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Clare Moody
Police and Crime Commissioner

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Dear Police and Crime Commissioner

Following the government's announcement that you will be allowed to raise the police precept next year by up to £14 for an average band D property, I am writing to detail my 2025/26 budget proposal and to seek your support for a maximum increase in council tax.

As we come to the end of a year in which Avon and Somerset has celebrated its 50th anniversary, my personal reflections are rooted in three powerful emotions – pain, pride and hope.

- **Pain** - To quote one of our officers in their people survey response – “policing is the best and worst job in the world, often in the same hour”. As I have travelled about the Force over the past 12 months I have witnessed this reality: officers and staff working tirelessly, often against the odds, close to burnout. This is the sobering reality of modern policing. Increasingly, we are a service whose mission and purpose has evolved to become a triage response on behalf of other over-stretched public services. Creating capacity to deliver our policing purpose, and supporting and enabling our people to fulfil this, is a responsibility that drives me and my Chief Officer team each day.
- **Pride** – In August disorder erupted across our cities and towns up and down the UK. In those critical moments, policing alone stood between order and chaos. Here, in Avon and Somerset, I witnessed our people demonstrate extraordinary courage and resilience. From those who sacrificed their rest days, to officers standing as a shield between vulnerable communities and harm, investigators relentlessly pursuing justice day and night, and countless others who mobilised to 12-hour shifts without hesitation - policing fulfilled its unique role within our society. For me this pride is humbling, reminding me what a privilege I have, to serve alongside so many remarkable individuals.
- **Hope** – Despite our challenges, there is much to be hopeful about. We continue to change and redefine our service offer, providing optimism that we can create the necessary capacity and capability to focus on policing. Examples here include the early benefits being realised through the adoption of our new enhanced video response initiative, transforming the way in which we respond to routine calls for service and protecting our response officers to focus on immediate and priority attendance. There are other examples too, including the ongoing use of robotic process automation through which we have delivered the work equivalent to 80 officers/staff in the last 12 months, and the investment into new capabilities to enhance and accelerate the analysis of digital evidence. This hope comes from the brilliance and innovation of our people to continue to change and evolve all that we do.

The police funding settlement

Just before Christmas, the government delivered a tough funding settlement for policing. The increase in core grant funding helps to part fund the full-year effect of last September's pay award for officers and staff but makes no allowance for next year's pay award or the wider inflationary pressures we face. Where additional grant funding has been provided, this is either intended to offset new costs (as in the case of the national insurance grant funding) or is ringfenced for new investment (as in the case of the neighbourhood policing grant funding).

Against this context, the maximum increase of £14 for an average band D property is critical. The precept is the only way we can secure funds to deal with new inflationary and pay cost increases which have not been provided for within the grant settlement. Even with a maximum increase in precept, our plans set out that we need to deliver a further £6.4m in savings to balance the 2025/26 budget and enable new investment.

If the maximum precept increase was not provided this would immediately grow our savings requirement. For every £1 less than the £14 maximum, funding would be £0.6m lower than our current plans. This is the equivalent of 13 fewer staff. These posts would need to be saved in addition to the savings already planned as outlined below. We're already in a position where we can no longer guarantee to shield the public from the impact of current savings plans, and anything less than a maximum increase in precept will only increase this reality.

Where are we now?

2023 represented a year in which calls for service peaked both in Avon and Somerset and nationally. 2024 has seen our calls stabilise back to levels seen prior to this peak, with reductions in both 999 and 101 calls seen, offset by continued small increases in the number of online digital contact forms received.

While calls for service have stabilised, the upward trend in recorded crime has continued, reflecting significant improvements we have made to recording practices. In 2024 we recorded 167,459 crimes, which is an increase of 15.7% in victim-based recorded crime. Reflecting both the nature and complexity of many of these crimes, combined with increased expectation of what policing should do when a crime has been reported, we are now allocating more and more of these crimes for follow up investigations. While our officer numbers have increased with uplift during this period, they have not kept pace with this change in demand. When measured against total reported officer headcount, we allocated an average of 13 crimes per officer in 2014, and we allocated an average of 40 crimes per officer in 2024.

To create policing capacity, we continue to work hard to reduce non-crime demand. An example of this is where we have worked closely with partners to launch our Right Care, Right Person initiative during 2024. This national initiative focusses on reducing the avoidable deployment of police officers and ensuring that the public are receiving the right care from the right service. The first phase of this work focussed on when we would provide a police response to concerns for the safety of a person being reported to us. This went live in June 2024, and in the first 5 months has resulted in a 32% reduction in call volumes and a 39% reduction in the number of incidents being attended, equating to 4,500 fewer calls and 3,300 fewer incidents. At the beginning of November, we went live with the second phase of this work, focussing on the police response when we receive reports of someone leaving or failing to return to a healthcare setting, or are absent when detained under the Mental Health Act. This, alongside wider work on how we manage missing persons, has helped result in a 30% reduction in missing persons investigations in November and December 2024. In 2025 we will be progressing work with partners on the handover of people detained under the Mental Health Act from police to NHS services. Currently our officers spend c. 13,000 hours per year conducting constant observations on those detained under the Mental Health Act but not yet allocated a space in a dedicated health-based place of safety, with an average commitment of two officers for over 11 hours per incident. Where it is safe for the detained person and healthcare staff, we hope to reduce the average time to less than one hour thereby freeing up further policing capacity.

We have sustained our police officer numbers throughout 2024. To achieve this, we have recruited 234 new officers into the force during 2024, of which 140 have joined through the three-year Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) programme and 29 have joined us through our two-year degree holder entry programme. In addition to this recruitment, we have maintained our position where officer retention is better than the national average. We are on target to sustain officer numbers through until our next reporting date at the end of March, with a dedicated degree holder programme for officers joining into a neighbourhood policing role, and a trial of a new police constable entry route for military leavers, both planned in the final quarter of the current financial year.

Growing police officers takes time. A PCDA officer is abstracted for training for 42% of their time in the first year, and 22% each in their second and third years. At any point in time, we will have between 400 and 500 officers undertaking their initial training, creating abstraction that needs constant and ongoing management.

As I said last year, growing the capable and confident workforce that we need, and managing the challenges and pressures we face, requires strong and effective leadership. Our investment here has seen 523 officers and staff complete the First Line Leaders (FLL) programme during 2024. We are further developing our Middle Line Leaders (MLL) course for implementation in early 2025. Over the coming days and weeks, my senior leadership team and I will be bringing together leaders from across the Force for our annual Leadership Time events, providing an opportunity to refresh and reset ourselves to meet the challenges of the next 12 months and beyond.

During 2024 we have also made investment into our infrastructure, providing the tools and environment in support of our officers and staff. Our police estate continues to improve, with a new police station in Minehead opened this year, along with a newly refurbished police station in Chard, and substantial progress made on several other projects across Bristol, Bath and Somerset. We have continued to innovate in our management of fleet, utilising telematics data to inform operational planning and deployment. We recently won the GreenFleet award for public sector car fleet of the year in recognition of our work towards the electrification of our fleet of police vehicles.

Last year we made a commitment to the PCC and the Police and Crime Panel to undertake a series of dedicated, proactive operations across the year and across the breadth of our Force area. Operation Harmony started in May 2024, and to date has seen us undertake 8 weeks of action around the Force, led by the local neighbourhood team but utilising the full range of specialist and operational resources we have. We have written to the panel throughout the year to keep them updated on the progress of these operations, and through this we have been able to track how this has delivered successful outcomes, including the arrests of over 60 offenders.

We also made commitments to the PCC and panel last year to increase the number of officers we had in neighbourhood policing roles. Applying the same measure we understand the government intends to use in monitoring the delivery of its neighbourhood policing guarantee, we had 253.4 officers (full time equivalents) in neighbourhood policing roles as 31st March 2024. At the end of December 2024 this number had grown to 286.4 officers, an increase of 33 officers in 9 months. We remain committed to growing where possible, the capacity of our neighbourhood policing teams.

Our Finances

Our finances continue to be well managed, however our budgets are tight. At the end of the second quarter, we were forecasting an overspend of £0.7m/0.2% against Constabulary budgets. This reflects several cost pressures, including on overtime where we have seen officers have to step up to support both routine and extraordinary demand, as well as on acute challenges such as the cost of kennelling suspected XL bully dogs following the ban on these which started in February 2024.

We understand the importance of being prudent and continuing to drive efficiencies and deliver savings. We're working to bring this forecast back within budget, and on delivering new recurring savings that ensure we can both balance our budget and enable new investment to help us keep pace with the pace of change in criminality and wider society.

Avon and Somerset has had to be prudent in its financial management for many years now, recognising the underlying funding inequality that is the result of the way in which police grant is distributed. If Avon and Somerset Police were to receive the average funding per-head, we would see a £52 million increase to our budget. It would be more than double that if we were to receive the funding of other forces with major cities like Bristol to police.

While a £14 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 2025/26 and across the medium term. Even with a precept of £14 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 maximum increase in the precept. Our plans have identified £6.4m in savings in 2025/26, rising to £12.4m across the medium term. Through these savings we can balance our 2025/26 budget, support some limited growth to address cost pressures and targeted investment, 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 well as releasing savings from non-pay budgets.

Our savings plans include:

- Further delivery against our planned reduction of 86 police staff investigator posts. These plans were announced last year, with a two-year delivery period to realise these reductions in full by March 2026. We remain on track to achieve these savings in accordance with this plan, releasing £1.7m in savings in 2025/26.
- Re-setting our PCSO establishment to 230 (from a previous position of c. 310) after a pause in recruitment throughout 2024/25 and releasing the full-year effect of the financial savings this has generated, releasing a further £0.3m in savings in 2025/26.
- Further reduction of 36 other police staff posts which were identified as part of our plans last year to be realised for saving from 2025/26. This releases £1.3m in savings in 2025/26.
- Savings from non-pay budgets of £2.8m, including IT related savings as we have been able to end legacy systems and support contracts, and release some savings across our estates and fleet budgets.

These are not new savings plans, largely reflecting the announcements we made last year. Because we have taken this longer-term approach to our planning, we are able to realise many of these headcount reductions through natural attrition, thereby minimising the pain and cost associated with a more formal management of change process.

We have a balanced and sustainable plan for 2025/26. Beyond this our forecasts project that we will need to identify further significant savings, which rise to nearly £11m over the next five years. We will work on these plans over the coming months as an integral part of our wider transformation work.

What Next?

While 2024 has presented us with many challenges, we have also laid the groundwork for ongoing change and transformation which will be delivered throughout 2025.

We know from our People Survey, and from feedback from HMICFRS, that our operating model needs to evolve to help our officers and staff best respond to and manage our demand and deliver for the public. We have begun a consultation with staff to set about changes to our operating model that brings geographical leadership and accountability closer to the communities we serve.

We are reviewing our performance framework, ensuring that this supports the new Police and Crime Plan, and uses data to help our officers and staff consistently focus on outcomes which we know are important to the public.

We will continue to build on our record for innovation, with the embedding of our enhanced video response offer, as well as reviewing ways to allocate crime more efficiently, intelligently, and where we can best deliver a positive outcome for victims and our communities.

We are already working with the same academics who supported us with our Operation Bluestone/Soteria work, this time with a focus on policing's response to domestic abuse. Through this work, known as Project Brightlight, we will look to deliver a comprehensive assessment and in-depth mapping of our current domestic abuse response, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. This will build on the experience of Operation Bluestone/Soteria, and if successful could provide a means of addressing the challenge that accounts for approximately 20% of our policing demand.

We will build on the work delivered under Operation Harmony, embedding this way of working into core policing and continuing to share the impact that this has with our communities.

Conclusion

2024 has been challenging for policing and for Avon and Somerset. 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.

There remain many risks over the coming year which I and my senior leadership team will proactively manage and navigate. The government have been clear in its financial settlement that there are limited central funds available to help us manage future inflationary pressures. Our financial plans therefore already assume the delivery of savings, and the need for further savings across the medium term. These savings will have consequences which will need to be managed. Without a precept increase of £14, the scale of this challenge and the consequences of the savings needed will only grow.

I know we are both aware of the financial pressures on household budgets, and that this is not a decision either of us take lightly. The trend towards Council Tax being expected to fund more of our policing budget started under the previous government, and this settlement continues that path. While we can be hopeful that the expected 2025 Spending Review might correct this, the state of the public finances and the myriads of conflicting priorities make this far from certain.

I'm grateful for the support your predecessor and the Police and Crime Panel have shown over successive years. I hope I can continue to rely on this support as we plan for policing across the next financial year.

Yours sincerely



Sarah Crew QPM
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