeling the strain of a significant reduction in trust and confidence, brought about by a range of national and local policing issues which have undermined public attitude towards policing.

The decline in public confidence is deeply concerning and the Commissioner shares this view. Whilst the Commissioner assures that the whole Police and Crime Plan is about raising confidence, the Panel takes the view that a more targeted strategy is needed.

The Panel formed a Public Confidence Sub-Committee in 23/24 to support and challenge the Commissioner as he responds to and holds the Chief Constable to account for the areas for improvement emerging from the last inspection of the force by

HMICFRS. His strategy to proactively improve public confidence, maintain the reputation of the force, and importantly to communicate this to the public, is key in our opinion.

The sub-committee will report in June 2025 and its Terms of Reference can be viewed on the Panel's website [here](#) under Proactive Scrutiny.

Crime Prevention Assurance Report

In the Police and Crime Plan, the Commissioner states "My vision is to lead Avon and Somerset Police to reassure our communities by building a culture that puts the emphasis of policing back on the prevention of crime." The Chief Constable states "The prevention of crime is at the core of this plan, and we're committed to pursuing those who commit the most crime, present the most significant harm and are the most corrosive to our communities".

The Panel recognises that prevention and problem solving are the responsibility of a number of partner agencies and has looked for assurance that partnership working is working as well as it can, as this can significantly reduce demands for service, increase trust and confidence and improve public safety.

In the context of the Neighbourhood Policing Teams, the Panel's aim was to get an understanding of their core duties and whether the reassignment of neighbourhood officers to manage demands for service had now ceased, as was anticipated last year. The Panel requested an assurance report on crime prevention detailing the strategies and measures in place in support of this priority and progress achieved since the implementation of the plan in 2021.

The Panel's review can be found [here](#) under Proactive Scrutiny.

Strategic Plan for the Police Estate in Avon and Somerset

Members considered this an important part of the Work Programme because of its links with diminishing public confidence in Policing. December 2023 was an optimal time to look at the Estates strategy as the outcome of the discussion could inform the Panel's Precept decision on 1st February 2024.

The Panel's review of Estates can be found [here](#) under Proactive Scrutiny.

Business Crime Assurance Report

An assurance report was commissioned by the OPCC on the theme of Business Crime in January 2024 that would provide opportunity to engage with the business community on this issue. This enabled the Panel to have sight of an assurance report on this theme from a force perspective, in addition to the planned OPCC input.

It was apparent that business crime had been a focus for the Commissioner since the start of his appointment, and that he wanted to understand the root issues. The Report demonstrated the recent work on business crime and gave an indication of the direction the work was taking. It is a priority issue for the Commissioner due to the concern voiced by affected communities and the importance of supporting small businesses.

The Panel thanked the Commissioner for the honesty of the report and the analysis undertaken. The Panel's review of Business Crime can be found [here](#) under Proactive Scrutiny.

Tackling Disproportionality Steering Committee and Race Matters

This topic was deferred to 2024/2025.

Development of the Panel

The Panel has continued to develop and seek opportunities for informal briefings, training and development workshops to keep members abreast of strategic policing issues and enhance their scrutiny role.

Panel Members supported by the Lead Officer have been involved in the following during 2023/24:-

Budget Task Group

See earlier in report.

Public Confidence Sub Committee

See earlier in report.

Private Budget Briefing – OPCC Chief Financial Officer

Complementing the work undertaken by the Budget Task Group, this briefing takes place annually and is the start of the consultation process on the budget for the wider Panel. It provides opportunity for all members to consider the OPCC's planning assumptions and forecasts and develop key lines of enquiry ahead of the presentation of the draft Medium Term Financial Plan in December 2023.

Police and Crime Panels Annual Conference

The Panel is represented annually at the conference by a mix of Panel Members and the Lead Officer.

New Member Inductions

In May 2023, all new members received a 2 hour induction from the Lead Officer as an initial training session. This took place ahead of a training awayday in September 2023 facilitated by the Lead Officer and Frontline Consulting.

Member Awayday

The following areas were covered at the awayday:-

- a presentation and facilitated discussion on scrutiny principles as they apply to

Police and Crime Panels.

- the statutory duties of the Commissioner and the Panel and how this plays out in practice at Panel meetings.
- how scrutiny can be effectively applied in meetings with emphasis on the Commissioner's priorities in the Police and Crime Plan, focusing on the upcoming Crime Prevention scrutiny topic in order to prepare for this meeting.
- the primary legislation and strategic policing in its national context
- the Panel as a non-executive body, how the member role assists with public assurance and how to adopt an evidence-based approach when asking questions at Panel meetings.

Reflections of Panel Members

John Bradbury (South Gloucestershire Council)



Thoughts after one year's membership of the Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel. One thing that has struck me since I joined after being elected last year, is that both members and the wider public really care about policing. Many of us have views on what good policing is and what our police should be doing.

We expect many things from our local police; we want them to be visible through Neighbourhood Policing. We want them to keep us safe; we want them to catch criminals. We want them to be trustworthy and to police society with consent – a mantra we often hear at meetings and see in documents placed before us.

Accordingly, the Panel has established a Public Trust and Confidence Sub-Committee to examine the response to the last inspection of the force and the strategies that aim to get us where we need to be.

We have also established a Budget Task Group to look at how our local force is financed. Following work by that budget group, the Panel considered a budget proposal from the former Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford to increase the policing precept by 3.8% (£10 for an average Band D house). This was accompanied by a public precept survey, while the then Commissioner also took the unusual step of asking the Panel to also consider the option of £13.00. This higher figure, backed by the Chief Constable, would provide more funding for the force, enabling an additional £1.8 million to support Operation Hemlock, targeting anti-social behaviour, knife crime and drugs activity.

The precept decision is one of the key powers of the Panel because it influences how our local force is financed. Despite endorsing the higher precept, there will still be a pause in the recruitment of Police Community Support Officers until the end of 2024/25 resulting in 80 fewer PCSOs in Avon and Somerset.

Our local force is obliged to both prevent crime and detect crime – which are two of the fundamental principles of policing laid down by Sir Robert Peel after establishing the Metropolitan Police back in 1829. In Avon and Somerset, prevention and detection of crime can be improved, and it is incumbent on the Police and Crime Commissioner to do so through their Police and Crime Plan. By careful examination and monitoring of that crime plan, the Panel will review the Commissioner's strategies and monitor performance against the published priorities.

Chief Constable Sarah Crew and her predecessor deserve credit for the very honest way in which the force was portrayed in the three-part Channel 4 documentary series "To Catch a Copper" which aired earlier this year. This series highlighted some adverse aspects of policing. It was uncomfortable viewing, and I hope it incentivises further force improvement.

The Chief Constable also attracted much publicity when she declared the force was institutionally racist. She has the support of the Commissioner and efforts are underway to address this within the force too. We look forward to seeing an even better police service going forward.

Gary Davies (Independent Member)



I have been an Independent Member of the Panel for the last 3 years and have come to realise that it offers a unique vantage point, merging accountability and community representation. It's a mirror reflecting the intersection of justice, governance and public trust. Never before has the confidence in policing been so tested with a range of national and local issues resonating a deep concern within communities as to the way in which they are policed. Through our deliberations and oversight, we have been rigorously scrutinising that the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) is fulfilling his role in ensuring the Chief Constable delivers efficient and effective policing but is also able to hold the confidence of the public. It is clear there remains much to do in this regard and as a consequence, a small sub-committee has been set up within the Panel to sharpen our focus on this critical area.

As a Panel Member, I have specific responsibility for leading on responding to any complaints about the conduct of the PCC or the function of overseeing complaints about the Chief Constable that the PCC has to fulfil. This is important work and whilst the majority of the complaints received fundamentally reflect a dissatisfaction with operational policing, nevertheless it is an important element of public accountability that ordinary people have access to a legitimate means of raising their concerns. Everything that is received is given due consideration, respect and answered with care and thoughtful consideration.

Julie Knight (Vice-Chair and Independent Member)



I am one of 3 non-political independent Panel members appointed in 2021 and I have acted as the Vice Chair this past year.

Our Panel of 17, welcomed 7 new elected members last year from different areas, bringing a wealth of different expertise and special interests. As it can take a little time to settle into the role, I hope for

continuity in the coming year to help the Panel to be as productive as it can be in the delivery of its purpose.

Throughout the year, we have welcomed updates from the Police and Crime Commissioner on progress and challenges in delivering their 2021-25 Police and Crime Plan. Whilst there has been progress reported on crucial elements such as improving the positive outcome rate for rape and serious sexual offences, the outcomes are still far too low despite the Constabulary leading the way on innovative approaches nationally.

The Plan itself was always ambitious with numerous competing priorities. This has made it challenging to deliver for several foreseeable reasons, including:

- the national shortage of accredited detectives and the predicted time to address;
- an inexperienced workforce due to a 4-year period of reinvestment in police officer numbers; and
- increased demands for service, compounded by complexity and the service picking up where others fall short.

The Plan was being relied upon to raise public confidence in policing that declined steadily over the 3-year term of the Plan. The Panel has established a Public Trust and Confidence Sub-Committee and studied literature reviews to establish areas of focus. Given that 2024 is a PCC election year, the PCC's creation of a new Plan offers an opportunity to bring sharper focus around its priorities. The Panel would welcome a clear strategy around how public confidence in policing will be improved going forward. This will significantly help the Sub-Committee in its scrutiny function to not only challenge but provide support too.

Challenges ahead and looking to the future

Work Programme

As the Commissioner's primary "checks and balance" in between elections, the Panel is aware of its important role in challenging and supporting the Commissioner on your behalf. Our shared objective for the future is to influence and impact positively on the decisions that matter.

The Panel has a work programme that is developed to align with its statutory duties and topical strategic policing issues. The aim is also to mirror any new responsibilities that the Commissioner may have that the Panel is required to review and to follow up any issues or actions that remain unresolved from the previous year.

The initial planning to discuss the Work Programme that takes place with the OPCC ahead of the Panel's Annual General Meeting is a co-operative and useful exercise that enables both the Panel and the Commissioner to plan ahead and ensure that reports and information are produced in a timely fashion. It is fluid and reviewed every 4-6 weeks. The Chief Constable attends a Panel meeting at least once a year to provide an update on key issues including the financial challenges linked to the Precept proposal.

Below are the work areas the Panel will review as part of its work programme for 2024/25:-

- Review of the Commissioner's Annual Report for 2023/24 and Panel statutory response.
- Scrutiny of meaningful performance reports and data.
- Development of a new Police and Crime Plan.
- Confirmation Hearing for a Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner.
- Scrutiny review of strategies to combat the surge in knife crime.
- Outcomes of PCC commissioning responsibilities and funding/community safety partnerships.
- Equalities/Diversity Update including Tackling Disproportionality Steering Committee and Race Matters work.
- Scrutiny and statutory response to the Commissioner's Precept proposal.

- Neighbourhood Policing – update on pilot to ensure local policing is not adversely affected by the abstraction of neighbourhood officers to deal with response.
- Oversight of the Commissioner’s governance mechanisms to hold the Chief Constable to account – Performance and Accountability Board/Governance and Scrutiny Board.
- Budget Task Group to retain oversight across the year and ensure that the Panel makes a tangible, practical contribution to the budget and Precept-setting process.
- Public Confidence Sub Committee meetings will continue to focus on the four key elements of confidence, trust, legitimacy, and procedural justice.
- Complaints handling function.