

Minutes of the meeting of the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Panel, held in the Council Chamber at County Hall, Chelmsford on Thursday, 9 December 2021

Present:

Councillor

Daniel Lawrence
Frankie Ricci
Godfrey Isaacs (Chairman)
Paul Stalker
Ross Playle
Michael Garnett
Ian Shead
Lynda McWilliams
Gary Collins
Maggie Sutton
Jude Deakin
Aidan McGurran
Lee Scordis

Representing

Basildon Borough Council
Braintree District Council
Castle Point Borough Council
Epping Forest District Council
Essex County Council
Harlow District Council
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Tendring District Council
Thurrock Council
Uttlesford District Council
Co-opted Member for Balanced Appointment
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
Annette Chan	Essex Police
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
Nathan Hutchinson	Essex Police
Rick Hylton	Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service
Debbie Martin	Essex Police
Janet Perry	Strategic Head of Performance and Resources, OPFCC

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, including the correction of an error with regard to the appointed representative from Uttlesford District Council being Councillor Maggie Sutton.
2. The following apologies were noted:
 - John Gili-Ross, Chairman
 - Councillor Andrew Baggott, Basildon Borough Council, for whom Councillor Daniel Lawrence substituted
 - Councillor Beverley Oxford, Colchester Borough Council
 - Councillor Jeremy Lager, Chelmsford Borough Council
 - Councillor Keith Barber, Brentwood Borough Council
 - Councillor Arthur Williams, Rochford District Council
 - Councillor Mark Heard, Maldon District Council
3. The following declarations were made by Members:
 - Councillor Lynda McWilliams declared a Code Interest as her son was currently a police officer. Councillor McWilliams participated fully in the meeting.
 - Councillor Frankie Ricci declared a Code Interest as his son was currently a police officer in Essex. Councillor Ricci participated fully in the meeting.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 9 December 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With regard to actions arising from the last meeting the Commissioner gave the following update:

- Improvements to 101 – a ring back service has been looked at, there was no immediate plan to install this, the focus was on answering the telephone at the first point of contact, which had already improved. There was further investment planned. The Live Chat had proved very successful.
- Operation Solstice – 355 E-scooters have been seized. A series of communications have been run highlighting the work in this area. The Department for Transport pilot was being extended and this was being looked at.
- Hate Crime Incident Reporting Centres – it was felt that these were working well, but if there were any specific issues raised these would be looked at.
- Anti-Social Behaviour – the detail can be sent by Policing Division or by Council. From the 12 months to the end of January 2021 to the end of this year, anti-social behaviour was down by 34%, although it was noted that this was distorted by the pandemic interventions.

- Convictions relating to Modern Slavery – Essex sat within the top five forces nationally for charges relating to this area. The new team had achieved 21 charges so far. The Crown Prosecution Service had prosecuted those and additional offences relating to drugs and weapons. It was a crime area which was being learnt about as it developed.

3 Questions to the Chairman from members of the public

Three questions, relating to items on the agenda, were put to the Chairman on behalf of Jenson Cooper who was unable to attend the meeting and the following responses were provided:

1. Why is ECFRS losing more wholetime firefighters when Essex's population continues growing? Purfleet (On-Thames) or Beaulieu (expanding village near Chelmsford) require new infrastructure and housing which mean emergency incidents nearby could increase.

Response – The Commissioner advised that this was the implementation of a decision by the previous Fire Authority of moving day crew staffing to being an on-call based shift system which was being implemented this year. Reassurance was given that a rigorous assessment of risk was carried out across the County. The focus was increasingly on prevention and protection work which had been successful in seeing a continued reduction in the number of people harmed over the period in fire and rescue and road traffic accidents. The demand on the service and the risks presented across the County were constantly being reviewed and took into account new development planned. The Commissioner also advised that he was part of lead group nationally who were pushing for Planning to take into account needs of the emergency services in more depth and provide monies as part of major new developments.

2. Essex Police recruitment pages online make no mention about the force needing operational staff 24/7/365, which means rest day or annual leave cancellations on occasion. (E.g. Local Policing Teams, Force Control Room, OSG, proposed High-Harm Teams).

I totally support encouraging a diverse range of people to join up though ensuring rigorous training and an understanding of what comes with doing said job before starting any application is surely essential?

Response – The Chairman reported that the Panel has a meeting of the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee scheduled on 22 March 2022. At this meeting it was planned that there would be an item to consider the recruitment process of police officers.

3. Investment into both services if your budget receives approval will be significant, though why not add the last penny onto Essex's police precept? It could provide funds for overtime after major incidents with impact on local ratepayers being minimal. (Unlike energy bills)

Response – The Commissioner confirmed that it was £9.99 in Band D, due to the rounding of the other Bands. If it was increased to £10 in this Band it may push the other Bands over the percentage threshold for a potential referendum challenge.

It was noted that further questions had been received from a member of the public after the deadline and would be put to the meeting by the local Member where appropriate.

4 2022/23 Proposed Fire and Rescue Precept

The Panel received report EPFCP/02/22 which set out the proposed budget and precept proposal for Essex County Fire and Rescue Service for 2022-23. The budget had been set in line with the objectives included within the Fire and Rescue Plan 2019-2024.

The Commissioner thanked the team for the outstanding work in preparing the budgets. The County Fire and Rescue service was currently in a good financial position, having reduced risk and demand over recent years. However, it continued to be an ambitious service with a continuing improvement programme to remain efficient and effective. There was a focus on improving capacity and capability in protection following the report of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017. There had been further work in prevention activity and investment in that area. The budget also allowed for recruitment and retention particularly of on-call firefighters.

The Commissioner acknowledged the current situation with regard to inflationary challenges. The Government had kept in place the local referendum precept increase limit of a 2% for those authorities outside of the lower quartile. A survey had been undertaken to gauge public views on potential increases to the precept. The Commissioner explained that the proposed increase of 1.95% would result in an increase of £900k in Council tax receipts. The priorities for investment and improvement within this budget were highlighted.

In response to questions from the Panel the following points were made:

- The on-call shift system was very successful. In Essex there was a divide between more urban settings where there was a more constant level of activity, it was more wholetime and in the rural settings it was more predominantly on-call. The budget anticipated increasing the number of on-call firefighters by 5 this year and a reduction of 10 in the wholetime firefighter establishment as a result of the move from day crew to on-call. There was no pressure to shrink the service, the desire was to shape it to be as effective as it can be.
- It was clarified that the references in the report to Grey Book staff covered uniformed officers and Green Book staff was non-uniformed fire and rescue staff. There were different negotiating processes for each relating to pay. The Green Book staff came under the Local Government Association negotiation structure. There was a claim of 1.75% which not accepted by the unions but the ballot had resulted in no industrial action.

The claim had not yet been made. The Commissioner was not involved in those negotiations. During the public sector pay pause, the National Joint Council for negotiation of fire and rescue officer pay decided on a 1.5% increase which was accepted for the Grey Book staff. This was found from within internal resources as it was not funded by Government.

- Flood rescue wasn't a separate division, it was delivered by more extensively trained officers as part of the overall service. There was no statutory responsibility for fire and rescue to respond to flooding in England, however the service did respond. There was a number of specialist trained units around the County and a review of water rescue capability was currently being done, but apart from the current equipment and renewal programme there were no plans to further invest in that area.
- In response to concern raised that the online survey was only a small sample of residents and not accessible to everyone, the Commissioner advised that the online survey was one way of gathering feedback, speaking to the Panel was another. The Election was also a source of feedback. Going forward focus groups could be considered. A mix of methods were used to get an insight.

The recommendation that the Essex Fire and Rescue precept be increased by 1.95% 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 12 in favour and two against to accept the Commissioner's proposal. It was

Resolved:

That the Panel supported the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed increase in the precept of 1.95%. The precept payable for a Band D Council tax property would increase from £73.89 to £75.33, a change of £1.44 per year.

5 2022/23 Proposed Police Precept

The Panel received report EPFCP/03/22 which presented the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed police precept for 2022/23.

The Commissioner introduced the report, setting out the current situation in Essex Police and what the focus of the proposed budget and precept would be. It was highlighted that with the proposed additional police officers, overall there will have been an increase of 900 additional police officers since 2016. There were 450 through the government uplift scheme and 450 from local resources. The Commissioner considered that this would put the service where it needed to be in terms of driving down crime and making Essex a safer county. The tangible reductions in crime were highlighted. However there were also newly designated crimes being reported and demand had increased. There was more to do particularly with regard to violent crime. Public confidence in Police had increased in Essex.

The budget presented reflected investment from Central Government as well as local investment. Attention was drawn to the efficiencies programme and the Commissioner commended the Chief Constable and staff for work on this budget particularly in the area of ongoing improvement and efficiencies. The Government settlement was a three-year settlement and that was matched with an ability to raise the precept by £10 for a Band D property in each of those three years without the need for a referendum. It was considered by the Commissioner that this increase was needed this year in order to reduce the levels of crime across the county, which he felt was a priority for the public. A survey had been undertaken with regard to investments in policing and potential increases to the precept, which had given a positive endorsement to the proposed increase in investment in policing, together with the recent Election. The Commissioner explained that the proposal was to use in full the Government's funding and increase the Police precept element of the funding by £9.99 per year for a Band D property which was 4.79%. This would result in an additional £6.55million of Council tax receipts to invest in policing in Essex. The priorities for investment and improvement within this budget were highlighted, along with where the additional Police Officers would be allocated.

In response to questions from the Panel the following points were made:

- The match funding from Government was related to the efforts of the Police and Crime Commissioners nationally, for which the Commissioner was the finance lead, resulting in the Government being convinced to match fund the local investments, which the Commissioner saw as a positive step. He reminded the Panel that it was all tax-payers money from either central Government or local taxation. However local taxation is directed to investment locally within the county.
- The Town Centre teams were new and were focussed on being more visible and accessible. Community Policing teams had also nearly doubled in size. There was also improved accessibility through shorter waiting times for 101 and through live chat functionality and other investments throughout the county. There was still more work to do in this area.
- Crimes such as burglary, theft and robbery had all reduced prior to the pandemic lockdowns. However other areas of crime such as drug violence, domestic violence and sexual violence had not reduced and this was where the investment was needed.
- It was recognised that there were issues of isolation and communication with rural communities, a rural team had been introduced and feedback had been positive on the difference it had made.
- With regard to investigating crime, the Chief Constable advised that there was a young, enthusiastic, and competent workforce. It was noted that the service needed to ensure that the officers were given the training to develop investigative skills; both uniformed officers and detectives with specialist skills. There were about 890 detective posts, 550 of which were filled by qualified detectives with a further 260 going through the training/qualification process. The focus and investment in this area would build on that capability to support victims, investigate and bring the perpetrators to justice. The ethos was for all officers to have the skills and

capability to gather evidence, investigate crime and support victims as the first response was often key to an investigation. Additionally detectives with specialist expert investigative skills were required.

- Concern was raised regarding the level of crimes relating to fraud, with prosecutions being only in single figures. The Commissioner noted that this was an area which had been significantly enabled by the internet. It was led on by the City of London Police nationally. Essex Police had a significant capability in that area collaborated with Kent. There was an innovative and networked approach. A huge amount of work was done on prevention via the neighbourhood teams, business crime teams, town centre teams and protect and prepare teams.
- The previous peak in the number of police officers in the county had been in 2010 and the number now exceeded that. The additional 200 officers proposed in the budget were to take the service where it needed to be for the investment programme, in response to the shape of policing as recommended by external consultants that had carried out analysis complemented by the Chief Constable and his team. The Commissioner considered that this was needed to support the priority to bring crime down and although it could have been deferred to another year to lower the precept increase, it was felt that there was improved support for this investment through the survey feedback and public feedback.
- The Estates Strategy which had been put before the Panel previously was now being implemented. It was being reviewed in light of the impact of the pandemic and agile working, but there was still a need to modernise the estate. Proceeds from the sale of property would be invested in improvements to the current estate. The biggest single activity was the Essex Police Headquarters, with the level of expenditure therefore increasing.
- The strategic priorities within the Police and Crime Plan highlighted the challenges around violent crime and the increase in crime in these areas. Therefore the focus of allocating the additional officers has been in those areas including investigation. The effectiveness of Town Centre teams and Community teams as well as the Rural Engagement team has been seen and can be tracked through public opinion and a reduction in crime. There was also a focus on training and supervision, particularly as the workforce was younger in service and less experienced and a focus on the police staff support.
- The Commissioner and Chief Constable had been very determined to ensure that their decisions were sustainable over the longer-term.
- With regard to Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP), it was confirmed that the independent Audit Committee had scrutinised this and the Commissioner was confident that the rules on this had been applied correctly. It was reflected in the Medium Term Finance Strategy over the next five years and incorporated the changes.
- The Commissioner was confident that the recruitment was good and had been developed ahead of the national recruitment pattern had started and had been successful. There had been a focus on improving diversity and inclusion which was working. Up to the current time there hadn't been a struggle to recruit. However there were potentially some challenges going forward due to some changes.

- In terms of rural crime compared to urban crime, whilst it was recognised that the approach needed may be different, it was noted that much of the crime was driven by the same things.
- It was clarified that under the proceeds of crime, there was a percentage that went back to the Force into the reserves and the Chief Constable made recommendations on how that was spent on policing.

The recommendation that the Essex Police precept be increased by 4.79% was proposed and seconded and then put to the vote by the Panel Chairman. Following review of the report and having considered the Commissioner's justification for the increase, the Panel voted 11 in favour, two against and one abstention to accept the Commissioner's proposal. It was

Resolved:

That the Panel supported the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed precept increase of 4.79%, equivalent to an increase of £9.99 a year, from £208.53 to £218.52 for a Band D property, raising an additional £6.55 million of council tax receipts.

The Commissioner took the opportunity to thank the Panel for its review of the precept and to thank the Chief Constable and his team for putting together the reports.

The Chairman advised that the decisions of the Panel would be confirmed to the Commissioner in writing following the meeting.

6 Date of Next Meeting

The Chairman confirmed that the reserve meeting date of Thursday 17 February 2022 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 Tuesday 22 March 2022.

There being no urgent business, the meeting closed at 4.07pm.