

INVOLVING YOU

POLICE BUDGET SPECIAL ISSUE
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NPA consults communities on Council Tax dilemma

On 19 January, as Home Office crime figures identified Norfolk as the safest county in England, Norfolk Police Authority held its annual budget consultation event to gauge public opinion on the dilemma facing its Members in setting the 2012/13 police budget. The public meeting, attended by more than 50 business and community representatives, as well as senior police officers and Police Authority Members, focussed on the impact of funding cuts on Norfolk's policing service.

The Authority's Chairman, Stephen Bett, and Chief Constable Phil Gormley reported on the steps taken in the last year to realise savings made necessary by a 20% cut in Government grant over a four-year period. These steps included collaboration with Suffolk Police Authority and Constabulary to form joint support service departments and specialist policing teams, removing duplication and making the most of tightening resources. Attendees also heard of the reductions in police officer, PCSO and staff numbers, and the work that had been undertaken by the Force to change its approach to operational policing to maintain the general quality of frontline services with a reduced workforce. So far £10.7 million has been saved out of a target of £24.5 million.

Thus, with further funding cuts in 2012/13 and the next three financial years, the message from the police representatives was this: The progress made thus far had been good, but the road to realising the required savings was a long one with many difficult decisions to be made along the way. One of those decisions, Mr Gormley explained, would be taken by Police Authority Members on 21 February when they agreed the police budget for the coming year. The choice facing the Authority was outlined: accept a one-off Government grant equating to a 3% rise in Council Tax in 2012/13, in return for a freeze on the police precept; or raise Council Tax by up to 3.9% (the maximum permitted by Government restrictions), increasing annual income for 2012/13 and future years.

Mr Gormley explained that the grant, equating to £1.7 million cash, was of limited use to him as, being a one-off, it would not create sustainable income. By accepting the grant, the Authority would do little more than slow the pace at which overall expenditure needed to be cut; he couldn't use it to retain or recruit staff, invest in services or do anything that would create recurring revenue costs.

He then said that, by choosing to increase Council Tax, the Authority would allow him to plan for the future with a greater degree of certainty. He emphasised that it was not about growth, but about minimising the impact of the current cuts, and increasing resilience to future ones.

Outlining the challenge he faced, Mr Gormley spoke of cuts to youth services, the effects of rising unemployment amongst young people, and rising child poverty, referring to the potential these things had to cause an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour in the county. And with these increases would come greater demand on Norfolk's policing service.

He shared with attendees the proposals he had presented to the Police Authority at its budget seminar, saying that, with increased income through a rise in Council Tax, he could maintain current PCSO numbers (the work of whom, feedback showed, was valued by communities across the county) focussing them on working with schools to support young people in the learning environment to reach their potential, and tackling anti-social behaviour. He would also use the PCSOs to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, including the elderly, allowing them to feel safe and supported. Mr Gormley explained that, by tasking PCSOs in this way, he could free up warranted officers to concentrate on addressing the crimes that posed serious harm and presented a risk to the safety of communities.

He went on to say that, with further funding cuts and another Comprehensive Spending Review on the horizon, it was likely the impact on the public sector would be felt even more in the years to come. He stressed that, through an increase in Council Tax, Norfolk's police service could build resilience and continue to support the county's communities through the worst of the recession.

In closing, and before inviting questions and comments from attendees, Mr Gormley said that he would, of course, make the best of whatever budget he had to work with, and was committed to continuing to provide as effective a policing service to the people of Norfolk as possible. He stated, however, that he would be failing in his responsibilities if he did not point out the benefit of continuous and sustainable investment and inform the Authority of the resources he needed to do the best job he could.

The themes of questions and comments from the floor included current and potential future collaboration, police officer and staff numbers, the revised model of policing for Norfolk, and the changes to policing governance being introduced in November 2012 through Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

At the close of the meeting, Mr Bett asked for an indication from attendees of their view on the Council Tax dilemma facing the Authority, to which he received an overwhelming show of support from community representatives for choosing an increase and allowing the Chief Constable to implement his proposals. Attendees were then given the opportunity to talk informally to the Constabulary officers and Police Authority Members in the room. The views shared and points raised by the community representatives who attended the meeting will play an important role in the Police Authority Members' budget deliberations. A final decision will be taken at a meeting of the Authority to be held on 21 February 2012. The agenda papers for that meeting will be published on the NPA website - www.norfolk-pa.gov.uk.

What does a 3.9% increase in the policing Council Tax precept actually look like?

Council Tax Band A - an extra 9 pence per week, or £5 per year.

Council Tax Band D - an extra 14 pence per week, or £7.50 per year.

So, the Budget Consultation attendees were in support of an increase in Council Tax to fund Norfolk's policing service? But what do you think?

If you have a view on the funding dilemma facing the 17 Members of the Police Authority, then we would like to hear from you. Your input will contribute to Members' on-going deliberations.

You can contact the Norfolk Police Authority Office with your views in the following ways:

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