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Our ref: SC/SC

Police and Crime Commissioner Mark Shelford
BY EMAIL ONLY

Your Ref:

Date: 16th January 2023

Dear Police and Crime Commissioner

2023/24 BUDGET PROPOSALS AND PRECEPT CONSIDERATIONS

I am writing to outline my budget proposal for the next year, and to seek your continued support for a maximum increase in the policing precept. This follows the Government's announcements on funding, providing you with the flexibility to raise the police precept in 2023/24 by up to £15 per year for an average band D property.

I am grateful for the support you and the Police and Crime Panel provided last year. The growth in funding has enabled us to continue to rebuild our police officer strength, and I am pleased to report we are on track to deliver our target growth by the end of the current financial year. However, our work does not stop there, as we continue to train our new officers to develop the skills and experience that will deliver the priorities of your Police and Crime Plan.

I recognise the challenges the cost-of-living crisis already places on our communities, other public services, and our wider economy. As our financial plans demonstrate, we are not immune to these challenges, with cost pressures generated by inflation forecast to increase our costs significantly more than the expected increases to funding – even with the maximum precept.

We have a strong track record of absorbing demand and inflationary growth through driving ongoing efficiencies. However, the scale of challenge forecast is too great for this approach to be maintained and therefore it is clear we will need to release significantly more in savings than we had previously expected to.

We continue to face an underlying funding inequality, receiving £53m less when compared to the average police service funding – the equivalent of over 1,000 additional police officers. The Government plans to consult on the distribution of police grant funding during 2023. While I am hopeful this will lead to some redress of this imbalance, I recognise this is unlikely and I am not expecting this situation to change within the timeframe of our forecasts.

With your support our financial plans show the use of reserves will be necessary to balance the 2023/24 budget, giving us time to ensure the delivery of our officer uplift targets and plan for the savings we know we need to release. The use of reserves for the purposes of balancing the budget is far from ideal, and it remains my ambition to identify and begin to release savings as soon as possible to establish confidence in our savings plans and to protect reserves to support investment in our future transformation.

Our financial forecasts for 2023/24

In 2023/24, you will receive £223.2m revenue grant funding, a growth of £3.9m (1.8%). This includes an increase to the amount that is ring-fenced and will only be paid in arrears on maintenance of newly uplifted police officer numbers throughout the year.

An increase of £15 (6.0%) in the precept would raise an additional £11.3m (7.8%). This is the total forecast increase after adjusting for movement to our Council Tax base, which has started to recover after the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. When this is combined with an anticipated share of the surplus from local collection funds, total council tax funding will increase by £12.6m.

Against this growth in funding, we are forecasting an additional £25.6m in our costs. This includes: -

- The full cost of our police officer numbers having delivered on the governments uplift target (+£6.3m).
- The full year effect of the September 2022 pay awards for officers and staff (+£10.5m) and provision for a 3% pay award in September 2023 (+£5.2m).
- Increases to the cost of pensions, including inflationary uplift for injury pensions (+£0.9m) and increases to staff pensions resulting from the actuarial valuation (+£0.6m).
- Inflationary pressures on non-pay costs, including an additional £1.6m in the cost of heating and lighting our police stations and buildings, and a further £0.4m increase in the business rates on these properties, as well as £0.4m extra costs in fuel for our police vehicles and other general inflationary pressures of £2.6m.
- Increases in the costs of collaborations and partnerships (+£2.7m), reflective of pay awards for our officers and staff seconded into these arrangements.
- Growth (+£3.2m) targeting those areas of the Constabulary identified as requiring further resilience and critical to our future ambitions, including corporate communications, workforce planning, and some market enhancements to pay to ensure we can attract and retain staff into specialist roles.

Offsetting these cost increases we have already identified savings (£3.0m) and adjustments (£7.5m), including: -

- Procurement savings, including nearly £0.9m p.a. achieved in the collaborative procurement of custody healthcare services.
- Savings achieved through the successful appeal of the business rates payable on some of our police stations.
- Savings realised through restructuring our estates and facilities, our intelligence and some of our collaborative functions, as well as identifying new sources of income.
- Adjustments to National Insurance budgets, reversing the impact of the now cancelled Social Care Levy and adjustments to reflect increased investment income.

These savings do not yet go far enough. Even with a maximum increase in the policing precept, we recognise a **residual deficit of £3.4m in 2023/24** which we forecast will rise further over the medium term. Our prudent financial management over many years means we can, with your support, lean on reserves in 2022/23, giving Chief Officers and the Constabulary senior leaders some time to purposefully develop our plans to realise your Police and Crime Plan vision within the funding constraints which are now being forecast.

Our focus to date

Last year I outlined six areas of focus to help us move through the challenges of sudden and rapid growth after a decade of austerity with speed and efficiency and to pave the way for our journey to deliver outstanding policing to our communities. I think it will be useful to reflect on our performance in these areas.

1. Delivering police officer uplift

I am pleased to report that we are on track to deliver on our police officer target of 3,291 officers by the end of March 2023. Indeed, such has been our success that with the approval and financial support of the Home Office, we are forecasting to temporarily exceed this target by a further 80, to help realise the national uplift target of 20,000 new officers by this date. Subject to confirmation, our aim will be to have 3,371 officers, with expectation of temporary funding of £1.6m in 2023/24 to support the additional costs this would present.

The scale of work required to achieve this milestone should not be under-estimated. In the four years since April 2019, we will have recruited over 1,500 new officers into Avon and Somerset. This incorporates 1,000

officers who will have joined through the new Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) route, and 300 through our Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP) – both new programmes which have been introduced within this same period.

And let us not forget, much of this will have been achieved against a backdrop of the COVID-19 global pandemic, requiring us to adapt and change our recruitment and training practices so as not to lose momentum in the delivery of this target.

2. Managing growing pains

Securing our uplift takes time to achieve. Many of our PCDA and DHEP recruits are just starting their learning journey, while others will be fully qualified and operational later this year.

By March 2023, over 200 of these new officers will have graduated and will be deployed into a fully operational role within the Constabulary. Thereafter we will see further cohorts of officers graduating every two months throughout 2023/24, with this trend continuing across subsequent years.

While we build and develop the skills and experience of the workforce, we continue to manage daily demand from the public. This requires us to actively manage the deployment of our officers towards our future target operating model, as the training abstraction and tutoring requirements of the new officers has a significant impact on the movement of officers into new roles. We are carefully growing our capacity sustainably so as not to place too great a pressure on frontline patrol resources where new officers predominantly gain the required knowledge and proficiency.

We continue to manage the risks and challenges of our ambitious uplift plans, recognising stronger performance will be achieved as our capabilities grow. The quality of our policing graduates remains high, and we now have a consistent supply joining teams across the force area moving forwards.

3. Rebuilding investigations

Across the police service nationally the shortage of officers in detective roles has been highlighted time and again – it remains one of the most persistent challenges in policing. To realise our ambitions in Avon and Somerset we need to overcome this challenge, investing in those areas helping to deliver high quality, suspect-focussed investigations.

Enabling growth in this area again takes time, and we are accelerating our ambitions here wherever possible. We have used the DHEP entry programme to focus on introducing officers into policing on a fast track into investigative roles. We have also introduced a new entry route aimed at those police staff investigators who wanted a fast track to become detectives – we were the first force in the country to do this.

Over the course of 2022, we have increased the number of officers within the investigations function by 116 (+31%). We have also laid the groundwork for the growth in accredited detective numbers, with some small growth experienced in 2022, followed by 63 new DHEP student officers graduating as fully accredited officers within the first six months of 2023.

These plans are well thought through and are delivering the growth in accredited detectives we aspire to – achieving our target by early 2025.

We are also investing in specific capabilities, and I would highlight our work on rape, fraud, and cyber-crime, where there continues to be both a national and local focus on prevention and victim support.

Operation Bluestone, our specialist rape investigation team, now has an additional 100 officers and twelve police staff investigators dedicated to investigating rape and sexual offences. They have a greater focus on perpetrator behaviour, and disrupting known offenders, shifting away from the ‘credibility’ of the victim’s account. With support from the previous Home Secretary, Avon and Somerset are leading the way nationally with significantly improved performance.

We also continue to provide a dedicated service that sees 100% of all cyber dependant crime that is disseminated to the force investigated. Additionally, we provide all cyber victims with specialist advice to support, reassure and prevent further victimisation.

4. Leading cultural change

Culture change within policing has been front of mind, nationally and within our own organisation. We have not shied away from having difficult conversations about the changes we need to make so our own people feel safe, supported, and able to thrive at work, and to retain the trust and confidence of our communities.

In October, a force-wide internal communications campaign, "This is not who we are," shone a light on inappropriate behaviour, misogyny, and misconduct in our own organisation. It made clear, unequivocally, our expectations around standards and behaviours and marked the start of a programme of positive action to eradicate sexual misconduct and misogynistic attitudes within the workplace, and to empower our staff and officers, giving them the necessary skills and knowledge to seek out and challenge inappropriate behaviour.

In Black History Month, our internal Race Matters Week of events was a chance for us to deepen our understanding of lived experiences and how issues of racism and disproportionality affect us all and can impact our ability to serve the public. More than 350 officers and staff attended the sessions in person or via Teams, and 83% said they were better informed as a result.

Culture change is not something we can enforce on our people. Open and honest conversations will continue to be key to our success. Our Talk Time sessions, hosted by chief officers, were another invaluable opportunity for us to understand the hopes, fears, and challenges facing our people so we can lead them more effectively.

There is more work to be done but important conversations are happening, and I have been heartened by the appetite I have seen for embracing real and meaningful change.

5. Developing our leaders

Leadership sets and drives the culture of an organisation and its people. Effective policing can only be achieved through our people. Ensuring our officers and staff are well led, particularly at a time when so many are starting out on their careers in policing, is fundamental to our success.

Our Leadership Academy is designed to provide the training and support needed for all our staff to develop excellent leadership skills. Since its introduction in 2021 we have been developing this offer. Throughout 2022/23, we have been enhancing the digital platform through which the academy is accessed, providing flexibility on how, when and where our officers and staff learn.

At Leadership Time events, chief officers were joined by leaders across the organisation to explore our vision of what outstanding policing means over the next five years and the strategic imperatives we must all focus on to achieve that vision. Our aim: to empower those who lead our people to go back to their teams with clarity of purpose and direction.

We have also invested in our executive leadership, building our coaching capabilities, and investing in an additional chief officer as part of our uplift growth. Combined with some additional capacity within the senior leadership team, we have given time and space for strategic thinking and leadership as we enter a critical period of change.

We also recognise the importance of the training and support that is particularly provided to those stepping into first line leadership roles. With your support we have been working with our independent consultants, Leapwise, to more clearly define our target leadership model, enabling the creation of clear development pathways and the introduction of new offers for first line leaders. While this work is not yet complete, I am excited by the opportunity it presents for us.

6. Creating capacity

Continuing to grow organisational capacity through efficiency and productivity remains a focus, building on our track record of using data and insight to continuously innovate.

Our approach to removing routine repetitive tasks from workloads using Robotic Process Automation (RPA) has meant that in the past three years we have been able to save the equivalent of 77 full-time employees and free-up staff to concentrate on higher value tasks.

During 2022, we introduced a new mobile digital policing application, known as Pronto, to frontline officers and staff. We combined this new capability, with a review of the forms used by frontline officers when responding to calls for service. Through this work we have enabled the more efficient and effective completion of administrative tasks in the field, enhancing visibility and saving on travel time.

Looking ahead, we have progressed our plans to replace our suite of corporate ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) systems, with the expectation of new systems being introduced in April 2024. The end user experience will be a focus of this work, including, for the first time, the ability to complete many tasks associated with this system via a mobile application. This project will release both savings and efficiencies across all areas of the Constabulary.

We are also developing our plans to reduce the time it takes our officers and staff to redact audio, video, and written evidence and reports as part of their investigations. We have several initiatives in the pipeline, which, when implemented, will release significant capacity for investigative teams.

Delivering improved performance

Last year I set out where we would invest in our capabilities and capacity to improve performance. As a result of the investments made to date, we are beginning to see strong signs of improvements in performance in many areas.

Operation Bluestone brings an innovative approach to how we investigate rape and serious sexual assault. The charge rate for rape continues to show strong improvement, doubling from 3.1% to 6.2% over the past twelve months, and an even stronger upward trajectory recorded over the last six months, with rates increasing to over 10%. There have been 133 charged offences in the last twelve months compared to 56 in the previous year – which is an increase of more than 120%. Our rape charge rate has seen us shift from bottom of our Most Similar Group (MSG) of forces to second (based on the latest six months). Nationally, we currently have the 8th highest positive outcome rate for serious sexual offences and the 16th highest for rape positive outcomes – having previously been bottom quartile for both twelve months ago. I strongly believe the learning from Bluestone can be applied more widely, bringing the same level of improvement to a wider array of criminality, especially that affecting women, girls, and the vulnerable.

I am proud of the work we have done in tackling drugs and the results we have achieved through the concerted regional effort of Operation Scorpion. This contributed to us recording 1,267 drugs related disruptions to Organised Crime Groups and County Lines last year – an increase of 259%.

Although neighbourhood crime has shown a slight increase throughout 2022 (+5.7%), it continues to remain notably below pre-COVID levels, with robbery (+7.8%), burglary (-2%), vehicle offences (+9.9%), and theft (+1.1%) all showing stable or small increases. Our support to victims of dwelling burglary remains strong, with 86% satisfaction.

Reported domestic abuse offences (-1.4%), sexual offences (+6.3%), and stalking and harassment (+2.5%) have become more stable throughout 2022 – following the large post-COVID-19 increases that we saw throughout 2021.

The risk of being a victim of serious violence remained low throughout 2022, with our recorded “violence with injury” offences seeing Avon and Somerset as the 8th lowest of all forces in England and Wales.

Crime recording has continued to be a key performance focus for us, with notable improvements on our 2020 compliance rates noted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMICFRS). However, there is more to do here, with all compliance rates of 91.4%, violent crime at 86.6%, and sexual offences at 92.9%.

The 999 call demand has been unprecedented both locally and nationally – where we have seen up to 30% increases. Despite this challenging demand, our 999 call handling time has remained strong and was nationally recognised as the timeliest across all police services in the UK. Our 999 abandoned rate has remained extremely low at 0.2%. However, in protecting these calls, 101 call handling performance has been compromised, with overall 101 abandonment rates rising to approximately 10% for the last twelve months.

While many of these green shoots are encouraging, we know that as we continue to navigate the growing pains of an organisation that will see more of our new officers develop experience and become fully deployable, our performance will improve further still.

Looking ahead

As we look ahead it is clear to me that we are going to continue to see challenges over the short-term. The growing pains we are managing are likely to remain for the next 18 months before the capacity gained through growth in headcount really starts to be felt.

We are actively managing the day-to-day delivery of policing, while keeping our eye firmly fixed on the horizon. We have already given significant thought to what policing will look and feel like for our communities and our people in five years' time, setting out five Strategic Imperatives which together will create the conditions for our success: -

1. Ensuring we are **inclusive** in our organisation and our service to the public.
2. Delivering a service with a clear-eyed and relentless **focus on perpetrators** – through the continuum of prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation.
3. Being truly **trauma informed**, both internally and in how we serve our communities.
4. Inviting and embracing **transparency** in radical ways, strengthening the trust and confidence everyone has in us.
5. Continuing to drive **innovation**, unlocking greater efficiency and effectiveness in all we do.

As is clear from our financial forecasts, we will need to achieve this vision within the funding envelope we have, bringing forward savings that ensure we can sustainably balance our budgets and live within our means. Raising council tax by the maximum of £15 for an average property will not protect us from the need to deliver these further savings.

Realising these savings within the plan to deliver on our ambitions will require us to review our demand, and in particular our non-crime demand. With your support I intend to work with partners to ensure the public are receiving the right service from the right public servant to respond to their need. This will be important if we are to ensure that we can deliver the service our communities expect to see from their police.

We will also have to revisit our plans for the deployment of our additional officers, ensuring that we retain the right workforce mix to deliver on our ambitions and balance the books. Managing this alongside the growing pains of an organisation still some way from achieving its optimum operating model, will test and stretch us as an organisation.

I recognise the challenges that households are facing with increases in the cost of living. I share in the concerns that I know you and members of the Police and Crime Panel will have about adding to their burden through additional council tax. However, I need to balance this against the responsibility I have of overseeing the policing service we are here to provide to our communities across Avon and Somerset. Without the full precept we will have to curtail our ambitions still further, which is not something I believe our communities want.

In closing, I want to recognise the unwavering dedication and commitment of the officers and staff within Avon and Somerset Police. We have experienced – and managed – unprecedented levels of demand over

the last year, and we, our communities and partners continue to face the economic hardships being felt across the country. Despite this, I am inspired by my colleagues every day and feel immense pride in the work they do to secure justice and deliver exceptional service for our communities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Crew', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Sarah Crew QPM
Chief Constable
Avon and Somerset Police