

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE POLICE, FIRE AND CRIME PANEL
REPORT TO THE POLICE, FIRE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER
FOR NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

8 FEBRUARY 2024

Report Title	Review of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner’s proposed Fire precept for 2024/25
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1 The report is intended to set out the results of the review by the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner’s proposed Fire precept for 2024/25.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire is required to notify the Police, Fire and Crime Panel of the Fire precept that he proposes to issue for the next financial year. The Panel must review the proposed precept and make a report on it. The Commissioner must have regard to this report and respond to any specific conclusions or recommendations from the Panel before issuing the final Fire precept.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire:

- a) Has regard to this report by the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel arising from its review of the proposed Fire precept for 2024/25 in accordance with the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 Schedule 5 Paragraph 5(2)(a).
- b) Gives the Panel a response to this report in accordance with the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 Schedule 5 Paragraph 5(2)(b).

3.2 Reasons for Recommendation(s) – The recommendations are required to complete the Panel’s review of the proposed Fire precept for 2024/25 produced by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, in accordance with the Panel’s statutory responsibilities.

4. Report Background

- 4.1 A fire and rescue authority is a major precepting authority under the Local Government Finance Act 1992. The Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner is the fire and rescue authority for the county under the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire (Fire and Rescue Authority) Order 2018. A Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner may not issue a precept under Section 40 of the 1992 Act until it has been subject to scrutiny by the relevant Police, Fire and Crime Panel according to the process specified in Schedule 5 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, as amended by the Policing and Crime Act 2017.
- 4.2 Schedule 5 of the 2011 Act, supporting Regulations, and the Rules of Procedure for the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel require:
- a) The Commissioner to notify the Panel of the Commissioner's proposed precept by 1 February of the relevant financial year
 - b) The Panel to review the proposed precept
 - c) The Panel to resolve to:
 - i) Support the proposed precept without additional qualification or comment; or
 - ii) Support the proposed precept and make additional recommendations on it; or
 - iii) Veto the proposed precept provided that the Panel makes that decision by the required majority, which is that at least two thirds of the persons who are members of the Panel at the time when the decision is made vote for it.
 - d) The Panel to make a report to the Commissioner on the proposed precept, setting out the results of its review, by 8 February of the relevant financial year. If the Panel votes to veto the proposed precept the report must state that the Panel has done so and set out its reasons for doing so.
- 4.3 If the Panel does not veto the proposed precept the Commissioner must:
- a) Have regard to the report made by the Panel
 - b) Give the Panel a response to its report and to any recommendations in the report
 - c) Publish the response in a manner determined by the Panel.
- 4.4 The scrutiny process concludes at this point. The Commissioner may then issue the proposed precept as the precept for the next financial year or issue a different precept but only if it would be in accordance with a recommendation made in the Panel's report.
- 4.5 If the Panel vetoes the proposed precept the Commissioner is required to produce a revised precept, which must be subject to further scrutiny by the Panel.

5. Review of the proposed Fire Precept

- 5.1 The Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel met in public on 6 February 2024 to review the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire's proposed Fire precept for 2024/25. The meeting was webcast live and the recording is available to view at the following link: [West Northamptonshire Council - YouTube](#).

- 5.2 The Commissioner presented the proposed precept and budget, which were based on an increase in the precept of 2.99 per cent per year to £75.39 for Band D Council Tax. The Commissioner noted that the proposed precept and budget had been developed in the context of high inflation levels and the outcomes of the Autumn Statement. The proposed budget would enable Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) to build on previous successes and to invest in improving both its performance and its organisational culture. Significant work done since the creation of the Northamptonshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority (NCFRA) meant that it was now possible to manage within the budget and invest in some improvements. The number of firefighters in Northamptonshire had been increased and a £10m programme of capital investment put in place. The proposed budget for 2024/25 would provide a sustainable base, maintain an adequate level of reserves and continue to safeguard services in the county. However, NFRS remained underfunded and vulnerable to the impact of increasing costs. NFRS was the third lowest funded service in the country and had the second lowest precept level. The Commissioner continued to press the government to change the current funding model. In the meantime, the precept generated around 63 per cent of the budget and so the level that was set had a significant impact. Consultation on the budget had shown that residents were prepared to pay more than a 2.99 per cent increase. The proposed budget also took into account the clear expectation on NFRS and Northamptonshire Police to work together to maximise efficiency. The Commissioner ultimately considered that the proposed precept was a fair and affordable one that achieved a balanced budget and represented best value for local residents and the future interests of a vital service.
- 5.3 The Panel questioned the Commissioner about assumptions on funding and commitments that had informed the proposed budget and affected the resources required to support it from the precept. A Panel member questioned the need to allocate £300K annually to support the capital programme. The Panel was advised that this was done in order to provide funding for the capital programme without adversely affecting the revenue budget. NCFRA saw borrowing as the last option for capital financing due to high interest rates. If borrowing was required NCFRA would do so internally where possible. When external borrowing was necessary for longer life assets such as estates it was not done in a way that would produce an excessive risk in the future.
- 5.4 A Panel member sought clarification of the sources of income that produced the £1.2m included in the proposed budget. The Panel was informed that the sources included provision of training, use of buildings by partners, cash recovery for services delivered, grants outside the main settlement and some commercial operations that produced a return. The Panel subsequently questioned that the proposed budget showed £0m in the reserve for Section 106 developer contributions over the period of the Medium Term Financial Plan. The Commissioner was challenged about this position, particularly given that the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 increased the scope for emergency services to receive funding for local infrastructure. The Panel was advised that the position shown in the proposed budget reflected that Section 106 income was accounted for when drawn down and was then committed very quickly. NFRS and Northamptonshire Police did seek to maximise Section 106 income and jointly funded a post focussed on this function. Panel members raised the need for greater clarity about how Section 106 income was accounted for and used so that the Panel could be reassured on this matter.

The Panel was advised that this was subject to set procedures, overseen by the Chief Finance Officer. Further information could be provided to the Panel if required.

- 5.5 The Panel went on to scrutinise how the proposed precept and budget would support the delivery of effective services in the county. A Panel member questioned whether it was based on an assumption that all current fire stations would continue to be used. The Commissioner responded that the operational utilisation of fire stations would be considered as part of the overall estates review. This would also be informed by work on the local availability of retained firefighters. There might be opportunities to consolidate some fire stations in future. A Panel member highlighted the need to anticipate future demands for fire cover resulting from housing and commercial development. The Commissioner advised that detailed work was done to analyse current and future demands in the county.
- 5.6 A Panel member questioned whether the proposed budget would have any implications for current collaboration between NFRS and Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS). The Commissioner advised that WFRS had recently needed to move from its control room and had co-located in the NFRS facility. Consideration would be given to any opportunities for further collaboration with WFRS that might arise from this. However, the priority for NCFRA was to develop a control room in the county for both NFRS and Northamptonshire Police.
- 5.7 A Panel member emphasised that the biggest challenges facing NFRS related to firefighter numbers and equipment and challenged the Commissioner whether increasing the precept by 2.99 per cent would produce improvements in these areas. The Commissioner stated that it would do so. At the same time, the Commissioner emphasised that no one should underestimate the challenges currently facing all Fire and Rescue services, highlighting that North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service was purchasing second-hand appliances to help to manage budget pressures.
- 5.8 The Panel sought further clarification of particular aspects of the proposed budget. The Panel was advised that investment for a Youth Engagement Officer post was intended to add this post to the base budget after a successful pilot project by NFRS and the Early Intervention and Youth Team in the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. The Commissioner confirmed that the interim Chief Fire Officer and the senior leadership team had been involved in the development of the proposed budget. The Commissioner's nominee for appointment as the new permanent Chief Fire Officer had received briefings on it.

6. Outcomes of the Review

- 6.1 At the conclusion of discussion the Panel resolved unanimously:

To endorse the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire precept for 2024/25.

7. Background Papers

Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011

Policing and Crime Act 2017

The Police and Crime Panels (Precepts and Chief Constable Appointments) Regulations 2012

Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel Rules of Procedure