

Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

Minutes of a meeting of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel held at the Maybin Room, One Angel Square, Angel Street, Northampton NN1 1ED on Thursday 3 February 2022 at 1.00pm.

Present Councillor Gill Mercer (Chair)
 Councillor Jon-Paul Carr
 Councillor Dorothy Maxwell
 Councillor Zoe McGhee
 Councillor Ken Pritchard
 Councillor David Smith
 Mrs Anita Shields
 Miss Pauline Woodhouse

Substitute Councillor Rufia Ashraf [to item 42]
Members

Also in Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner
attendance Deborah Denton, Joint Head of Communications, Office of the Police,
 Fire & Crime Commissioner
 James Edmunds, Democratic Services Manager, West
 Northamptonshire Council
 Helen King, Chief Finance Officer, Office of the Police, Fire & Crime
 Commissioner
 Nicci Marzec, Director for Early Intervention, Head of Paid Service
 and Monitoring Officer, Office of the Police, Fire & Crime
 Commissioner
 Stuart McCartney, Governance & Accountability Manager, Office of
 the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner

There were also two members of the public in attendance.

37. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Gonzalez De Savage, Roberts and Strachan. Councillor Ashraf substituted for Councillor Strachan.

The Panel was advised that Councillor Gonzalez De Savage was currently not able to attend in-person meetings but would be following the live webcast of the Panel meeting.

38. Notification of requests from members of the public to address the meeting

Requests to address the meeting on agenda item 6 (the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner's proposed Police Precept for 2022/23) were received from:

- Ms Shirley Jones
- Mr Aaron Preston

The Panel was advised that Mr Preston was present but had asked that his address be read on his behalf.

39. **Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

40. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting and made the following points:

- The meeting was being webcast live and participants were asked to use their microphones.
- The agenda for the current meeting featured guide times for individual agenda items, as agreed by the Panel. Panel members were encouraged to follow these.
- The Chair had participated in a recent Home Office workshop on developing training for Police & Crime panels.

41. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the Police, Fire & Crime Panel meeting held on 16th December 2021 be approved, subject to the amendment of minute 30 sixth bullet point to read: "Previous investment had put the force on course to have 1,500 officers by 2023."

42. **Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner's proposed Police Precept for 2022/23**

The PFCC presented the proposed Police precept and budget for 2022/23, which were based on an increase in the precept of £10 per year for Band D Council Tax. The PFCC highlighted the following points:

- The proposed precept and budget had been developed against the background of significant financial uncertainty.
- The 2021 Spending Review had provided a three-year funding settlement and the flexibility to increase the Police precept by £10 in each year to 2024/25. At the same time, public bodies faced pressures resulting from increases in the cost of living and the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This situation added to the importance of consulting Northamptonshire residents on the proposed precept. In this case, 50.3 per cent of those replying to public consultation indicated that they would be prepared to pay a £10 increase; 42.9 per cent of those replying thought that Northamptonshire Police was doing a good or excellent job.
- He needed to strike the right balance between competing demands when setting the precept. He considered that the proposed precept did this and that it represented the best deal for Northamptonshire.
- The proposed precept and budget for 2022/23 would support a further increase in the number of police officers in the county to 1,500; provide investment in early intervention; and would include ring-fenced funding for other action to support the delivery of his Police, Fire & Crime Plan priorities.

- The proposed precept and budget would provide funding for the capital programme and for reserves to meet unforeseen demand.
- Medium term savings would still need to be made but the proposed precept would enable him to set a balanced budget over three years for the first time.
- Funding for policing in Northamptonshire had not kept pace with local growth and he would continue to press for the police funding formula to be updated, as well as working with his counterparts on the response to other national challenges such as future pension costs.
- He commended the proposed precept as a robust proposal that would produce a balanced budget over the next three years and that would support his strategic priorities.

Ms Shirley Jones addressed the meeting and made the following points:

- She had recently been in contact with Northamptonshire Police as a service-user. The force was very stretched and in her case it had not fulfilled its statutory duties: it had not been able to download CCTV footage within six months, which had meant that a case was not able to proceed.
- The small budget for the Office of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) showed in the standard of service provided at times. She thought that correspondence and complaints could be dealt with better.
- The Northamptonshire Police Professional Standards Department (PSD) had taken over eight weeks to acknowledge a complaint that she had made and would not respond to related queries. The police complaints process should treat complainants fairly.
- She believed that her experiences reflected that Northamptonshire Police was funded poorly.

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager read out the address by Mr Aaron Preston, which made the following points:

- Mr Preston thought that the increases in the Police and Fire precepts proposed by the PFCC could have been higher, given the need for the two services to have adequate equipment and personnel to support and protect local communities. However, he welcomed that the increases would provide additional resources to help to meet current policing challenges and to improve the financial position of Northamptonshire Fire & Rescue Service (NFRS).
- Mr Preston raised the need for more information to be provided to local communities about planned activity to support crime prevention and community safety in the county. He was the Police Liaison Representative (PLR) for Far Cotton and Delapre. It was more difficult to get residents to engage with the force and to provide local intelligence if there was a lack of information about how best to support the force and about initiatives underway. Residents also needed to understand how crime was going to be reduced and how success in this would be measured
- Mr Preston questioned how the success of the Safer Nights Out (SNO) van trial project would be judged and what the project aimed to achieve.

- Mr Preston highlighted that beat officers still had to spend a significant amount of time on paperwork, which reduced their visibility in the community. He questioned whether there was a plan to address this situation, including making more use of automated systems and civilian staff.

The PFCC thanked the speakers for taking the time to attend the meeting.

The PFCC made the following points in response to Ms Jones' address:

- He agreed that Northamptonshire Police should receive higher funding and he encouraged members of the public to lobby their MP on this matter.
- He apologised that Ms Jones' experience of making a complaint to the OPFCC had not been better. The capacity of the Complaints Team had recently been reduced due to the need to fill a vacancy that had arisen.

The PFCC advised that he would provide a written response to Mr Preston following the meeting and made the following points:

- The PLR scheme had been launched in April 2021. PLRs were supposed to receive a welcome back and regular information from the force. It did not appear that Mr Preston was receiving this and the situation could be checked.
- Current investment in neighbourhood policing reflected the importance of community intelligence. More accessible services would encourage residents to share information.
- The SNOvan had operated for less than eight weeks so far. The project was intended to provide support to vulnerable people in the night-time economy in Northampton, not to reduce crime or anti-social behaviour. He thanked the Northampton Guardian volunteers who operated the SNOvan.
- The force faced additional demands relating to paperwork as a result of requirements set out in the latest guidance on charging produced by the Director of Public Prosecutions. However, increasing the numbers of officers, the Qlik data-sharing system and the joint-service IT function would produce a benefit.

The PFCC provided additional information in response to further questions as follows:

- As PFCC he was subject to a statutory obligation to publish performance data. Members of the public would see the OPFCC publish more information over the coming year.
- Northamptonshire Police had been a struggling force and was still not where he wanted it to be but was now making real progress. Recent reports by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) demonstrated this.
- Perceptions of the performance of PSD needed to take into account that it carried out complex and sensitive work. It also received a significant number of spurious complaints that wasted time. The PFCC had taken a greater role in overseeing the complaints process to help to address this situation. He was also considering what could be done to increase PSD resources.

The Panel considered the proposed Police precept.

The Panel questioned the PFCC about the benefit that Northamptonshire residents would see from the proposed precept and budget. It was emphasised that the major commitments it was intended to support needed to be delivered in practice, particularly in 'left behind' areas. The PFCC made the following points:

- The outcomes that the budget was intended to support could not be achieved immediately. The force currently had over 500 police officers who had been in the role for less than four years and needed time to become fully effective.
- Performance data already showed that police officers were more visible in the community but that public engagement remained at the same level. This was part of the reason for ring-fencing funding in the budget to support neighbourhood policing.
- The force was on an improvement journey and was making good progress but was not yet where it needed to be.
- Funding for neighbourhood policing would be used across the county rather than focussed only on specific areas. However, it was part of his role as PFCC to hold to account the Chief Constable for the outcomes being achieved by the force. He expected that the expanded neighbourhood policing offer in Northamptonshire should produce a benefit for all areas.

The Panel noted that the PFCC had increased the Police precept by £13 at Band D in 2022/23 compared to the £10 increase proposed for 2022/23 and sought reassurance about the potential impact of setting a lower precept this year. The PFCC was further questioned about whether he would need to raise the precept in 2023/24 if the cost of increasing the force's establishment to 1,500 officers would be covered in the latest budget.

The PFCC made the following points:

- All Police & Crime commissioners had to work with the Council Tax referendum limit set by the government, which had been higher in 2021. He was comfortable that a £10 increase represented the best option at this point, whilst the force had also been tasked with delivering a 1 per cent annual efficiency saving.
- The flexibility given to commissioners to increase the precept by £10 in each of the next three years would provide a clearer position over the near future.
- The Police precept set for 2023/24 would take into account that there would still be a need for additional resources at that point. The cost of police pay would increase as officers progressed in the role and moved through a broad pay scale. The force would also need to be in a position to meet new demands, such as the significant cost of charging electric vehicles.

The Panel considered potential risks that could affect the delivery of the 2022/23 budget as proposed. Panel members made the following points:

- Increased inflation, operating costs and new government priorities that did not come with funding attached could all contribute to pressures on resources in the near future.

- Possible increases in employer pension contribution rates could produce a pressure of £6.4m per year by 2024/25. It would be a significant concern if the government did not provide funding to cover this demand and it fell on local taxpayers.
- Budget pressures on partner organisations that affected their involvement in collaborative work could create additional demands on the force.

The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- Neither the range of potential increases in employer pension contribution rates nor the amount that might be covered by the government were yet known. The OPFCC was modelling an increase of 10 per cent with the government covering 75 per cent of the cost, which reflected previous experience.
- It was unlikely that the government would expect public sector organisations to meet the full cost of potential increases in employer pension contribution rates but there was a risk in anticipating the final position. However, this risk had been appropriately identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan and would be dealt with as necessary.

The PFCC made the following points:

- His approach to the question of future employer pension contribution rates was informed by the judgement that local taxpayers would not support an increase in the precept intended to build up a reserve now to deal with pension cost pressures that might arise in the future.
- He did have concerns about the impact of changes in partnership working, in light of a recent issue regarding local authority funding for the Sunflower Centre. Northamptonshire was going through an unsettled period following local government reorganisation and other changes such as the creation of the Children's Trust. It was important that all partners acted in a way that supported the aim of making people safer.

The Panel sought reassurance that the level of reserves maintained by the PFCC was adequate. It also sought further information about the use of the earmarked reserve intended to support specific initiatives arising from the Police, Fire & Crime Plan, given that the Reserves Strategy identified the risk of initiatives not being adequately defined or delivered and producing poor value for money.

The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- General and earmarked reserves had been thoroughly analysed as part of the development of the budget.
- The general reserve of £5m represented a suitable amount that made provision for issues that could arise, such as the local cost of responding to a major incident or meeting the external audit requirement to show a balanced budget over a three-year period.
- The PFCC did not keep a significant sum in earmarked reserves.

The PFCC made the following points:

- He judged that current reserves were adequate, which was supported by the Joint Independent Audit Committee.
- The Reserves Strategy identified the risk of initiatives not being adequately defined or delivered and producing poor value for money to reflect the difficulty in some cases of proving that an intervention had produced better outcomes than would have occurred if no action had been taken. Initiatives funded from the reserve were still designed to be as effective as possible.

The Panel noted that the public consultation on the proposed precept had generated a better response than the consultation on the PFCC's Police, Fire & Crime Plan in 2021. However, the PFCC was challenged about whether he was content with the number of responses received. The PFCC made the following points:

- He was always looking to improve public engagement. The consultation on the proposed Police precept had used a range of methods and the number of responses received was statistically relevant.
- The outcome of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner election in 2021 also represented a significant judgement on his priorities.
- As the PFCC he was ultimately responsible for making a decision on the precept and he was comfortable doing so having considered all of the relevant factors.

[Councillor Ashraf left the meeting during the preceding discussion].

The Chair welcomed the workshop session for Panel members on the Police and Fire budgets held ahead of the current meeting, which had been very useful. The PFCC was also invited to advise the Panel if it could assist in making the case for updating the current police funding formula.

The Chair invited the Panel to agree its conclusions on the proposed Police precept.

RESOLVED that: the Panel supports the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner's proposed Police precept for 2022/23.

43. **Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire Precept for 2022/23**

The PFCC presented the proposed Fire precept and budget for 2022/23, which were based on an increase in the precept of £5 per year for Band D Council Tax. The PFCC highlighted the following points:

- The proposed precept and budget came at a time of significant financial uncertainty, as a result of the one-year funding settlement announced by the government and increases in the cost of living.
- This situation made it particularly important to consider how any increase in the precept would affect Northamptonshire residents and to ensure that the budget he set was sustainable.
- Since becoming the fire and rescue authority in 2019 he had taken action to build a sustainable base budget, establish a realistic capital programme and increase reserves. He had also continued to make a case to the government for

recognition of the particular financial pressures faced by the authority. This case had been heard: the government had given Northamptonshire and the other seven lowest charging fire and rescue authorities one-off flexibility to raise the precept by £5 in 2022/23.

- Taking the option of raising the precept by £5 would generate almost £1m in additional funding for Northamptonshire and with some medium term savings would enable him to set a balanced budget over the next three years, with an integrated capital programme and stronger reserves.
- Responses to public consultation were supportive of the proposed precept: 61.3 per cent of those replying were prepared to pay an increase of at least £5, whilst 63.7 per cent thought that NFRS was doing a good or excellent job.
- The proposed budget for 2022/23 was almost £4.6m more than it had been in 2019. He was proud of the progress that had been made in this time.
- He considered that the precept proposed for 2022/23 would produce a fair and deliverable budget that represented the best deal for Northamptonshire residents and that would support the future of a vital service.

The Panel considered the proposed Fire precept.

The Panel questioned the PFCC about the resources available to NFRS relative to the demands on it. Panel members made the following points:

- The additional resources that the PFCC had provided since 2019 were welcome but if the proposed precept and budget were agreed Northamptonshire would still be the second lowest precepting fire and rescue authority in the country, with the second lowest core spending power and the lowest reserves.
- Progress was being made and the additional precept flexibility permitted by the government was positive but parity remained some distance away.
- It was questioned whether a £5 increase in the precept was sufficient in light of the significant pressures on NFRS. NFRS needed to have sufficient officers and equipment to deal with the risks that could result from increasing residential and commercial development in the county, such as fires in large warehouses.
- Reassurance was sought about the prospective impact of opening HMP Five Wells on local resources.

The PFCC made the following points:

- It had taken some effort to secure the flexibility to raise the precept by £5. He considered that the government should remove the limit on local flexibility to raise the precept.
- He was confident in the proposed budget. It was essential to use available resources as effectively as possible rather than just requesting more. This included learning from examples of good practice in other areas.
- New government requirements could increase the demands on NFRS. As an example the government was seeking to increase the focus on mid-rise buildings in the current fire safety inspection regime, which could have implications for Northamptonshire.

- His focus was on maximising the resources available for frontline services. This could increase the potential need to discuss with partner organisations what services the force and NFRS could and could not provide in future. Partner organisations making service reductions should not assume that the force and NFRS would be able to expand their activity to meet resulting needs.
- He had a good level of engagement with the HMP Five Wells management team, which aimed to make the prison a market-leading facility.
- The fire and rescue authority did not receive any additional government funding connected with HMP Five Wells and was expected to meet any needs within existing fire cover arrangements. However, the prison should generate some economic benefit for the county rather than just representing an additional cost.

The Panel noted that the precept provided approximately 63 per cent of funding for the fire and rescue authority. Reassurance was sought about the robustness of assumptions regarding the local Council Tax base and collection rates built into the proposed budget and the impact if these were not met. It was also highlighted that current economic pressures could cause difficulties for more local taxpayers this year.

The PFCC made the following points:

- He particularly thanked Northamptonshire residents for being prepared to make a higher contribution to the fire and rescue authority's resources given current economic pressures.
- Council Tax was guaranteed to produce a certain amount of funding. The fire and rescue authority had an existing smoothing reserve that could then be used to mitigate a deficit in the final position on the Council Tax collection fund.

The Chief Finance Officer further advised that the two Northamptonshire local authorities had provided very good estimates of their collection fund positions as well as sharing other relevant information that had informed the proposed budget.

The Panel sought clarification of the latest position concerning the provision of support services to NFRS. The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- NFRS currently used LGSS support services. These had worked well but NFRS would be moving to a new ERP system from 1st April 2023.
- Northamptonshire Police was moving to the same system a year earlier following the withdrawal from Multi-Force Shared Services. A phased transfer to the new common system would be more effective than both organisations changing arrangements at once.

The Panel sought clarification of particular elements within the fire and rescue authority capital programme. The Chief Finance Officer provided additional information in response to points raised by members during the course of discussion as follows:

- The higher capital allocation for Information & Communications Technology in 2022/23 compared to subsequent years reflected the need to front-load work to address legacy issues, following a lack of investment in the past.
- The capital programme for estates reflected a similar need to deal with legacy issues, including removing asbestos from buildings and providing better welfare facilities for firefighters.
- The capital funding allocation in 2022/23 reflected the development of the new joint fleet workshop for NFRS and Northamptonshire Police. The fire and rescue authority had purchased the workshop building and the force would pay a charge for using it, whereas the opposite arrangement applied to Darby House.

The PFCC confirmed that he had done as much as he could to seek additional one-off capital funding support from the government to mitigate the costs of financing legacy items in the capital programme. The government had not yet responded, but the proposed budget made prudent assumptions on this matter.

The Chair invited the Panel to agree its conclusions on the proposed Fire precept.

RESOLVED that: the Panel supports the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire precept for 2022/23.

44. **Police, Fire & Crime Panel Work Programme 2021/22**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager presented the report setting out the latest version of the Panel's work programme, highlighting the following points:

- The work programme reflected resolutions from the last Panel meeting requesting a report on fire safety risks in residential properties for the meeting on 14th April 2022 and identifying children and young people's involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour as a possible topic for future scrutiny, subject to further consideration of the practicalities involved.
- The PFCC had offered to give the Panel a presentation on the telematics system earlier in the current meeting.
- The potential for Panel members to visit Darby House had been highlighted again at the current meeting.

The Chair suggested that a visit to Darby House should be combined with a briefing session with the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer as the Panel had previously intended. The Chair also highlighted that the reserve Panel meeting on 17th February 2022 did not need to take place as the Panel had supporter both of the proposed precepts for 2022/23.

The Panel considered the report. Members highlighted modern slavery and the role of Trading Standards in dealing with crime as potential topics that the Panel could include in its work programme. The Chair noted that trading standards was more of a topic for local authority scrutiny. The PFCC advised that he could provide briefings to the Panel on a range of topics, such as modern slavery or the vehicle fleet. He encouraged the Panel to identify the topics that it wanted to cover so that the Panel Secretariat and the OPFCC could produce a schedule.

The Panel went on to consider how to move forward with potential work on children and young people's involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. Members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- This was a pressing issue affecting the county. If there was an opportunity for the Panel to help to address it then it should do so.
- It would be a good starting point for the Panel to seek a presentation from those involved in work on this topic. That would help the Panel to identify if a piece of task and finish work was necessary.
- The Panel could scrutinise whether the PFCC was holding the force to account effectively for the contribution it was making to preventing young people from becoming involved in crime and anti-social behaviour.
- The proposed topic was very broad. The Panel should be clear about the focus of any work.
- Any work by the Panel should reflect that its role was to scrutinise and support the PFCC. It could be counterproductive for the Panel to seek to scrutinise issues for which the PFCC was not responsible.
- Many aspects of the suggested topic were likely to be covered by the work of the Community Safety Partnerships. However, it could still be useful for the Panel to have a briefing.
- The topic of children and young people's involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour could be linked to priorities set out in the PFCC's Police & Crime Plan.

The Chair identified the potential for the Panel to request a presentation on work on Early Intervention and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Northamptonshire as a way of moving forward. However, the Panel would also need to consider how this could be scheduled given that it only had one more meeting in 2021/22.

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Panel was encouraged to be clear about the aims of any in-depth scrutiny work that it proposed to do. This would then help it to identify the best approach and the timescale for the work.
- The Panel was able to change the priorities within its work programme. It might consider rescheduling the proposed report on fire safety risks in residential properties, or the regular update reports, from the Panel meeting on 14th April 2022 if it considered that other business was a higher priority.

The PFCC made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Panel's and the PFCC's respective remits should be reflected in any potential work on children and young people's involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour.
- The force was not solely responsible for dealing with anti-social behaviour.
- The Early Intervention & ACES team operated by the OPFCC dealt with an aspect of the wider topic. He was happy to discuss the team's work. He currently

had concerns about their ability to work with the Children's Trust and around data-sharing and vulnerability.

- He could present shorter budget updates to the Panel meeting on 14th April 2022 if requested, particularly given how early it would be in the financial year.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel requests that a visit to Darby House for Panel members be combined with briefing sessions with the Chief Constable and the Chief Fire Officer on their respective service's priorities and challenges.**
- b) The Panel agrees that Panel members should suggest topics for future briefing sessions to the Secretariat to enable a programme of sessions to be produced.**
- c) The Panel agrees to include a briefing session on the use of telematics in Northamptonshire in the programme of briefing sessions.**
- d) The Panel agrees that the agenda for its meeting on 14th April 2022 should include the following items of business:**
 - **An overview of work on Early Intervention and Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northamptonshire.**
 - **An overview of priorities in Northamptonshire with regard to managing fire safety risks in residential properties, including risks associated with houses in multiple occupation.**
 - **Short updates on the Police and Fire & Rescue Authority 2021/22 budget positions.**

45. Police, Fire & Crime Panel meeting dates 2022/23

The Chair introduced the report setting out proposed meeting dates for the Panel in the next municipal year.

The Panel considered the report. A member questioned that the current Panel was being asked to set dates for 2022/23 when the councillor membership could change in the meantime. The Chair responded that the proposed dates provided a basis on which to proceed; individual dates could be changed later if the need arose.

RESOLVED that: the Panel agrees the following meeting dates for 2022/23:

- **23rd June 2022**
- **8th September 2022**
- **1st December 2022**
- **2nd February 2023**
- **16th February 2023 (Reserve)**
- **20th April 2023**

All meetings to start at 1.00pm. All meetings to take place at local authority venues in Northampton.

46. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 3.50pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____