

Annex A: Response to the Consultation on the Police Precept for 2016/17

Introduction

Every year, as the Police and Crime Commissioner for Hertfordshire, I have issued an Open Letter ahead of setting the police precept for Council Tax, to set out my principles and thoughts on the level of the precept and gather feedback from you in order to understand what you think about my proposals. In the Open Letter issued in January 2016, I outlined Hertfordshire Constabulary's sound financial position, the high level of reserves and well-developed savings plan, and my proposal to only take from the public what is required to provide the level of service needed to meet on-going policing demands and invest in new and emerging areas of crime. In the letter, I proposed making a small reduction in the police element of the Council Tax given the favourable policing settlement by government, strong level of reserves amounting to £48.3 million, and continued savings from collaboration with neighbouring forces.

Methodology

Due to the short timescale demanded by the late receipt of financial information from government, the consultation was not a referendum; however the Open Letter was posted on the Police and Crime Commissioner's website, circulated to local media and on the OWL network to over 90,000 households across Hertfordshire. In total, I received 402 detailed responses to my proposal from members of the public, Councillors and those in their capacity representing organisations and schemes, including Neighbourhood Watch, Residents Associations and Community Centres. The Chief Constable, Andy Bliss, and his Chief Officers have also been consulted on my proposals and are in agreement that even with a small reduction we can still deliver a first class policing service that protects the public from harm whilst ensuring it remains value for money.

Summary of the Feedback

Agreement of additional investment in policing

Around three fifths of respondents (approx. 240) supported additional investment in policing. Many respondents agreed that further investment was needed to support those areas of business that are new or emerging, such as cyber-crime and child sexual exploitation. Nearly all respondents were equally pleased to support additional investment to tackle 'everyday crimes', which included fly-tipping, anti-social behaviour and speeding, which they felt would greatly improve quality of life for the whole community. Many recalled particular incidents or issues across the county and were in favour of dedicating appropriate resources. This included:

- Putting more funding into preventing fly-tipping, installing remote cameras to catch those who flout the law, and prosecuting those caught.

- Introduce measures to penalise those whose conduct is anti-social, so they have to pay a 'total cost to society', which is recouped by the local police.
- Investing in road safety measures to tackle rat-runs through villages, speeding through red lights and other motor related offences, including talking on mobile phones.

From 2016/17 I will be making funding available for new investments into a range of areas to strengthen the Constabulary's capacity to address new areas of demand, as well as those stubborn and persistent issues of concern to the public, as outlined in my Police and Crime Plan, Everybody's Business (2015-2020). These include the following new funds:

- **Operational Capability Fund** – to bring to bear a range of tactical needs to respond to rising crime trends or operational demands (e.g. Burglary).
- **Partnership Fund** – to respond to a range of issues that affect the public's quality of life. This includes fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour.
- **Road Safety Fund**- to tackle issues relating to road safety, including speeding, inconsiderate parking and anti-social driving, In October 2015, I set out my plans to set up a new Road Safety Fund and work with partners such as Hertfordshire County Council to tackle a range of road safety issues, including speeding and anti-social driving. I will use the surplus generated from the fines and fees from those who have been caught speeding, attended a speed awareness course, or from court prosecutions and recoveries, to reinvest back into road safety measures. From early February 2016 I will be inviting the public, partners and local organisations to bid for a share of the £1.3 million Road Safety Fund, which will support a range of educational, engineering and enforcement road safety activities across the county.

I will also be making substantial reinvestments in a range of areas, including those that support safeguarding, cyber-crime and child sexual exploitation:

- **Response to cyber-crime and fraud**- to develop Hertfordshire's capability to respond to fraud and cyber-crime.
- **Data Forensics** – to increase the capacity of the High Tech Crime Unit to meet levels of demand.
- **Domestic Abuse Investigation and Safeguarding Unit (DAISU)** - in response to the root and branch review I commissioned Safelives to undertake on domestic abuse in 2014/15, the DAISU will provide an end to end service aimed at improving the outcome for victims; reducing repeat victimisation and dealing more effectively with perpetrators.
- **Response to increasing demands on safeguarding teams** - to increase the capacity of the teams to support victims who report child sexual exploitation.
- **Public Contact and Victim Services** – to continue improving the level of customer care by developing a range of methods, by which the public can contact the police to report a crime, or request emergency or other assistance.

- **Victim Services Team** - to expand the capacity of the Victim Services Team through the Victim Care Hub Beacon, to make contact with victims, answer questions, assess level of vulnerability and support required.
- **Support Operational Demand** - to continue investment in Bail Management, Integrated Offender Management and Virtual Courts.

Only charge what is needed for policing

Approximately 160 respondents were in agreement with the principle outlined in my Open Letter, that I should only take from the taxpayer what is required to provide the level of service needed to meet on-going policing demands. Many respondents were complimentary about my approach to financial management and welcomed the prudent and responsible financial plans I had made over the last three years, taking a considered approach to taxation, and suggestion of a small reduction to the police precept. The following viewpoints articulate the basis for this support:

- The large level of reserves held by the Constabulary, equivalent to five months running costs, which seem excessive and unjustifiable, and will not engender officers to seek out efficiency savings.
- A good response to the current financial climate and where there is enough money to fund all necessary forecasted activity, savings should be passed on to the taxpayer.
- Savings through collaboration that has been achieved, and will continue to be achieved over the coming years.

The majority of respondents were not in favour of a large reduction in the policing precept. As a result of this feedback I have decided not to make a significant reduction in the police precept. I am proposing to reduce the Band D Council Tax precept for policing by 0.55 per cent, to a figure of £147.00. This amounts to a reduction of 82p for a Band D household for the year 2016/17. I remain firmly of the view that I will only charge you for policing for what we need this year.

78 respondents said that they would be content for the police precept to increase. This ranged from 50p to as much as £5.00 a month. One of the primary reasons given was to protect against future budget uncertainties given the capping provisions on Council Tax rises. However, Hertfordshire is in a strong position in this regard because the government has given it considerably more flexibility in relation to precept rises than other areas. Having one of the lowest Council Tax precepts for policing, seventh in the country for a Band D property, it is one of only 10 forces that has been given greater flexibility to increase the precept should the need arise. This will give any PCC the opportunity to increase the police precept for a Band D property equivalent, by up to £5.00 (3.4 per cent) over the course of the three year spending review period. With changes to the grant funding allocation for policing due in April 2017, the PCC will have the ability to raise the Council Tax in order to bridge any shortfall in funding should they choose to do so.

Resources and Performance

A few respondents raised concerns about the impact of a reduction in the police precept on the level of policing, and in particular, on Neighbourhood Policing. Let me reassure you that the proposed reduction in 2016/17 will be offset by the increase in income arising from the larger Council Tax base and collection fund surplus from district councils, which amounts to approximately £180,000 even after the proposed reduction in police precept. Therefore, overall there will be more funding for policing, not less. Neighbourhood Policing will remain as it always has done. We will still have a balanced budget, a high level of reserves and be able to make significant investments in emerging areas of crime. My full budget proposal report explains in more detail how the 2016/17 budget has been constructed.

A few respondents queried the financial position of the Constabulary when there has been the closure of a custody suite at Watford. The decision to close the custody facility is an operational matter and therefore one which is the responsibility of the Chief Constable to make. I have been assured that the closure will not affect the excellent local policing service delivered in Watford, but I have asked the Chief Constable to measure the impact and to report back to me over the coming months. My Police and Crime Plan, Everybody's Business (2015 -2020) guarantees that Watford will continue to have its own police station and the Chief Constable's decision to close the custody suite does not change that. The current building is in need of modernisation and improvement.

General observations and other priorities

Throughout the consultation, respondents also took the opportunity to raise other concerns, some of which were very broad, with many relating to issues outside of the scope of the consultation and my roles as a Police and Crime Commissioner. These included:

- Pay, conditions and remuneration of serving and retired Police Officers
- Regionalisation and amalgamation of police forces and Police and Crime Commissioner's Offices
- The retention and recruitment of Special Constables
- Street lighting being turned off at midnight
- Closure of council refuge sites and the adoption of policies on bin collections
- Cycling on pavements

These are all helpful and thoughtful comments and points to note which I intend to raise with the relevant authorities and organisations so they are aware of them and your concerns are listened to. Thank you to those respondents who took the time to feedback their thoughts on my proposal for the 2016/17 police precept.