

West Mercia Police and Crime Panel

Report of the Task Group to examine the Police and Crime Commissioners Proposed Budget 2021/22 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2021/22 – 2024/25

Purpose

1. To present the findings and details of the considerations undertaken by the Budget Task Group of the West Mercia Police and Crime Panel (PCP).

Membership

2. The Task Group of Michael Wood (Lead Member), Sebastian Bowen, Roger Evans, James Lavery and Aled Luckman met with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), his Chief Finance Officer and Chief Executive on 15 December 2020 and 15 January 2021.

3. The Task Group has been supported by Rachael Hart (Worcestershire County Council's Financial Reporting Manager) Tim Rice (Worcestershire County Council's Senior Public Health Practitioner, lead Officer for Community Safety), Sheena Jones (Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager) and Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator).

Role of the Task Group

4. The Group's main role was to review the precept proposals and to report its findings to the PCP.

5. In addition, the Task Group received presentations on Digital and Forensics Transformation, Estates and Property Services and Digital Services and how these services Supported the PCC Safer West Mercia Plan and West Mercia Police Priorities.

Discussion of the Budget and Proposed Precept

6. The Group considered the PCC's Proposed Budget 2021/22 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2021/22 – 2024/25 in the context of the Safer West Mercia Plan.

7. The PCC explained that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 had been exceptionally challenging for communities and policing and that the challenges were likely continue beyond 2021. This was acknowledged and reflected within his budget.

8. The proposals included a further 91 police officers, totalling almost 400 since the PCC came into office. The additional officers would ensure a greater focus on the priorities of the communities. The PCC and Chief Constable reassured the Task Group that the health and wellbeing of staff was a priority and that they would ensure that staff had the right tools and equipment to do their job effectively and that the estate was fit for purpose. Investment was also being made in occupational health.

9. Transformation work would continue as planned to include additional resource for things such as digital forensics, further investment in the police call centre and police ICT (including upgrades). These areas were crucial to support frontline police work, but the PCC reported that they had suffered from under-investment whilst West Mercia was

part of the Strategic Alliance with Warwickshire. Investment in ICT for 2021/22 was £2.883m and £3.164m for 2022/23.

10. There would be new and major investments in improved services for victims of crime, as well as funding for crime prevention and diversionary projects. The initiatives included the further rollout of a domestic violence perpetrator programme, improvements and expansions to the Victim Advice Line, and new packages of support for victims of both child sexual exploitation and sexual violence.

11. West Mercia would also incur the cost of a major investigation in 2021 and beyond. To ensure a thorough investigation and ensure the right support for potentially thousands of victims, the costs were expected to run into several million pounds. Support was being sought from Government but was not guaranteed.

12. A review of estates services was undertaken and new arrangements were being implemented, following the County Council's decision to serve notice and withdraw from the joint venture company Place Partnership Limited. The PCC and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service were working in partnership to create a joint estates service which would deliver efficiencies whilst creating an improved bespoke service for both emergency services.

13. Each year the Treasurer carried out an assessment of the risks facing the PCC to determine the minimum level of reserves to hold. This year the assessment is that £6.975m needs to be held in general reserve at all times to provide adequately for these risks.

14. Last year, the PCC increased the precept to 3.94% for 2020/21, adding £8.54 average to the annual Council Tax bill for a typical band D home. This year (2021/22), the PCC is suggesting that the Council Tax charge would be increased by 6.66% or £15 for a Band D property followed by a 1.99% increase thereafter.

Conclusion

15. Subject to the results of the PCC's 2021/22 Budget Consultation which closed on 20 January, the Task Group was supportive of the PCC's financial strategy for the Budget Proposals for 2021/22 and the MTFP through to 2024/25 in the context of the West Mercia Policing Plan, although there were reservations about the 6.6% Council Tax increase given the current economic climate.

16. The Task Group also thought that it was optimistic for the Medium Term Financial Plan to assume that the Council Tax Collection Fund would return to surplus over three years. The rationale being neither a surplus or deficit on the Collection Fund for 2021/22 (distributed or recovered the following year in 2022/23), a surplus of £700k on the Collection fund for 2022/23 (distributed in 2023/24) and £1m a year thereafter distributed from 2024/25 onwards.

17. The Task Group recommends that the Panel authorises it to meet again with the PCC mid-way through the financial year to review the impact and effectiveness of the spending proposals.

18. The Task Group would like to thank the Commissioner and his staff for the clarity of their written and oral presentation as well as their time in facilitating their meetings.