

Questions from the Police and Crime Panel Members

Received 23rd February 2021 from a member of the public – reply 10th March 2021

Question to the PCC:

1. Police Officer establishment

A candidate standing in the forthcoming PCC election has stated that if elected he would recruit an additional 100 Police Officers, above and beyond Operation Uplift, within the existing police budget. This candidate whilst not providing any detail has declared that he would not make any pledge that is not fully costed, achievable and deliverable.

I would like to know from the current PCC,

i) Whether It is feasible to recruit an additional 100 Police Officers, beyond Operation Uplift, within the existing police budget and without any increase in either government funding or the local precept and

ii) If it is feasible, why he has not pursued this option for increasing the Police Officer establishment.

2. Police station closures

The PCC has provided updates to the Panel regarding the 2017-21 Estates Strategy, which includes the objective of reducing the costs of running the estate by 20%. It is being reported that the proposed sale of at least nine current police stations is being progressed, which has attracted adverse comment from many members of the public. All four PCC election candidates have indicated that they would like there to be a review of the sale of these police stations.

I would therefore like to know from the PCC whether the sale of these police stations, particularly during the current pandemic, is in his view,

i) Still necessary or could the sale of one or more police stations be temporarily suspended pending review by his successor and

ii) What impact the suspension or cancellation of the sale of one or more of these police stations would have on Wiltshire Police's capital programme.

Response:

1. Police Officer establishment

Elections of Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales are fast approaching, and therefore I fully understand the increased interest in the role of the Police and Crime Commissioner. These elections will be the third elections since the role was created in 2012, and they will provide every local resident with an opportunity to express their personal preferences and vote for the candidate of their choice. As previously, the Returning Officers will run these polls in a way that meets the highest standards of both public safety and democratic integrity. I understand how important the pre-elections period is for every candidate, and therefore I would like to clearly state that it is not for me and my Office to respond to questions about the viability of any prospective candidates' plans.

As the Police and Crime Commissioner, I am responsible for the totality of policing and resources available and I have made it clear that increasing police officers, both funded nationally and locally is a priority, alongside protecting community policing teams. A new Police and Crime Commissioner will be able to work within the statutory parameters of their role and will receive advice from the Chief Constable and the OPCC on policing need, how to deliver their plans and associated costs and implications.

2. Police station closures

In my latest Police and Crime Plan Update which was published in June 2020, I have committed to deliver year three of my Estates Strategy 2017-2021 and as the current Police and Crime Commissioner, I will continue in my role until 12th May and I intend to continue to deliver my plans until that date.

Based on operational advice from the Chief Constable, the Estates Strategy highlighted a number of police sites which are no longer required to deliver policing. This included the disposal of many sites that are beyond the end of their life for policing purposes and not required for policing, and therefore a disposal of unused and often run down police buildings is in favour of high quality policing hubs and community locations that make officers visible and available to the public. All officers and staff have office locations available within their policing sector when required to carry out other duties, supported by excellent ICT solutions that reduce the need for them to be in an office.

This has been the strategy since 2017 and disposal is the end point of this strategy. The majority of the sites being marketed are not fit for 21st century policing, as refurbishment or retention is not value for money. The Chief Constable and I regularly discuss the changing threats we face and that officers and staff are fully supported to do their jobs. This is why the strategy also invests heavily in a refurbished policing site at Royal Wotton Bassett, a new police station in Warminster and plans for a new police station and community hub in Tidworth. Extensive work will need to continue to implement improvements across the police estate aligned to the government road map and future policing needs. Estates work has considerable lead in times, and therefore I have been ensuring that in line with my strategy there is work being prepared on the future need in Devizes.

Lastly, the member of the public has asked a pertinent question on the funding. The current capital plan within the MTFs is based on delivering my Police and Crime Plan and the Estates Strategy. You will note from the MTFs that there are extensive capital requirements surrounding estates and ICT. I can confirm that income from sales is part of my capital plan. This plan clearly sets out how I intend to fund my plans as there is real pressure on capital funding. Central government provides only £0.109m per annum in capital grant which does not enable the investments to give the frontline officers the estate and equipment they need to keep our communities safe. To meet these plans my MTFs shows that to fund estate improvements various funding streams are required including capital receipts and borrowing.

In anticipation of your further question if this is needed, I would like to outline my reasons for borrowing. Firstly, we will need to spend money on the retained estate. Whilst disposing of many sites that are no longer needed or are at the end of their life, much of the retained estate is at the end of its life and requires significant investment to continue supporting policing. Given the historically low-level interest rates, this provides a good balance on enabling quality estate being paid for prudently. With continued restrictions on funding caps this is the only cost-effective way of raising money for long term capital investments. Wiltshire has modest reserves and has not in my view, overtaxed the local population to have great war chests of money just in case.

Even if I was able to raise more money from the precept, I do not believe it is fair to effectively borrow money from local families over several years to make capital improvements when other options are available. I would like to reiterate that holding onto estate we do not need will impact the capital plan and will either mean planned investments in estate and ICT will need to be examined or more will need to be borrowed to mitigate the decision. I am focused on ensuring Wiltshire Police is effective and efficient and will not borrow more than is needed to ensure this.

A future Police and Crime Commissioner may of course have different direction, views and policy objectives, and therefore taking stock once elected to review the information and advice I received on all policing and crime matters is understandable. However, the fact remains that Wiltshire Police will continue to work within a challenging funding position until the government addresses the out of date police funding formula, which means in 2020-21 I had £26.15 per head of population to provide a policing service to the people of Wiltshire.