



# Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Panel

Hosted by Somerset County Council Democratic Services



## Minutes of the Police and Crime Panel

19<sup>th</sup> February 2021 (10:30am)

('Remote' meeting held under the provisions of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020

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### **Present:**

#### **Local Authority and Independent Member Representatives:**

Chris Booth (Somerset West and Taunton Council), Richard Brown (Chair/Independent Member), Asher Craig (Bristol City Council), Janet Keen (Sedgemoor District Council), Franklin Owusu-Antwi (South Gloucestershire Council), Alastair Singleton (Bath and North East Somerset), Pat Trull (South Gloucestershire Council), Andy Wait (Bath and North East Somerset Council), Richard Westwood (North Somerset Council), Heather Shearer (Mendip District Council), Martin Wale (South Somerset) and Roz Willis (North Somerset Council).

#### **Host Authority Support Staff**

Patricia Jones – Governance Specialist  
Jamie Jackson – Scrutiny Manager  
Kait Harvey – Clerk

#### **Police and Crime Commissioner and Support Staff:**

Sue Mountstevens - Police and Crime Commissioner  
Mark Simmonds – Interim Chief Executive Officer  
Paul Butler – Chief Financial Officer  
Ben Valentine – Performance Officer

### **1. Apologies for absence**

Peter Abraham and Pat Trull.

## **2. Public Question Time**

The Chair invited Councillor Tessa Munt to ask a question.

Councillor Munt asked about the enforcement of Rights of Way in rural Somerset - what plans are there to try to enforce Rights of Way legislation in rural Somerset? There were problems with local droves and bridle ways and off-road vehicles were damaging land and making it impassable.

The PCC confirmed that she had spoken to Superintendent Mike Prior who offered to meet with Councillor Munt. Attention was drawn to the input of the Rural Crime Team on BBC Crimewatch and their work with local farmers and Natural England.

## **3. Declarations of Interest**

None.

## **4. Consideration of revised Precept Proposal**

The Chair recapped on the purpose of the meeting:-

- Meeting about revised Precept – to make decision and report back to PCC by 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021. Intent to provide Report by end of business today.
- Previous meeting – proposal vetoed by Panel. Panel then wrote to PCC with their deliberations, thoughts and recommendations.
- Question from Chair in respect of Operation Remedy funding, whether this was put to its intended purpose and what was diverted elsewhere. Operation Remedy underspend of £1.3million by year end was the result of the introduction of Serious Violence surge funding and the recruitment time lag, much of funds which was offset by compensating overtime. Anticipating being at full establishment by end of financial year. £1.3m would have ended up applied to our capital reserve, and hence available to fund capital expenditure in the MTFP. The Chair requested clarification as to the underspend of £1.3million in recruitment had been spent on overtime. The CFO stated that a small element had been spent in overtime due to a lack of investigators but £1m underspend.
- Chair asked where underspend was now. PCC responded that any underspend would be transferred to reserves depending on the final year end position.

The Chair invited PCC to give context to arrangements.

The PCC responded as follows:

- Reflected on comments and speculations in press and perception of tussle between PCP and OPCC.
- Budget frozen in 2012. Assurance that team challenged, examined Business Case and considered families within pandemic situation. Noted Panel supported Precept rises over last 9 years and supported 'Tipping Point' when cuts had consequences. Both want value for money. Constabulary rated as outstanding and £83m (28%) had been saved over last 10 Years.
- Hoped that the amended precept reflected the comments in the Panel's report. Having considered the Report, the PCC will issue a final response to the Panel and will issue the Precept. The Police funding settlement puts all under pressure. An independent report predicted that Police recorded crime would increase by 26% in the next few years. 60% of Police funding was from the central government grant which has been frozen. Struggle to keep pace with rising costs. Most PCC's had therefore taken advantage of the £15 precept increase in 2021/22.
- Prosecutions for rape at lowest levels. Had to disband Operation Bluestone due to austerity cuts. Introduction of a specialist team of over 90 officers who would be tackling rape and serious sexual assault. Each local authority having an Offender Management Team and Specialist team.
- Precept setting process needs to have regard to the MTFP. There are underspends in some areas of the budget. 80% of the budget is people – hard to fill underspends in year where this is due to first year recruitment lag. Avon and Somerset Constabulary have had an unprecedented year, challenges of recruiting whilst ensuring supervision for new Officers. Reserves do not fund future recurring expenditure which falls on the precept. Revised precept needs to maintain critical investments. The reduced precept proposed has created £1million annual funding gap – taken from reserves for next year. Reserves being used is not sustainable in this way and the gap will need to be addressed by the new PCC. Majority of houses are in bands A,B and C and therefore will be subject to a smaller increase than the Band D headline.
- Need to be clear on the process following the meeting to inform the Billing Authorities as it is delaying the Billing Authorities from issuing council tax bills. Grateful to have receipt of the Report by the end of the day.
- Over last 9 years local people have told us that more local Police required.
- Revised precept increase of £13.39 per year for Band D.

Chair thanked PCC for context and noted that the meeting was about taking a professional approach to address the issues and concerns and to come to a conclusion at the end of the meeting in respect of the Precept proposal.

Chair invited questions from the Panel:

- Panel expressed concern in respect of the use of terminology on 'victimless crime' towards the end of the address by the PCC and the equation to a reduction of the

budget spend, requesting that this be re-phrased. PCC stated that cuts have consequences and that decisions have had to be put on hold due to the precept. Any reduction of resources going into the Constabulary have consequences. Felt that some people had not had the service they deserved. Had been a reactive not a proactive workforce – desire to move to a more proactive approach.

- The Panel sought clarification of the reductions now appearing in the budget as result of the revised precept because it was not visible in the report. It appeared to the Panel that the budget had been balanced and therefore there had been no impact as a result of the reduced precept. The PCC confirmed that reliance was being placed on reserves, thus creating more difficulties in coming years. There would be pressure on the next PCC to find more savings to bridge the gap.
- B&NES representative advised that B&NES had made £10m of savings and taken £11m from reserves and that income had been devastated by lockdowns. Demands were being placed across the public sector.

Assurances were sought that there would not be a delay in the opening of the new station due to the reduced Precept. Concern had been generated following comments made in public by senior officers who suggested this was a possibility.

The Commissioner stated that Redbridge House and the Enquiry Office at Lewis House were currently available. The Panel was advised that the veto had removed the maximum allowed by the government which had delayed all decisions until the budget was settled. There would be no decisions on any estate or business case during this time period. Once the Precept has been issued, conversations with the Chief Constable would resume.

CFO Paul Butler reported that every public sector organisation had to make significant cuts over the last decade. Identifying savings when 80% of the costs were staff was a challenge. The government had ringfenced staff numbers, therefore these could not be touched thereby leaving very small numbers to control – cutting officers or opting out of the Police IT programme was not an option.

The Serious Violence Grant was a one off which overlapped with Operation Remedy and was being used to enable maximum benefit.

In the original MTFP there were £7.3m savings in the plan. After these savings a deficit of £7.4m was left in year 4. With the additional £1m deficit from the reduced precept, the savings challenge was increased to £8.4 million by Year 4. This could require a reduction in staff.

- The Panel requested more information in relation to the recruitment of 113 Officers ahead of schedule. The Commissioner's expectation was a trajectory to recruit 450 extra

Police Officers by the end of 2022/23. Might recruitment be slower at the other end, as opposed to losing staff? It was clarified that the uplift programme was supported by government and would be maintained as a priority. The £8.5million saving by the end of MTFP could only be found through staffing numbers.

- The Panel sought clarification on the £1million identified for the use of the incoming PCC and whether this would be funded by an increase in the deficit. The Commissioner confirmed that it came from the underspend over this year. This also happened in 2016. She referred to a number of cliff edges during the year including the funding of 'Appropriate Adults' which was meant to be Local Authority led. However, there was no statutory decision about funding. The £1m referred to was no longer being made available to the new PCC to ensure funding for the investments outlined at the last meeting remained.
- The Panel sought further assurance regarding cuts in planned provision or recruitment as a result of the revised precept figure. The Commissioner was unable to provide that guarantee as she would no longer be PCC. The CEO advised that the £15 precept rise had enabled a balanced budget through 2021/22 and the gap now arising from the reduced precept would be filled from reserves. In respect of the budget for subsequent years, there would be a recurring additional £1m funding gap, from reduced precept income and any further savings would be a matter for the next PCC. The CFO remarked that to address savings in future years, an action plan may be required at an early stage to ensure a good lead in time for savings to take effect.
- Attention was drawn to PCSO supervision referenced in the MTFP and more information was sought on the direction of travel for management of neighbourhoods. It was noted that due to the career structure in place, a number of PCSOs would routinely leave their positions to become officers. with a policy of PCSOs supervising PCSOs which had been far more effective.
- There was general agreement that the press attention and unfortunate headlines generated by the Precept decision and resulting reports were unfortunate. An important decision had been reduced to a simple message that lacked nuance. It was understood that morale had been damaged by chronic underfunding and front line challenges, however the Chair emphasised that the Panel's support of the Constabulary was a given and reflected in the continued support the Panel had shown since 2012.

The Commissioner stated that she was disappointed in light of Precept increases having been accepted by other Panels. She suggested that morale had been affected – the Police Federation, Superintendents Association and the Black Police Association, who were supportive of the maximum rise. However, it was accepted that all households had been affected by the pandemic and this was not an easy position. By taking on board

the concerns expressed by the Panel and by using reserves as balancing feature, she hoped that a compromise had been reached.

- The Panel welcomed the Commissioner's acknowledgment of the democratic process. The force had made good progress, leaders were well motivated and delivering day to day.
- The Commissioner requested the Panel's written report as soon as possible to avoid delay in signing off of LA budgets. She recommended that the timings of all meetings should be looked at in future to avoid further delays.

The Chair outlined the budget consultation that commenced annually from September /October. The statutory timescales and obligations had been met. He highlighted the merits of engaging with communities earlier in the year as opposed to a limited survey at short notice. The Commissioner reported that the telephone phone survey was conducted every quarter and the government's late funding announcement precluded earlier consultation on the final proposal.

- Councillor Willis stated that she would not be reprimanded or made to feel uneasy about the decision made by the Panel. A decision was made following full scrutiny of the facts and with due regard to the public purse. The Panel's Precept history was one of support and working together. The government was asking people to pay more for the Police service through underfunded Local Authorities and it was not right in her view to ask the taxpayer to continually subsidise. This, and the Panel's duty to consider residents who find themselves at a cliff edge were the substantive reasons for the Panel's veto.

Following discussion and on being put to the vote, the Panel **RESOLVED** to support the Commissioner's proposal to increase the Policing Precept by £13.39 per annum in 2021/22 for an average Band D property (11 members voting in favour and 1 abstention).

The Commissioner thanked the Panel for its support.

## 5. Date of next meeting

11<sup>th</sup> March at 10.30am

(Meeting closed 11:01am)