

Dear

In advance of the police settlement later this year, I am writing to all Surrey MPs and Council Leaders to share with you my view on the financial state of Surrey Police in the short and long term, and ask for your support in principle to removing the current 2% precept cap for policing.

Compared to many other forces, the service is in a reasonably stable position and will be able to maintain, albeit with difficulty, its current front-line capabilities over the medium term. However, that is contingent on finding further savings of some £12m over the next three years (compared to a total annual spend of £210m). Half of these have been identified in principle, although achieving them will not be easy, but the rest have still to be sought. The unfunded bonus of 1% to police officers has meant that we have had to find another £1m annually out of the blue with the expectation that this will have to continue year after year.

Much has been made of the reserves that police forces are said to have accumulated. That's not the case with Surrey Police however, as explicitly accepted by the Police and Fire Minister when he visited us recently: apart from the nationally accepted level of 3% of gross turnover to deal with unexpected contingencies, Surrey doesn't have any unallocated reserves, the 'surplus' having been gradually drawn-down in recent years to shore up revenue spending.

Most, although not all, PCCs are advocating in our coordinated submission to the Home Office that the 2% precept cap should be raised or abolished. I support that majority view as, in Surrey, every 1% rise in the police precept brings in £1m. If I am given permission to go beyond 2% I will certainly examine that seriously - but I can pledge now not to abuse that power.

In the medium and long-term, there are a number of 'big-ticket' opportunities to save money and bring greater efficiencies: rationalising the estate, further regional collaboration and better use of upgraded technology in areas such as back office enterprise resource planning. Work is actively progressing on these issues. However, the savings won't start becoming significant in the near term (and the projects are inherently risky) so hard choices will have to be made in the next two or three years if we are to remain financially stable. Inevitably, the first port of call for future savings is likely to be local policing.

There are significant demand pressures currently facing all police forces, and these will increase in the future. Resources to fight terrorism, deal with cyber-crime, tackle the backlog of historical cases, fight drug-related crime, be forced to step in as other public services withdraw to their core functions (in dealing with mental health sufferers for instance), take seriously modern slavery and domestic and sexual abuse are all likely to rise, as is the extra policing across the board that a growing, diverse population will require. The pressures that face us all have been spelled out in detail in the submissions being made to the Home Office.

But in addition, Surrey Police has the particular problems of containing the criminality spilling out of South London (burglary is on the increase for instance), and retaining experienced police officers and staff: an issue that has been with us for a long time and I am afraid is likely to continue, despite the recent small improvement in retention rates. That doesn't just mean that there will be fewer experienced officers and staff in the front line than there should be, but that the total recruiting and training effort is disproportionately high.

I need to present a balanced picture however: Surrey Police's reputation in the eyes of the public remains high – and rightly so. My election and appointment of a new Chief Constable started the process of forming a new senior leadership team which is beginning to make a real difference. Partnership working with other enforcement and justice agencies and local government is improving, as is the collaboration with the voluntary and charitable sector. And above all, the calibre of front-line officers and staff is second to none. These are all strengths that will allow us to police the county effectively for the foreseeable future.

In summary: Surrey Police are still in a viable medium-term financial state, but that depends on finding significant further savings. While I am not anticipating that these will seriously degrade front-line policing (as is regrettably the case with some other forces), there will need to be a hard-headed examination on priorities versus resources. A lifting of the 2% effective cap on the precept will allow me to consider a small increase in order to get us over the short and medium term problems before the major savings that are forecast through technology, more efficient estates and further collaboration are fully implemented.

Yours sincerely

David Munro
Police and Crime Commissioner
