

MEETING	Police and Crime Panel
DATE	08 February 2024
TITLE OF REPORT	Report on Police Precept Consultation 2024-2025
SUBMITTED BY	Dr Amie Birkhamshaw, Deputy Chief Executive, OPCC
PURPOSE OF REPORT	To discuss the results of the public consultation on the police element of the Council Tax Precept for 2024/25
DECISION(S) REQUIRED	To note the content of the report on the public's feedback on the proposed policing element of council tax precept for 2024/25 by 5.5%, raising it by £13.00 per annum for an average Band D household, equivalent to £251.00 per annum.
FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	To discuss in conjunction with the 2024/25 Budget Report
RISK IMPLICATIONS	To discuss in conjunction with the 2024/25 Budget Report
LEGAL IMPLICATIONS	None noted at this time
EQUALITIES IMPACTS	None identified
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION EXEMPTION SECTION IF APPLICABLE	Not exempt

1). Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Under the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 (the "Act") it is the Commissioner's responsibility to decide the budget, allocating assets and funds to the Chief Constable, and set the precept for the force area. It is for the Chief Constable to have day to day responsibility for financial management of Hertfordshire Constabulary (the "Constabulary") and to decide on the configuration and organisation of policing resources.
- 1.2 As part of the precept setting process, Police and Crime Commissioners have a legal duty to consult with residents and those persons or organisations who appear to the PCC to be representative of those subject to non-domestic rates in their area, on the police element of the Council Tax precept. Following the budget meeting on 20th December 2023 where the financial position and draft MTFS was discussed, the Commissioner wrote an Open Letter to the residents of Hertfordshire outlining his proposal to increase the policing element of the precept

for an average (Band D) equivalent by £13.00 per annum or 5.5% per cent on the comparable figure for 2024/25 rising to £251.00 per annum.

- 1.3 The Open Letter outlined the Commissioner’s strategy to deliver efficiencies and meet the standstill costs against a backdrop of inflationary and rising wages totalling £21m, together with the withdrawal of partner funding for joint community safety services. The letter outlined the need to sustain the substantial growth in officer numbers to maintain neighbourhood policing and ensure the force continues to make efficiencies through greater digitalisation. Raising the precept by the flexibility allowed by government of £13.00 (for an average Band D household) would generate £6.1m in income during 2024/25 and help to meet these financial challenges.
- 1.4 Table 1 below shows the calculation for a precept increase of £13.00 per annum for 2024/25 across all household bandings A- H. Under the proposal, each household would see an annual increase of between £8.66 and £26.00 on their 2024/25 precept.

Table 1: Precept increase by household bands A - H (2024- 25)

Precept Bands	A	B	C	D
2023/24	158.67	185.11	211.56	238.00
2024/25	167.33	195.22	223.11	251.00
Precept Bands	E	F	G	H
2023/24 £	290.89	343.78	396.67	476.00
2024/25	306.77	362.56	418.33	502.00

2). Results of the Public Consultation

- 2.1 The public survey was open for 26 days between 20 December 2023 to 14 January 2024. The survey was available to be completed online, via email or through a paper version. 2,866 responded to the online survey together with 55 responses via email totalling 2,921 responses. This is a higher response than in previous years. The responses to the survey highlighted that people agreed with the proposed precept increase and showed the strength of that opinion. Over 1,
- 2.2 900 respondents provided an explanation as to their voting preferences. A fuller summary of the survey results can be found in Appendix A.
- 2.3 Of the 2,853 online and email responses who identified whether they agreed, disagreed or were neutral with regards to the proposed increase, 64% (1,849) respondents were supportive of the increase. 30% (871 respondents) disagreed with the proposal to increase and 6% (24 respondents) remained neutral about the proposed increase (see Table 1).

Table 1: Voting preferences for all responses reviewed (online survey and email correspondence)

Vote	Count	Percentage
Agree	1,849	64%
Disagree	871	30%
Neutral	188	6%
Total	2,853	100%

2.4 The survey asked respondents to specify which district or borough they live. Table 2 summarises the range of responses broken down by each of the 10 districts and boroughs. It shows that no individual district had a response below 50% in agreement, with Stevenage the lowest at 53%, and the highest number of negative responses to the precept increase came from Watford and Stevenage.

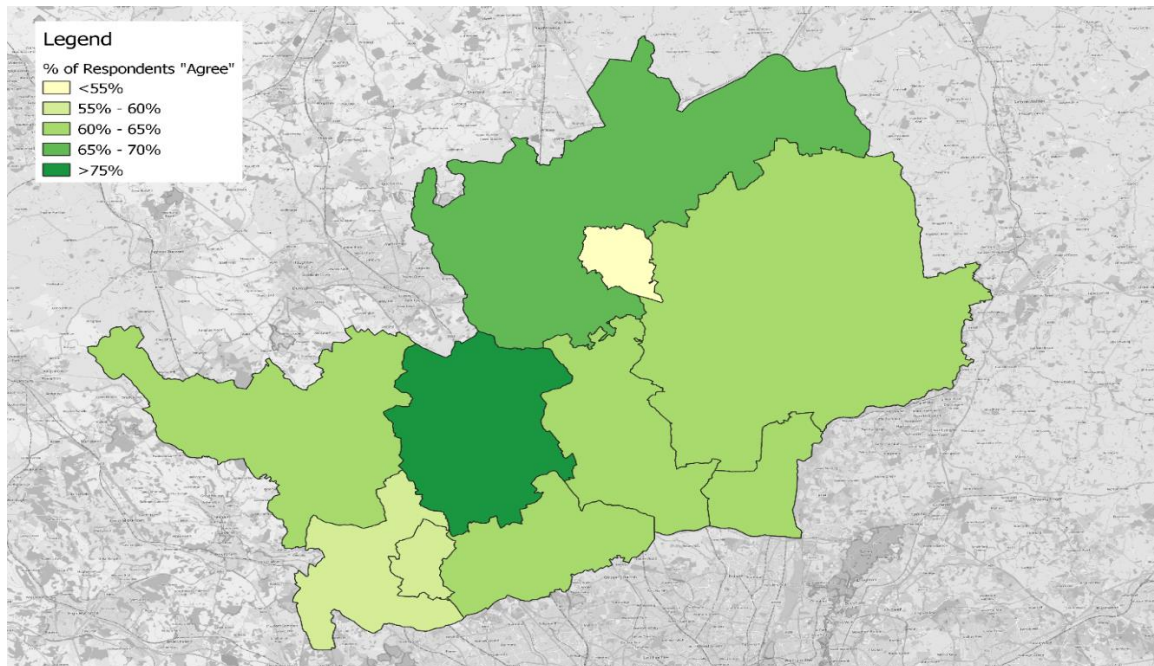
Table 2: Responses broken down by the county's 10 districts and boroughs¹

District	Responses	Agree		Disagree		Neutral	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Broxbourne	268	165	62%	81	30%	21	8%
Dacorum	336	218	65%	98	29%	19	6%
East Herts	445	283	64%	122	27%	37	8%
Hertsmere	255	165	65%	77	30%	13	5%
North Hertfordshire	330	219	66%	91	28%	19	6%
St Albans	393	278	71%	95	24%	18	5%
Stevenage	70	37	53%	26	37%	7	10%
Three Rivers	324	188	58%	112	35%	21	6%
Watford	166	97	58%	62	37%	6	4%
Welwyn Hatfield	226	143	63%	64	28%	18	8%

2.5 The map below shows a visual representation of the correlation between an increased number of respondents within a district and the percentage of positive responses ('Agree').

¹ NB: The total number of agree/disagree/neutral counts does not necessarily add up to the total number of responses within the district – this is because some respondents left the field blank.

Map 1: Percentage of respondents who agreed with the precept increase by district / borough



Agreed with precept rise

2.6 Of the 64 per cent of respondents in favour of the proposed increase, responses broadly fell into three categories. The highest number of responses (551) related to the opinion that policing needed to be properly funded and had the right level of resources to meet the challenges now, and in the years ahead. Of those that gave this response, 20 people also said they would be prepared to pay more as ‘you get what you pay for’ with many suggesting that a £20 increase would not be an unreasonable amount to maintain the low crime levels they enjoy in the county.

2.7 The second prominent theme from those respondents in agreement to an increase related to a desire for the Constabulary to maintain Hertfordshire’s Neighbourhood Policing model (373 responses). Residents commented positively on the visibility of policing across the county and noted that supporting the precept increase would help sustain the increase in officer and PCSO numbers.

2.8 The third theme related to residents’ perception that there remained several crime issues that are not yet being tackled (or as well as they should be) and therefore further funding was needed to ensure the police have capacity to address them. 63 people cited the proliferation of e-scooters that are not driven with any care or attention, ASB and illegal parking.

Disagreed with precept rise

2.9 Of the 30 per cent (871 respondents) who disagreed with the proposed increase, several respondents related it to perceptions that the police are ‘too woke’ and were spending more time undertaking activities that was not considered to be ‘core policing’. There was also an impression from some respondents that the visibility of

the police had decreased over the last year despite the uplift to officer numbers. Respondents also questioned how the £21m standstill costs quoted in the open letter had been calculated and whether as many efficiencies had been drawn out that could have been. They suggested that the Constabulary should reorganise to create efficiencies instead of asking the taxpayer for more money.

Remained neutral

2.10 6 per cent (188 responses) of respondents remained neutral, with many expressing neither support nor objection to the proposal. This was for several reasons. For some it was because they felt torn between the rise of inflation and costs on household bills and people struggling financially, but also the desire to see more police officers. 12 respondents felt unable to vote because they needed more information to understand how the money would be spent or more detail around officer numbers and investment plans.

3). Background Paper

Appendix A: Response to the Police Precept Consultation 2024-2025

In December 2023, I issued an Open Letter ahead of setting the police element of the Council Tax precept for 2024/25 to seek the public's thoughts on the level of precept. The letter set out my approach on how to balance the budget and meet wage and inflationary pressures, maintain officer numbers and ensure efficiencies through greater digitalisation and automation.

In the letter I outlined how Hertfordshire Constabulary is funded and the encouragement by government for Police and Crime Commissioners across the country to use the flexibility they have been given to raise the precept by £13.00 a year or 25p a week (for an average Band D and equivalent) for 2024/25. For Hertfordshire, this would raise an additional £6.1m in income, which alongside core grant, would represent over a seven percent increase to the estimated total gross budget of £293m

My letter acknowledged the previous financial support from the public to continue investing in neighbourhood policing, and helping to grow our officer numbers by 400 to 2,400 - the highest in a decade. When compared to our most similar county forces we have the lowest levels of violence with injury, serious sexual offences, homicide and robbery. The Burglary rate has also continued to reduce since 2012, from eight burglaries on a typical day to five. This is unheard of for a county of our size.

Collaboration with our neighbouring forces in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire has driven out efficiencies and new savings amounting to £32m over the past decade. I outlined the joint Hertfordshire efficiency and effectiveness review undertaken this financial year and how it has identified cashable savings which will help to contribute towards bridging the budget gap. Making best use of digitalisation and automation through AI over the coming year will also ensure we continue to drive out greater efficiencies.

Methodology

On 20 December 2023, the Open Letter was posted on my website and a press release sent out to the local media. It was also circulated to Hertfordshire County Council and the 10 Borough and Districts, Parish and Town Councils, Hertfordshire's 10 MPs and their offices. The business community were engaged through the Independent Business Advisory Group, the Business improvement Districts and Chamber of Commerce. In addition, the survey was emailed to all of Hertfordshire Criminal Justice Partners which includes those representing the Probation and Prison Service, the Crown Prosecution Service and HM Courts and Tribunal Service.

The Open Letter was also circulated to 168,000 Neighbourhood Watch members in Hertfordshire. It was also shared with the University of Hertfordshire, Police and Crime Panel members, Hertfordshire Constabulary and the volunteer scrutiny panel members.

The Open Letter also received the following media and press coverage across the county:

- Hertfordshire could face council tax rise to fund police (Comet): <https://www.thecomet.net/news/24002651.hertfordshire-face-council-tax-rise-fund-police/?ref=rss>
- Residents could face council tax rise amid £21m police costs spike (Watford Observer): <https://www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/24002404.hertfordshire-face-council-tax-rise-fund-police/>
- Hertfordshire could face council tax rise to fund police (Welwyn Hatfield Times): <https://www.whtimes.co.uk/news/24002651.hertfordshire-face-council-tax-rise-fund-police/>
- Cost of funding Herts police next year set to rise to £251 for typical household (Bishop Stortford Independent): <https://www.bishopstortfordindependent.co.uk/news/cost-of-funding-herts-police-next-year-set-to-rise-to-251-f-9348250/>

Over the course of the 26-day consultation period to 14 January 2024, my proposal was highlighted widely using social media and was tweeted on six separate occasions. On 'X' (formerly Twitter) (@hertspcc), the message had 2,707 impressions and received 250 impressions on Facebook.

The Chief Constable, Charlie Hall and his Chief Officers have also been consulted on my proposal and agree that an increase in the precept is required to continue operating in the financially challenging environment, to maintain the current workforce strength and asset base and deliver Hertfordshire's local Neighbourhood Policing model, its strategic policing requirements and local priorities.

Summary of the Public Feedback

Many of the 1849 (64%) of respondents who were in favour of an increase in the council tax precept, fell into three categories. The highest number of responses (551) related to the opinion that policing needed to be properly funded and had the right level of resources to meet the challenges now, and in the years ahead. Of those that gave this response, 20 people also said they would be prepared to pay more as 'you get what you pay for' with many suggesting that a £20 increase would not be an unreasonable amount to maintain the low crime levels they enjoy in the county. As noted here:

"I think we need to pay for the service we wish to have and be realistic about the cost".

"In these challenging times I feel it is important to fund the police force appropriately, so they are able to do their job with the resources they need".

“The police should be properly funded. They have never faced so many policing challenges”.

“Inflation has risen during the year and the police costs have gone up”.

“I would be more than happy to £20 to enable more policing”.

The second prominent theme from those respondents in agreement to an increase related to a desire for the Constabulary to maintain Hertfordshire’s Neighbourhood Policing model (373 responses). Residents commented positively on the visibility of policing across the county and noted that supporting an increase in the precept would help sustain the increase in officer and PCSO numbers:

“We need the police to be visible. So, any additional numbers would be welcome”.

“Needs must and there should be no compromise on efficient neighbourhood policing”.

“I think it’s important to maintain a visible police presence and continue duty of care to all members of our community. I believe that your office is doing an excellent job seeking savings where possible and being proactive in finding new techniques to add value and grants to support services proved by local charities”.

The third theme related to residents’ perception that there remained several crime issues that are not yet being tackled (or as well as they should be) and therefore further funding was needed to ensure the police have capacity to address them. 63 respondents cited the proliferation of e-scooters that are not driven with any care or attention, ASB and illegal parking:

“Still appears there is not enough presence of police on the streets. An example of this is the proliferation of E-scooters, which are usually driven without any due care and attention”.

“I am in agreement, but more action needs to be taken on illegal e-scooter riding, in Waltham Cross Town centre, especially on Market days”.

“I agree, but only if I see electric scooters BANNED from pavements and cyclists stopped from jumping RED lights”.

“The police here do a good job and the proposed small increase in the precept is a good idea to give them some additional resources. The only thing that I think needs more attention is the misuse of electric scooters and bikes”.

Of the 30 per cent (871 respondents) who disagreed with the proposed increase, several respondents related it to perceptions that the police are ‘too woke’ and were spending more time undertaking activities that was not considered to be ‘core policing’:

“I feel that money is not being spent on core policing and is being wasted painting police cars in rainbows”.

“The police should NOT be following a 'woke' agenda nor acting as an extension nor appearing as part of Social Services. We expect back to basics policing - Crime prevention, successful detection, effective protection of us (the community). It is our money you are using - we expect good, positive and valid results, not excuses for non-achievement”.

There was also an impression from some respondents that the visibility of the police had decreased over the last year despite the uplift to officer numbers:

“Last year I responded to a similar question positively. However, despite assurances, the reality is that uniformed numbers of visible policing have reduced, and our local neighbourhood team actually told one parish who was part funding a PCSO to save their money as the police could not fulfil its commitment”.

“Lack of visible police patrols. Officers seem to drive everywhere. No foot patrols to engage with the public. Officers even when driving do not appear to park up in prominent areas to give assurance to public walking or to motorists\ i.e., roundabouts, major junctions, shopping areas”.

Respondents also questioned how the £21m standstill costs quoted in the Open Letter had been calculated and whether as many efficiencies had been drawn out that could have been. They suggested that the Constabulary should reorganise to create efficiencies instead of asking the taxpayer for more money:

“As an accountant I would be interested to see how the £21m standing still costs are calculated and what areas of excess could be looked at to see if they are really necessary, or is there room for greater efficiencies”.

“Further work needs to happen to seek out efficiencies in spend to ensure that front line policing benefits from these funds and that the money isn't spent on back-end administrative work”.

“Hertfordshire Constabulary should be looking for greater efficiencies in order to raise these extra funds”.

“It seems that no amount of money will change it. Perhaps it's time to look at a restructure and spend so far and allocate money differently”.

“The Constabulary don't need more money; they need better management”.

“We have no idea how you spend the present money. Are there efficiencies which can be made? Asking us to contribute an average of extra £13 is not a worthy question. We need to know whether you have achieved maximum efficiencies and that should be an objective measure, not a subjective observation by yourself”.

6 per cent (188 responses) of respondents remained neutral in their response, with many expressing neither support nor objection to the proposal. This was for several reasons. For some it was because they felt torn between the rise of inflation and costs on household bills and people struggling financially, but also the desire to see more police

officers. 12 respondents felt unable to vote because they needed more information to understand how the money would be spent or more detail around officer numbers and investment plans.

General Observations

A number of those responding negatively to the service had conflated Hertfordshire County Council's precept rise with that of policing, noting their disquiet about missed bin collections. There were also 22 respondents who within their comments mentioned the closure or inaccessibility of some operational police stations across the county. There was explicit reference to Hemel Hempstead, Bishop Stortford, Welwyn and Buntingford.

"Will your plans mean the Police Station in Bishop's Stortford can reopen?"

"We no longer have no police station in Hemel Hempstead".

"I am very unhappy that there is no public access to the new/revamped Hemel Hempstead Police Station and no "counter" for the public to speak to someone face to face at the station".

"Welwyn Garden City no longer has an accessible police station which I feel strongly about".

"With the increasing population in Buntingford we need to have more local policing and a police station with long opening hours. Without having to go through long diverting calls around Herts to speak to someone".

These concerns have been a reoccurring theme raised by the public. I have listened to these concerns and have asked the Chief Constable to undertake a feasibility and cost/benefits analysis to better understand whether there is a financial and public safety /confidence business case for reopening some front counters across the county to help improve public contact, visibility and accessibility of police.

Feelings of Safety

For the first time this year, I also took the opportunity within the precept survey to ask respondents to tell me about how safe they feel in Hertfordshire and the reasons for their answer. Chart 1 highlights how respondents scored against a rating between 0 and 100, with zero being the lowest and 100 being the highest. The analysis shows that the highest distribution of responses can be found between 65-100, with the highest category between 75- 80, representing a high feeling of safety.

As shown in Table 4, the highest scores were from those that live in St Albans, North Hertfordshire and Dacorum districts. Respondents living in those districts cited the relatively low levels of crime compared to London and nearby counties and having not personally been a victim of crime. Those that cited lower feelings of safety in Stevenage, Hertsmere and Watford referenced reduced street lighting which made them feel uneasy

walking home with a number mentioning occasions where criminals had used the opportunity to try door handles of cars and examine properties prior to burglaries.

Chart 1: Distribution of responses 0 – 100

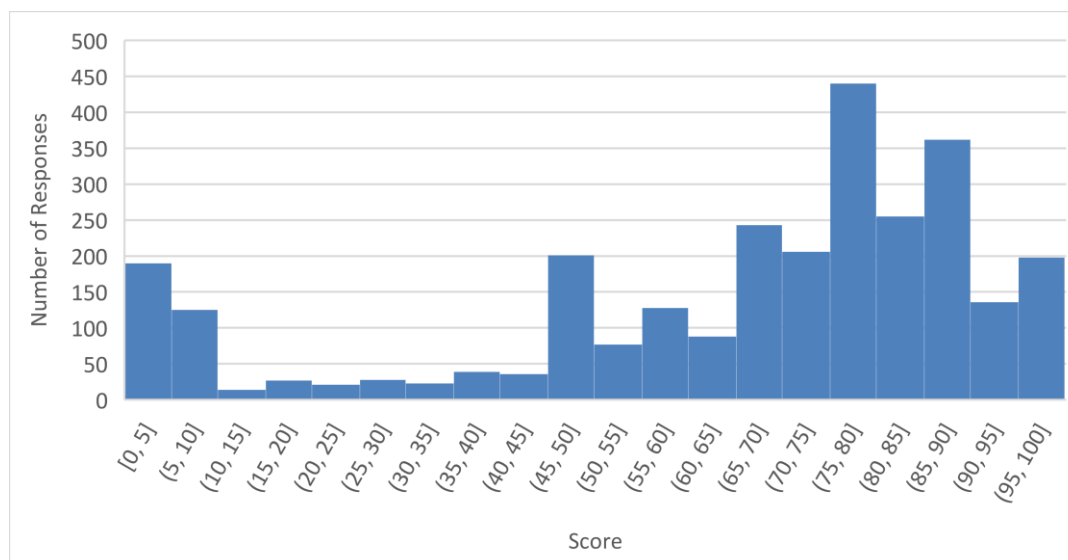


Table 3: Overall feeling of safety scoring for feeling of safety by district

Council	Average (Mean) Safety Score
Broxbourne Borough Council	62.6
Dacorum Borough Council	67.4
East Herts District Council	67.0
Hertsmere Borough Council	62.5
North Hertfordshire District Council	68.4
St Albans City and District Council	71.5
Stevenage Borough Council	56.6
Three Rivers District Council	64.4
Watford Borough Council	60.7
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council	67.7

These responses are helpful to understand people’s feelings of safety against crime volume and crime harm. This analysis will be used to help inform future engagement activity with residents across the county and feedback to relevant authorities regarding perceptions around street lighting. Thank you to all those who took the time to complete the precept survey for 2024/25.