

Minutes of the meeting of the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Panel, held in Committee Room 1 at County Hall, Chelmsford on Thursday, 1 February 2024

Present:

Councillor

Mary Cunningham
Donna Eley
Dave Harris (substitute)
Ross Playle (in the Chair)
Simon Burwood
Lisa Newport
James Courtenay
Gina Placey
Gary Collins
Maggie Sutton
Aidan McGurran
Frankie Ricci

Representing

Braintree District Council
Chelmsford City Council
Colchester City Council
Essex County Council
Maldon District Council
Rochford District Council
Southend-on-Sea City Council
Tendring District Council
Thurrock Council
Uttlesford District Council
Co-opted Member for Balanced Appointment
Co-opted Member for Balanced Appointment

Co-opted Independent Members

Sheila Murphy

Also in attendance

Gemma Bint	Democratic Services Officer
Pippa Brent-Isherwood	Chief Executive, Office of the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC)
Sophie Campion	Senior Democratic Services Officer, Secretary to the Panel
Neil Cross	Chief Finance Officer, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service
Jane Gardner	Deputy Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Ben-Julian Harrington	Chief Constable, Essex Police
Roger Hirst	Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner
Darren Horsman	Strategic Head of Policy and Public Engagement, OPFCC
Rick Hylton	Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service
Janet Perry	Chief Financial Officer and Strategic Head of Performance and Resources, OPFCC
Emma Tombs	Democratic Services Manager

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report of the Membership, Apologies and Declarations was received.

1. The membership of the Panel was noted.
2. The following apologies were noted:
 - John Gili-Ross (Chairman)
 - Cllr Mike Garnett, Harlow District Council

- Cllr Tony Hedley, Basildon Borough Council
- Cllr Barry Aspinell, Brentwood Borough Council
- Cllr Mike Lilley, Colchester City Council and the Substitute was Cllr Dave Harris

3. The following declarations were made by Members:

- For the purposes of transparency Councillor Simon Burwood advised that his son was currently a serving Essex Police Officer. Councillor Burwood participated fully in the meeting.
- For the purposes of transparency Councillor Frankie Ricci advised that his step-son was currently a serving Essex Police Officer. Councillor Ricci participated fully in the meeting.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 7 December 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Questions to the Chairman from members of the public

A question, relating to agenda item 5 – 2024/25 Proposed Police Precept, was put to the Chairman by Mr Kieron Franks. The question was:

‘News reports early in the New Year revealed that Essex Police have the lowest response rate of any police force in the country to requests for information under Clare’s Law, which gives people the right to ask police whether a partner or ex-partner has a history of abusive behaviour. In light of this, what are the PFCC’s plans to improve the safeguarding of women in Essex, particularly from domestic violence, through his plans and the precept he wishes to raise to fund them?’

At the Chairman’s request, the Commissioner provided a response, stating that this issue had been addressed and following discussions between the Chief Constable and the Commissioner, Essex Police had undertaken a review. Improvements had been identified and put in place and this had resulted in an improvement in performance. In the period August to December 2023 there had been an increase in the disclosure rate from 5% to 66%.

4 2024/25 Proposed Fire and Rescue Precept

The Panel received report EPFCP/01/24 which set out the overall level of resources in the proposed budget for 2024-25. The budget had been set in line with the objectives included within the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-2024.

The Commissioner introduced the report setting out the proposed budget and precept for Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS) and highlighting the areas of focus linked to the Fire and Rescue Plan priorities. The Commissioner made reference to the difficulties due to inflation and the cost of living. There were also uncertainties particularly with regard to any pay offer

negotiations. The Commissioner also gave some feedback from the precept survey which had been undertaken.

The Panel considered the detailed information provided on the budget and precept proposals. During the discussion members of the Panel asked a number of questions to seek clarification and test the evidence and assumptions, to ensure that they were satisfied that the proposed Precept enabled delivery of the objectives included within the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-2024 and represented value for money.

During the discussion the following points were made:

- Clarity was sought on the figures for expected additional council tax receipts.
- With regard to the Workforce Succession plan to recruit Firefighters, it was confirmed that there hadn't been any issues in recruiting so far. The funding was sufficient to meet the agreed establishment on all stations which provided resilience for training, holidays, sickness etc. It was confirmed that the scope of the planned recruitment was enough to place staff where they were needed, however it would take time to train any new recruits to.
- It was confirmed that there were no current plans to close any stations. There would be investment to modernise the existing wholtime stations and some resources may be moved around but the overall capability would remain.
- Clarity was provided on the decision to place the new joint fleet workshop in Boreham. The Fire Service's current fleet workshop in Lexden was coming to the end of its useful life. It made financial sense to have a joint fleet workshop with the Police and Essex Police were in a position to secure ownership of the site at Boreham.
- The importance of having inclusive, even-handed and fair training provided to ECFRS was confirmed. There was investment in training and subject matter experts and appropriately qualified people were used to deliver the training. A people impact assessment was undertaken to ensure that there was even-handedness. However if any issues were identified there was a willingness to hear about areas for improvement.
- The potential risks associated with any pay settlement above the assumption of 3% and if inflation did not reduce as expected were raised. The Commissioner confirmed that the budget process worked on economic projections. The pay settlement process was nationally negotiated but it was local settlement. There was a balance to be found between interests of the workforce and the burden on the public to fund it. There was no scope to raise more money through the precept without a referendum and there was no wish to do that. If the settlement was higher than the assumed 3% it would have to be funded through further efficiency gains.
- In terms of fleet investment the Commissioner explained that there was a long-term strategy which resulted in plans for delivery. This included plans for installing charging points across the estate for smaller vehicles.

Opportunities had arisen to upgrade some fleet in line with the plans, earlier and in a more cost efficient way.

- It was confirmed that ECFRS participated, alongside Local Authorities and the Police etc to resourcing a dedicated team in order to optimise collection of Council Tax. A larger amount was collected as a result.

The recommendation that the Essex Fire and Rescue precept be increased by 2.91% equivalent to an increase of £2.34 a year, from £80.28 to £82.62 for a Band D property, was put to the vote by the Panel Chairman. Following consideration of the report and having listened to the Commissioner's justification for the increase, the Panel voted 11 in favour to accept the Commissioner's proposal without qualification or comment, with two abstentions. It was

Resolved:

That the Panel endorsed without qualification or comment, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's decision to increase the Fire precept by 2.91% equivalent to an increase of £2.34 a year, from £80.28 to £82.62 for a Band D property, raising an additional £1.5m of council tax receipts.

5 2024/25 Proposed Police Precept

The Panel received report EPFCP/02/24 which set out the overall level of resources in the proposed budget for 2024/25 and how this would enable continuing to get crime down, protect the vulnerable, support victims and continue the strategic shift to prevention.

The Commissioner introduced the report setting out the proposed budget and precept for Essex Police and highlighting the areas of success, areas of focus and intended investment linked to meeting the priorities of the Police and Crime Plan and retaining the current size and strength of the Service. The Commissioner also gave some feedback from the precept survey which had been undertaken.

The Panel considered the detailed information provided on the budget and precept proposals. During the discussion members of the Panel asked a number of questions to seek clarification and test the evidence and assumptions, to ensure that they were satisfied that the proposed Precept enabled delivery of the objectives included within the Police and Crime Plan 2021-2024 and represented value for money.

During the discussion the following points were made:

- The Commissioner confirmed that there was impartiality within the training provided and each Police Officer took an oath of impartiality. It was done within the context of the guidance of the College of Policing and therefore open to scrutiny. Equality Impact Assessments were carried out on all training. If any instances occurred where this had not been appropriately implemented they would look into through the

police standards process to ensure behaviours were corrected as necessary.

- The Commissioner clarified the various Boards which would be monitoring the implementation of the efficiency and savings plan. It was confirmed that all savings were being achieved through better ways of working and reducing costs through better technology or new interventions. There was no reduction in service. It was further confirmed that whilst there was a vacancy factor taken into account, it was not used to manage the budget.
- A question was raised relating to the challenges associated with having 40% of Police Officers with less than 5 years experience and the mechanisms for ensuring that officers were progressing through to the senior roles. It was explained that there had been no shortage of good quality chief officers, both recruiting externally and progressing up through the ranks within the organisation. There were fast track schemes to encourage and nurture talent. It was reported that there were high quality recruits coming through. Some of the training investment was aimed at first line and second line supervisors and leaders to ensure they understand what the public expects, the priorities and an ability to nurture, train and direct officers.
- It was confirmed that staffing was projected month by month and consider when recruitment was needed. The objective was to end the financial year at around 3755 full time equivalent officers, no change. There were fluctuations throughout the year and the headcount was different to the full time equivalent due to differences in working hours.
- In response to a query the Commissioner confirmed that in Colchester in the 12 month period to December 2023, of the incidents that the Service was aware of, anti-social behaviour had reduced by 36.4% and all crime was down by 8.8%. This was thought to be a reflection of the success of the Safer Streets and Anti-Social Behaviour Hotspot interventions.
- It was clarified that the survey did include a question regarding Police visibility and local neighbourhood policing was one of the priority areas that people were asked to rate.
- In response to a question related to seeing improvement in ways of reporting crime, the Chief Constable explained the plans in place to ensure the Control Room was best equipped to respond, with systemic and personnel changes, ensuring the right calls were going through and improvements for access.
- It was acknowledged that the proposed increase in the precept was significant, however it was considered that in some areas the benefit and result of previous investment were starting to be seen. The Commissioner explained that the proposed increase was about sustaining the current capability and capacity.
- The Commissioner reported that the current funding formula was not fair to Essex, particularly as the population growth had been considerably more in the area. However there were controversies around changing the funding formula to avoid Services losing out in future.

The Commissioner agreed to consider the following points raised by the Panel:

- To further consider how the precept survey can be more widely advertised to achieve a higher response rate, including the suggestion of better utilising local authority partners for a wider reach.
- To provide clarification on the figures relating to male victims of domestic violence within Essex.
- To report back on the success of the plan to improve the 101 reporting service.

The recommendation that the Essex Police precept be increased by 5.55 percent equivalent to an increase of £12.96 a year, from £233.46 to £246.42 for a Band D property was put to the vote by the Panel Chairman. Following consideration of the report and having listened to the Commissioner's justification for the increase, the Panel voted 11 in favour to accept the Commissioner's proposal without qualification or comment, with two abstentions. It was

Resolved:

That the Panel endorsed without qualification or comment, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's decision to increase the police precept by 5.55 percent equivalent to an increase of £12.96 a year, from £233.46 to £246.42 for a Band D property, raising an additional £8.695 million of council tax receipts.

6 Date of Next Meeting

The Chairman confirmed that the reserve meeting date of Thursday 15 February 2024 would not be required due to the Panel's decision to support the proposed precepts.

The Panel noted that the next meeting would take place on Thursday 14 March 2024.

There being no urgent business, the meeting closed at 3:16pm.

Chairman