

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

Minutes of a meeting of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel held at Jeffrey Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton NN1 1DE on Tuesday 6 February 2024 at 12.30 pm.

### **Present:**

Councillor David Smith (Chair)  
Councillor Gill Mercer (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Fiona Baker  
Councillor Jon-Paul Carr  
Councillor André González De Savage  
Councillor Dorothy Maxwell  
Councillor Zoe McGhee  
Councillor Ken Pritchard  
Miss Pauline Woodhouse

### **Also Present:**

Stephen Mold, Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner  
Vaughan Ashcroft, Interim Chief Finance and Section 151 Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner  
Jonny Bugg, Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner  
Deborah Denton, 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  
Catherine Whitehead, Director Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer, West Northamptonshire Council  
James Edmunds, Democratic Services Assistant Manager, West Northamptonshire Council  
Diana Davies, Democratic Services Officer, West Northamptonshire Council

There was also 1 member of the public in attendance.

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

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillor Roberts, Councillor Strachan and from the substitute member Councillor Cali.

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

None received.

#### **212. Declarations of Interest**

None declared.

#### **213. Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting and issued the following announcements:

- The Panel Secretariat had received a letter from the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) Chief Executive advising of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioners (PFCC) intention to appoint Nikki Watson QPM as the Chief Fire Officer. The Panel would need to hold a confirmation hearing for the proposed appointment. The Chair proposed that the confirmation hearing be held on 20 February 2024 at 12.30pm, the reserve date identified for the Panel meeting that must take place should the Panel veto either of the PFCC's proposed precepts.
- The Secretariat had received a letter from Mrs Anita Shields advising of her resignation as an independent co-opted member of the Panel. Mrs Shields had served on the Panel since 16 July 2020.

The Chair indicated that the receipt of the resignation had been unexpected.

Councillor McGhee asked to express, her gratitude for the support that Mrs Shields had provided to her, hope that the reasons for Mrs Shields resignation were addressed, and that Mrs Shields received support.

#### 214. **Minutes**

RESOLVED that: the minutes of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting held on 30 November 2023 be approved.

#### 215. **Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Police Precept for 2024/25**

The PFCC presented the proposed Police precept and budget, which were based on an increase in the precept of £13 per year for Band D Council Tax to £306.04. The PFCC highlighted the following points:

- The decision to increase the precept was not one he had taken lightly given current economic pressures on taxpayers. However, he was confident that it had public support and was also underpinned by his track record of delivering improvements to services in the county.
- The proposed increase in the precept of £13 per year represented 4.4 per cent or 25p per week. It was informed by views from professionals and from members of the public.
- Northamptonshire was not well-served by the national funding formula for policing and continued to be disadvantaged every year that it was not updated.
- The proposed budget for 2024/25 would continue to support key priorities. It would enable Northamptonshire Police to maintain an establishment of 1,500 police officers. The number of officers in neighbourhood policing teams in Northamptonshire had already been doubled and more would be added.
- The proposed budget would provide £1.8m investment in the force's resources and systems, including for officer development.
- Overall the force budget for 2024/25 would increase by over £15m on the previous year and would be £64m higher than the PFCC's first budget. There was a funded

capital programme, an adequate level of reserves and a robust and affordable Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

- The PFCC ultimately considered that the proposed precept and budget for 2024/25 represented the best deal for Northamptonshire and its residents and he commended it to the Panel.

The Panel considered the proposed Police precept.

The Panel scrutinised how the increased precept would support the priorities in the PFCC's Police, Fire and Crime Plan. Confirmation was sought of how many more officers Northamptonshire Police would have in 2024/25 and how this would help with visible policing and other community safety activity. The PFCC made the following points:

- There was already a range of engagement work in local schools: the My Pink Trainers video was one good example of this. There was scope for police officers and police community support officers (PCSOs) to do more to augment work by the two local authorities in the county. However, partnership working was essential given the autonomous statuses of academy schools.
- The force continued to face challenges relating to dealing with people with mental health needs. Maintaining an establishment of 1,500 officers would and the resulting improvement in performance would increase overall focus on neighbourhood policing. The force needed to work with all relevant partners, including health organisations, as part of the overall response to mental health issues in the community.
- The force now had 1,526 police officers. However, this included around 600 officers with less than five years' service and 400 officers who had served for five to ten years. Around 500 officers were in the 25-34 age group and 1,200 were under 44 years old. In this situation it was important to invest in developing officers' capability as well as numbers, which was being done.

A Panel member challenged the PFCC that the proposed budget seemed to be based on traditional funding models and that more innovation was needed to maximise available resources and help to mitigate the impact of unfavourable national funding. The One Public Estate approach and linking together emergency service contact centres were highlighted as areas where more could have been done. The PFCC made the following points:

- He did not agree that there was a lack of innovation in Northamptonshire.
- The development of Enabling Services was an innovative approach that was already having a practical impact. Other examples of innovation included investment in the force control room, extending the use of social media to contact the force and investigating the use of facial recognition technology in policing. However, the PFCC welcomed any further ideas.

A Panel member noted that there was a slight reduction in the proposed budget for Early Intervention and Youth for 2024/25 and sought reassurance that this did not represent a loss of emphasis in this area of work. The PFCC responded that all areas of the budget were subject to a zero-base budgeting exercise to ensure that public money was being used as effectively as possible. The change in the budget for Early Intervention and Youth did not represent a loss of emphasis: it related to a post that had not been recruited and so resources had been returned to the budget.

A Panel member commented that the force was subject to increasing demand, neighbourhood policing teams were already under pressure and there seemed to be few PCSOs in the county. Taxpayers were again being asked to provide additional resources through an increase in the precept. The PFCC was challenged about whether residents would see a clear benefit from the increase in the precept that would demonstrate it represented value for money. The PFCC made the following points:

- Cost effectiveness could already be demonstrated by the fact that he was proposing a 4.4 per cent increase in the precept whilst needing to budget for a 7 per cent increase in police officers' pay.
- Some other forces such as Lincolnshire Police had had removed PCSOs altogether, which was not the case in Northamptonshire. There had been challenges relating to PCSO recruitment but the force should be in a better position to address these now that the number of police officers had reached the intended level. A recent recruitment exercise for PCSOs had generated 108 applications.
- There were 1,500 police officers protecting around 800,000 residents in Northamptonshire, which was a lower ratio than in some other areas.
- Northamptonshire was in the top quartile for what residents paid in Council Tax for policing and the bottom quartile for resources for policing per head of population.
- Consultation on the proposed budget showed that residents were prepared to pay the higher precept. Northamptonshire was one of only two areas in the country where consultation responses had increased this year compared to last.
- He considered that the proposed precept struck the right balance between investment and value for money.
- A range of improvements were already being delivered for Northamptonshire residents. The number of police officers in the community had more than doubled, whereas neighbourhood policing had been hollowed out up to 2015. The current situation was not perfect but was the best that could be achieved. Neighbourhood policing was one area of activity that contributed to an overall deterrent to crime.

The Panel recognised that Northamptonshire had received national uplift funding to recruit police officers up to the current level. The PFCC was questioned about the ability to maintain 1,500 officers beyond 2025 if there was no change in the national funding formula and whether the cost of doing so would have to be met by local taxpayers. The PFCC made the following points:

- He was not responsible for the funding allocated to policing by central government. If there was a reduction in national funding Northamptonshire would actually be at less risk than some other force areas as this represented a smaller component of its overall resources.
- Significant attention had been given to ways of maintaining the force at its current strength into the future. Northamptonshire had benefitted from focussing on recruitment earlier and had attracted additional funding that had not been used fully in other areas, which had been ringfenced to maintain numbers.
- He considered that Northamptonshire was well-placed to maintain the current position into the future, subject to any major changes by the government. It had taken a massive effort to bring the force up to its current strength and it would not be given up lightly.

A Panel member noted that the budget for PCSOs included in the MTFP increased by a relatively small amount each year and questioned how this would support additional recruitment. The importance of communicating additional recruitment to communities was also emphasised, particularly given perceptions in rural communities that they were neglected.

The PFCC made the following points:

- He and the force had not always taken the same view on PCSOs: he had a more positive view than the force of how much members of the public valued PCSOs. This was reflected in the requirement that the force return any funding allocated to PCSOs if it was not used.
- The proposed budget for 2024/25 covered planned recruitment. Rural communities would also see a benefit from increased capacity in rural policing.

A Panel member questioned the scope to lower the proposed increase in the precept by making more use of efficiency savings. The PFCC made the following points:

- The 1 per cent annual efficiency target included in the budget required the force to operate efficiently before any requests for investment would be considered. He would continue to require the force to innovate in order to reduce costs to taxpayers.
- The proposed budget had been identified in a very difficult economic situation. He was responsible for making Northamptonshire a safer place and judged that the proposed precept for 2024/25 represented the best balance to support this aim.

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

- The launch of work to implement the requirements of the Serious Violence Duty was welcomed and the PFCC was urged to work closely with the two local authorities in the county. The Chair encouraged Panel members to attend the forthcoming Serious Violence Duty launch event if possible.
- The increased number of police officers in Northamptonshire was welcome but needed to be reflected in visible policing. If residents did not feel safer then additional activity would not have the full impact.
- The proposed increase in the precept was too high, particularly just to maintain services at the current level, and did not give sufficient regard to the impact it would have on taxpayers who were already under pressure. The PFCC should seek additional funding from government.
- The PFCC's estates masterplan was crucial to the MTFP and the PFCC was urged to make it available to the Panel as soon as possible.
- The proposed increase was a necessary response to the gap between local needs and the national funding provided to Northamptonshire. If the precept was not raised by the maximum amount permitted without holding a local referendum the government could take the view that Northamptonshire had sufficient resources to meet local needs.

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

- The 4.4 per cent increase proposed was below the rate of inflation and took account of the police officer pay award.

- The estates masterplan should be published in the next month. It was a massive area of work, given the size of the police estate and that the estates strategy could need to cover a 20-year period. He considered that the programme being developed was a good one but was still likely to involve some difficult decisions.
- He held to account the Chief Constable for how effectively the significant proportion of the overall budget committed to operational purposes was used. The force was already doing a range of good work. The force had achieved reductions in burglary, serious violence and anti-social behaviour and an increase in arrests for domestic violence. The force was also now rated first in the country for the effectiveness of case files submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service.

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

- The force had 1,526 police officers in 2023/24. It was planned to maintain this level in 2024/25, although there would be an increase in the number of officers deployed in neighbourhood policing teams. The Chief Constable was responsible for determining where officers were based as part of an effective operational model.
- A significant amount of work was being done on joint control facilities for the force and Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS), although plans had not yet reached the point where they could be discussed.
- The proposed budget set contingencies at the same level as in 2023/24.
- Provision for 81 PCSOs had been included in the budget for some years. This was reset each year to account for recruitment and attrition, whilst there were also earmarked reserves that could provide funding for PCSOs.

The Chief Executive advised the Panel during discussion that the OPFCC had relatively good influence at national level. However, the issue of reviewing the police funding formula was a challenging one for the government as any change would produce winners and losers.

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

RESOLVED that: the Panel endorses the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire's proposed Police precept for 2024/25.

216. **Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's proposed Fire Precept for 2024/25**

The PFCC presented the proposed Fire 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 PFCC highlighted the following points:

- 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 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.

- 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. He 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.
- He 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.

The Panel considered the proposed Fire precept.

The Panel questioned the PFCC 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 the cost of borrowing to support the capital programme. The PFCC responded that borrowing was necessary to fund longer life assets such as assets. However, this was not done in a way that would produce an excessive risk in the future. The interim Chief Finance Officer advised the Panel that borrowing was used 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.

A Panel member sought clarification of the sources of income that produced the £1.2m included in the proposed budget. The interim Chief Finance Officer advised the Panel 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.

Panel members questioned that the proposed budget showed £0m in the reserve for Section 106 developer contributions over the period of the MTFP. The PFCC 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. Panel members went on to raise 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 PFCC advised that NFRS and Northamptonshire Police did seek to maximise Section 106 income and jointly funded a post focussed on this function. The interim Chief Finance Officer also provided information in response to points raised by members as follows:

- The position shown in the proposed budget reflected that Section 106 income was accounted for when drawn down and was then committed very quickly.
- The use of Section 106 income was subject to set procedures, overseen by the Chief Finance Officer. Further information could be provided to the Panel if required.

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 need to anticipate future demands for fire cover resulting from housing and commercial development was also highlighted. The PFCC made the following points:

- 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.
- Detailed work was done to analyse current and future demands in the county.

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 PFCC made the following points:

- 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.
- The priority for NCFRA was to develop a control room in the county for both NFRS and Northamptonshire Police.

A Panel member emphasised that the biggest challenges facing NFRS related to firefighter numbers and equipment and challenged the PFCC whether increasing the precept by 2.99 per cent would produce improvements in these areas. The PFCC made the following points:

- The proposed precept would enable improvements in firefighter numbers and equipment.
- No one should underestimate the challenges currently facing all Fire and Rescue services. As an example of this, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service was purchasing second-hand appliances to help to manage budget pressures.

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

- Investment for a Youth Engagement Officer post included in the budget 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 OPFCC.
- The interim Chief Fire Officer and the senior leadership team had been involved in the development of the proposed budget. The PFCC's nominee for appointment as the new permanent Chief Fire Officer had received briefings on it.

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

RESOLVED that: the Panel endorses the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire's proposed Fire precept for 2024/25.



217. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel Work Programme**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager introduced the report setting out the latest version of the Panel's work programme for 2023/24 and invited members to review it to ensure the work programme reflected the Panel's functions and priorities. Appendix B of the report presented the updated terms of reference for task and finish scrutiny work of early intervention activity with children and young people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity in Northamptonshire. These were based on the principle that the scrutiny work was to be carried out by the end of the 2023/24 civic year. The terms of reference would require a further revision, to reflect the resignation of the Independent Member, Mrs Shields.

The Panel considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- The Panel would benefit from receiving briefings from the Acting Chief Constable and Interim Chief Fire Officer. Members considered the timing of the briefing sessions, and whether formulating the dates to coincide with existing Panel meeting dates may improve attendance.
- The early intervention work would have benefited from additional time allocated but would carry out as much work as possible and be in a position to present a report to the Panel within the allotted time frame.
- Two items on the work programme, both related to the IPSOS Mori Survey could be combined.

During the discussions the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, OPFCC clarified that whilst it was the role of the PFCC to hold the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer to account, the OPFCC would encourage the informal briefing sessions with the Panel. Discussions were taking place to arrange a briefing session for the Panel on 'Serving with Pride'.

During the discussions the Director of Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer suggested that the Panel consider receiving a 'Serving with Pride' briefing on the 20 February, either before or after the scheduled confirmation hearing. The Director also provided guidance that briefings would need to avoid the pre-election period of Purdah which would commence on the 22 March 2024.

During the discussions the PFCC clarified that the briefing on the 20 February would be for both Serving with Pride, and the survey of organisational culture in Northamptonshire Police, NFRS and the OPFCC. A commitment had been made to the Panel, that the Chief Fire Officer and Chief of Police would be present annually, fulfilling that commitment in the next civic year may not be in his remit. The PFCC also added that a further briefing on the Estates Strategy would be scheduled in due course.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel agreed that its reserve meeting date on 20 February 2024 be used to carry out a confirmation hearing for the proposed appointment of a Chief Fire Officer and for a briefing for Panel members on Serving with Pride and the survey of organisational culture in Northamptonshire Police, Northamptonshire

Fire and Rescue Service and the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

- b) The Panel requested that further briefings for Panel members be scheduled on the following matters:
- A briefing with the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer on the operating environment, key priorities and challenges for the two organisations
  - A briefing on Estates Strategy
- c) The Panel agreed the updated terms of reference for task and finish scrutiny work of early intervention activity with children and young people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity in Northamptonshire, subject to removing Mrs Anita Shields from the task and finish working group members.

218. **Arrangements to recruit independent co-opted members of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager introduced the report outlining the proposed arrangements to recruit independent co-opted members of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel.

The Panel was required to include a minimum of two independent co-opted members in its membership. The sitting independent co-opted members of the Panel had been appointed in 2020 for a four-year term running until the day before the date of the first Panel meeting in the 2024/25 municipal year. The Panel was to consider and confirm arrangements, as outlined in the report, to recruit 3 independent co-opted members to join the Panel to serve from 2024 to 2028. The Panel was to identify a sub-group of members to participate in the recruitment process with new recruits being presented to the first Committee meeting in 2024/25 for the whole Panel to agree those appointments. The proposed arrangements set out in the report were informed by those used successfully in the past and other relevant factors such as national guidance.

The Panel considered the report and members made the following points during the course of discussion:

- Places for advertising it was suggested that this should include local area partnerships, community forums would provide access to voluntary organisations where interested members of the public would attend and to include Youth Networks and approach the University of Northampton.
- The Panel considered the importance of being representative of all age groups and the merits of introducing a younger demographic to the Panel and how the recruitment process could encourage their participation. A member recommended caution in the recruitment process on the basis of age representation, that the skills, experience and contribution that they can make should also be considered.
- That, historically, young people had not been easily attracted to provide representation at council meetings.

During the discussions the PFCC advised that, when undertaking the recruitment for PCSOs they had found that advertising on social media had significantly increased their coverage.

During the discussions the Democratic Services Assistant Manager advised that the Panel could be prescriptive in their requirements to attract candidates with specific experience, or the Panel could rely on the Sub-Group to bring forward the candidates that would best complement the existing Panel members.

In selecting the Sub-group members, the Democratic Services Assistant Manager recommended that, for the benefit of the candidates, that the Panel consider having between 3 and 5 members. It was also clarified that an Independent Member could sit on the sub-group, but only if they were not interested in applying for a position.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Panel endorses the proposed approach to the recruitment of independent co-opted members to serve on the Panel from 2024/25 set out in the report, subject to the following bodies being added to the list of partners to be asked to circulate information about the roles:
  - Local Area Partnerships
  - Community Forums
  - Youth Forums
  - University of Northampton
- b) The Panel agrees that the Panel members to make up the sub-group to participate in the recruitment process would be drawn from Councillors Baker, Carr, Gonzalez De Savage, Maxwell and McGhee, with the final composition to be confirmed depending on the dates of activity.

219. **Police, Fire and Crime Panel meeting dates 2024/25**

The Democratic Services Assistant Manager introduced the report, setting out the proposed meeting dates for 2024/25 and highlighted that the dates followed the established pattern; took into account the statutory timescales that the Panel had to apply to work programme items; and that the dates assigned should accommodate the municipal calendars for both North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Councils.

The Panel was asked to consider and raise any points arising from the report.

There were none.

RESOLVED that: the Panel agrees the following meeting dates for 2024/25:

- 13 June 2024
- 5 September 2024
- 5 December 2024
- 5 February 2025
- 19 February 2025 (Reserve)
- 13 March 2025

All meetings to start at 12.30pm. All meetings to take place at local authority venues in Northampton.

220. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 3.35 pm

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

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