

## **Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel**

Minutes of a meeting of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel held at the Great Hall, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton NN1 1DE on Thursday 2 February 2023 at 1.00 pm.

### **Present:**

Councillor Gill Mercer (Chair)  
Councillor Andre Gonzalez De Savage (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Jon-Paul Carr  
Councillor Dorothy Maxwell  
Councillor David Smith  
Councillor Winston Strachan  
Mrs Anita Shields  
Miss Pauline Woodhouse

### **Substitute Members:**

Councillor Greg Lunn

Councillor Zoe McGhee attended remotely for part of the meeting but was not formally present.

### **Apologies for Absence:**

Councillor Adam Brown  
Councillor Russell Roberts  
Councillor Ken Pritchard  
Councillor Zoe McGhee

### **Also in attendance:**

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

## **115. Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitute Members**

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Brown, McGhee, Pritchard and Roberts and from substitute members Councillors Irwin, Jelley and Lee. Councillor Lunn substituted for Councillor Brown.

116. **Notification of requests from members of the public to address the meeting**

None received.

117. **Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

118. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting. The Chair noted that the current meeting would be followed by a confirmation hearing and therefore encouraged members to focus their contributions to discussion.

119. **Minutes**

**RESOLVED that: the minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting held on 1 December 2022 be approved.**

120. **Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Police Precept for 2023/24**

The PFCC presented the proposed Police precept and budget, which were based on an increase in the precept of £15 per year for Band D Council Tax. The PFCC highlighted the following points:

- The proposal reflected the challenge of providing an efficient and effective police force in the context of current financial pressures and the effect of an unfair national funding formula for policing.
- He was acutely aware that increasing the precept would add to demands on local taxpayers and it was therefore essential that his final decision was well-informed.
- The Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) had carried out a far-reaching public consultation on the precept, which had received a better response than in the previous year. Over 51 per cent of residents who responded said that they were prepared to pay £15 or more for policing, which was higher than in the previous year.
- The proposed precept would enable continuing progress without having an undue financial impact on residents.
- The budget for 2023/24 would support a baseline establishment of 1,500 police officers, which was the highest number ever in Northamptonshire and included a significant number of officers allocated to neighbourhood policing.
- The budget for 2023/24 provided for further investment in key areas of operational and commissioned activity. It also maintained the commitment that OPFCC staffing costs would be kept below 1 per cent of the policing budget.
- The proposed precept and budget formed part of a robust Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) that provided for further investment and contingencies over the next three years.

- The national funding formula had not been updated for 10 years and central government funding for Northamptonshire did not take account of population growth. He would continue to make the case for change and encouraged all local elected representatives to work together on this matter.
- In the meantime, he considered that the proposed precept for 2023/24 represented the best deal for Northamptonshire, which would maintain investment in police officers, maintain an adequate level of reserves and safeguard policing services in the county.

The Panel considered the proposed Police precept.

The Panel scrutinised how the proposed Police precept and budget supported the PFCC's priority to provide an efficient and effective police response in Northamptonshire. The PFCC was challenged in particular about whether there was scope to increase investment in police officers or equipment above the level proposed. The PFCC made the following points:

- He had already made the commitment to have 1,500 officers in Northamptonshire by March 2023 and would sustain this number.
- There was currently significant economy uncertainty, with an increase in interest rates earlier that day. It was not practical in this context to make a further commitment to have a specific number of police officers at a future date.
- Northamptonshire Police had made good progress delivering its share of the national uplift in police officers, to the point where it had received additional government funding. However, the force was also likely to have a relatively young workforce until the end of the 2020s.
- He had been clear to Northamptonshire residents about his priorities concerning officer numbers and the development of neighbourhood policing, as well as related matters such as improving workforce support for serving officers.

The Panel questioned the PFCC about his case that Northamptonshire was treated unfairly by the national funding formula and members made the following points:

- The report indicated how government funding for Northamptonshire compared unfavourably to that received by some other areas in the East Midlands.
- The PFCC had been making this case for some years and it was questioned whether any change was likely to be forthcoming.
- The government might consider that an increasing number of taxpayers in Northamptonshire was already generating additional resources.

The PFCC made the following points:

- The government had committed to reviewing the national funding formula before the end of the current parliament. The key question was what measures a new funding formula would use to allocate resources in addition to local population.
- A new funding formula should not penalise force areas that were performing well or produce unintended consequences in relation to functions such as crime recording.

- He was confident in the basis for his case that the existing funding formula disproportionately disadvantaged the county compared to other force areas. Northamptonshire would receive £40m more for policing if it was funded at the same level per-head as Nottinghamshire, which received additional resources as a legacy of previous issues.

The Panel sought reassurance about the PFCC's level of confidence that the planned establishment of police officers could be maintained given current pressures on retention in policing and the need for effective vetting to ensure that suitable people were recruited. The PFCC made the following points:

- Recruitment and retention was less of an issue for Northamptonshire Police now than at previous times when it had been affected by the benefits that the Metropolitan Police offered to new recruits. Recruitment was monitored effectively.
- Previous investment in vetting meant that Northamptonshire was in a better position than some other force areas and was already using approaches that were now being recommended nationally.
- He was generally confident in the position in Northamptonshire without being complacent.

Panel members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- Public services were now delivered in collaboration with a range of voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. This was not mentioned in the report. It was questioned how the proposed budget supported VCS organisations that contributed to community safety activity in the county.
- Reassurance was sought about the robustness of the key assumptions on future pay policy and pension costs informing the MTFP.
- The Panel needed to have more information about the demographic breakdown of responses to consultation on the proposed precept and budget to give confidence that hard-to-reach groups or areas had been engaged.
- The PFCC should commit to a recruitment drive for Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in addition to recruiting police officers.
- The PFCC should seek to do more to deal with crime and antisocial behaviour by young people, including improving engagement with them by Northamptonshire Police.
- The PFCC should ensure that he invested sufficiently in Information Technology, including by maximising the use of civilian personnel for roles that did not require police officers.
- Further information was sought about take up of the Flare app for members of the public to report areas or behaviours that caused them to feel unsafe and whether the app would be funded on a permanent basis, as it had been well-received in the local community.

The PFCC made the following additional points:

- He commended the efforts of all VCS partners working on community safety. The OPFCC offered financial support to VCS groups through grant funding schemes, which provided funding for specific projects rather than core operating costs.
- Other statutory organisations needed to make an appropriate contribution to community safety activity alongside the OPFCC. He would seek a discussion with relevant partners about the extent to which the OPFCC was currently funding local Sunflower services.
- He was committed to recruiting additional PCSOs. Previous concern about progress with recruitment of PCSOs had led him to establish an earmarked reserve to retain any in-year underspends on the PCSO budget for neighbourhood policing and related activities. This had encouraged recruitment.
- There was already a significant amount of community safety activity focussed on young people in the county, including work by the OPFCC Youth Team and Adverse Childhood Experiences Team and the My Pink Trainers film on road safety. Neighbourhood policing would assist in addressing issues more generally.
- Local authorities were responsible for dealing with anti-social behaviour. All partners needed to work together more effectively on this matter. Northamptonshire Police was looking at the 'Right Care Right Person' model used by Humberside Police that was designed to provide the best response to people contacting the police who actually needed support for health or care needs.
- The Capital Programme included a relatively high level of investment in ICT. Work in this area included considering opportunities to make use of innovative technology such as artificial intelligence and drones. However, there was also scope for Northamptonshire Police to improve its cost-effectiveness by decommissioning old systems that had been retained because they held data that might still be needed in the future.
- The OPFCC commissioning and delivery budgets for 2023/24 included £80K funding for an IPSOS Mori public consultation exercise intended to inform the OPFCC about perceptions of community safety in Northamptonshire, particularly amongst women. He could present the outcomes of this work to the Panel at a future meeting.
- He was committed to maintaining the operation of the Flare app, which was providing useful intelligence.

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

- The PFCC's share of the Council Tax Collection Fund surplus was a one-off sum and was being used to replenish reserves after an equivalent sum had been taken out to support the 2023/24 budget. This was the first surplus on the Collection Fund for some years due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The OPFCC was working with local authorities to identify if further surpluses were likely in future and so could be built into the base budget.

- Assumptions concerning police pay had been informed by benchmarking and by extensive discussion amongst all Police and Crime commissioners and chief finance officers. The MTFP included prudent estimates for pay increases at an average of 2 per cent, which was the Home Office assumption. However, as this was felt to be low the 2023/24 budget also provided for a specific pay inflation contingency of a further 1 per cent.
- The position on pension costs during the period covered by the MTFP would be affected by the outcomes of the next actuarial review of the police pension scheme, which could result in an increased employer contribution rate. The financial implications of this could be significant. The MTFP was modelled on sensible assumptions based on precedents, including that the government would fund 75 per cent of increased costs.
- Responses to consultation on the proposed precept and budget had been analysed whilst consultation was underway to identify any gaps so that the OPFCC could take action to address these: for example, it had worked with North Northamptonshire councillors to boost the number of responses obtained from Corby. The OPFCC would publish a detailed breakdown of consultation responses online before the end of February 2023.

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

**RESOLVED that: the Panel supports the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Police precept for 2023/24.**

121. **Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire Precept for 2023/24**

The PFCC presented the proposed Fire precept and budget, 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 had been produced in challenging economic times, whilst specific issues affecting Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) added further complexity.
- He was proud of the work done since 2019 to stabilise and strengthen NFRS's financial position but this was an open-ended process that was also subject to factors outside of his control.
- Northamptonshire remained the second lowest funded Fire and Rescue authority in England and local taxpayers provided 64 per cent of its funding. A fairer national funding formula would reduce the vulnerability resulting from this situation.
- The increase in the precept that he now proposed for 2023/24 equated to 10p per week and was significantly less than the rate of inflation but would make a real difference.
- Around 65 per cent of residents who responded to public consultation had said that they were prepared to pay £5 or more for NFRS and around 65 per cent thought that NFRS was doing a good or excellent job.

- The proposed 2023/24 budget would be over £7m more than the budget for NFRS originally transferred to the PFCC, which represented a revenue budget increase of over 30 per cent since 2018/19. The MTFP still involved the need to make savings but the proposed precept would produce a balanced budget with an appropriate level of reserves and an integrated capital programme.
- He considered that the proposed precept was a fair and affordable one that would deliver a balanced budget over the next three years. It represented the best deal for residents and for the future of a vital service.

The Panel considered the proposed Fire precept.

The Panel questioned the PFCC about whether the proposed precept and budget would enable the recruitment of additional firefighters and the acquisition of new equipment in 2023/24, building on action in the current year. The PFCC made the following points:

- New appliances that had been purchased were being brought into operation. Further attention also needed to be given to making the best use of NFRS buildings, which was an area of work that had been held up by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NFRS ultimately needed to ensure that it was as fit for purpose as possible. The Chief Fire Officer had been tasked with completing an operational review that had been started by his predecessor. This would look at issues including how NFRS used retained firefighters. The financial environment for Fire and Rescue was very tight, which increased the onus on NFRS to use overall resources to best effect.

The Panel sought reassurance about risks to delivering the proposed budget that could result from prospective industrial action by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), including the effect on emergency response to fires in residential properties. The PFCC made the following points:

- The form and timing of industrial action by the FBU was still to be confirmed. Intense further discussions about the firefighters pay award were continuing and the FBU did want the national framework to work. Some support from national government could be needed to resolve the current issues.
- The proposed base budget for 2023/24 was built on a funded 5 per cent pay award. He was satisfied that Northamptonshire had been up-front about what it could afford, although he was not saying that firefighters were not worth more.
- Industrial action would result in increased risk. The Chief Fire Officer was producing an operational contingency plan to manage the situation.

Panel members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The most important resource available to NFRS was its people.
- The Northamptonshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority (NCFRA) had done well to develop the draft budget given that the final local government finance settlement was not yet known.

- It was important for NCFRA to maximise available sources of income. It needed to have a good understanding of resources due to it from Section 106 funding and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).
- The report presented to the Panel indicated the imbalance between the cost of a 1 per cent increase in pay inflation and the additional resources that could be generated by a 1 per cent increase in Band D Council Tax.
- The report highlighted the limited proportion of the resources for NFRS that came from central government funding. This was an issue that should be pursued by the county's elected representatives.
- National government had finite resources to support public services, including Fire and Rescue services.

Councillor McGhee joined the meeting remotely during the preceding discussion. The Chair advised that she had agreed to a specific request from Councillor McGhee for this facility at the current meeting. However, Councillor McGhee was not formally present as she was not in the meeting room.

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

- The reserves held by NCFRA would ideally be larger but did provide a buffer for contingencies.
- The Home Office was open to providing some additional resources to NCFRA to assist with pressures resulting from industrial action, to avoid its financial position degrading again after the recovery achieved since 2019.
- Funding from Section 106 agreements and CIL was a well-managed area. NFRS had transferred to the PFCC with a detailed schedule of expected funding. There was now an excellent officer who worked on securing funding from this source for both NFRS and Northamptonshire Police.
- The Emergency Services Network (ESN) Reserve included in the budget was largely made up of funding from the Home Office. It was anticipated that this would not be sufficient to meet the whole cost of the ESN project and NCFRA would keep pushing for additional resources to reflect this.
- The reduction in Top-Up Grant included in the 2023/24 budget compared to 2022/23 reflected that this grant was linked to business rates retention and information about business rates was not yet available from local authorities. The final position on the grant might be more positive than currently shown.
- NCFRA applied the general principle that any one-off windfalls received were put into the smoothing reserve not the base budget.
- The £899K reduction in the NCFRA staffing budget for 2023/24 compared to 2022/23 was a technical change. The creation of Enabling Services involved all support services being funded through the police budget. A charge to the NCFRA budget appeared in the budget line for Governance and Support Services.
- The level of income included in the MTFP for 2023/24 had gone up compared to 2022/23. Higher interest rates also benefited NCFRA. The estimates for income



for the later years of the MTFP were prudent and all possible action would be taken to maximise income.

- The PFCC and the Chief Finance Officer took every possible opportunity to encourage discussion of Fire and Rescue funding at national level.

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

**RESOLVED that: the Panel supports the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire precept for 2023/24.**

## 122. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel Work Programme**

The Chair introduced the report setting out the latest version of the Panel's work programme for 2022/23 and highlighted the following points:

- There had been some challenges involved in setting up meetings of the Early Intervention Working Group and the aim that it should present its final report to the Panel meeting on 20 April 2023 was now likely to be over-ambitious. The Panel could consider extending the timescale for this work.
- The briefing session on the development of the PFCC's proposed precepts for 2023/24 held on 17 January 2023 had been very good and the Chief Finance Officer was thanked for running this.

Councillor McGhee as Chair of the Early Intervention Working Group endorsed the principle of allowing it additional time, given the need to ensure that it produced a well-informed piece of work.

The Panel considered the report. Panel members were invited to consider the PFCC's earlier offer to present to it the outcomes of the recent IPSOS Mori public consultation exercise on community safety in Northamptonshire.

In response to a point raised during discussion of the PFCC's proposed Police Precept for 2023/24 the Panel was advised that there had been approximately 1,000 downloads of the Flare app and 31 incidents reported through the app to date.

**RESOLVED that:**

- a) The Panel agrees that the final report by the Early Intervention Working Group could be presented to the Panel in June 2023 to allow additional time for it to carry out its work.**
- b) The Panel requests the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner to present a report on the outcomes of the recent IPSOS Mori public consultation exercise on community safety in Northamptonshire to the Panel meeting on 20 April 2023.**

## 123. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting dates 2023/24**

The Chair introduced the report setting out proposed Panel meeting dates for 2023/24, highlighting that they represented a straightforward approach based on previous practice.

The Panel considered the report. A member queried that the proposed schedule did not include a Panel meeting in May 2023. The Chair advised that this reflected the need for the two local authorities to appoint councillor members of the Panel at their annual meetings in May.

**RESOLVED that: the Panel agrees the following meeting dates for 2023/24:**

- **15 June 2023**
- **7 September 2023**
- **30 November 2023**
- **6 February 2024**
- **20 February 2024 (Reserve)**
- **18 April 2024**

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

124. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 3.00 pm

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_