

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Safer, Cleaner, Greener Scrutiny **Date:** Tuesday, 12 February 2013
Standing Panel

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, **Time:** 7.30 - 9.50 pm
High Street, Epping

Members Present: Mrs J Lea (Chairman), Mrs M Sartin (Vice-Chairman), K Avey, Mrs H Brady, Mrs T Cochrane, L Girling, Ms Y Knight, G Mohindra, S Murray, Mrs P Smith and P Spencer

Other Councillors: W Breare-Hall, G Chambers, Ms H Kane, L Leonard, R Morgan, Mrs C Pond, Ms G Shiell, D Stallan, G Waller, Ms S Watson, C Whitbread, Mrs J H Whitehouse, D Wixley and N Wright

Apologies:

Officers Present: J Gilbert (Director of Environment and Street Scene), J Nolan (Assistant Director (Environment & Neighbourhoods)), C Wiggins (Safer Communities Manager), J Chandler (Assistant Director (Community Services and Customer Relations)), J Boreham (Assistant Public Relations and Information Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Also in attendance: N Alston, Ch Sup. A Prophet, Ch. Insp. E Wells and J Harding

40. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

41. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted there were no substitute members.

42. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

43. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The notes of the 8 January 2013 meeting were agreed as a correct record.

44. THE POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER

The Chairman introduced the newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex, Nick Alston. He was there to give a short presentation on his first few months in, and his aspirations for, his term in office and to answer any question from Panel

members. Accompanying him was Chief Superintendent Andy Prophet and Chief Inspector Ed Wells.

Mr Alston thanked all those present for turning out to see him. He told them that he was presently in the middle of a two day selection process, appointing a Chief Constable for Essex.

It had been 11 weeks since his selection and this was a new era, although much would stay the same as Essex had a good Police force; though he admitted that they should engage a bit more with the public.

We noted that his father had been a Deputy Chief Constable and he grew up in a police household. He had a science background and had worked in the Ministry of Defence, and then with an investment Bank as their global Head of Security. He retired two years ago.

He noted that this was an opportunity for the newly elected PCC to make a difference. People should have more say in how they were policed.

He joined the Conservative Party to be their candidate for the post and spent six months learning about the Police and crime across Essex.

He noted that this district had a very good partnership working, with their Safer Communities Team being one of the best and most active SCP he had seen.

Top of his responsibilities as a PCC was holding the Chief Constable to account on our behalf. He also had to set and update the four year Police and Crime Plan; set the budget precepts for policing; engage with the public and communities; and allocate grants and commission services. He was also responsible for giving the victims of crime a stronger voice.

He stated his intention to:

- 1) make sure we had policing across Essex that met local priorities;
- 2) make sure that the Police Service was as prompt and professional as it could be;
- 3) encourage/require partnerships in crime reduction; and
- 4) to commit to be a visible and influential leader and make a difference

and he had been trying to do these things, as he had promised in his manifesto, since he had been elected.

He promised that he would try and go to each district in Essex twice a year in a meeting like this one. It would give us the opportunity to hear from the district commander, afford the opportunity to pass on concerns to the police and vice-versa. He would be coming back to the District on 23 May 2013 to hold a public meeting.

He had noted that:

- Rural communities felt disenfranchised (although most crime happened in urban areas), so he had set up a rural forum;
- Businesses also felt disenfranchised and business prosperity was crucial for the area, and he has also set up a business forum;
- To give voice to victims in a victims forum and to enable them to liaise with various charities;
- There were still a lot of people either killed or seriously injured on Essex roads and he had therefore set up a roads forum.

His proposed plans were on his website for consultation. He hoped that members had a chance to see it and noted that so far he has had very good feedback. Once he had proposed his plan he needed to think how to fund it. It had been a hard decision to ask for an increase in the Council Tax policing precept. His instinct was to say no to an increase, but the reality was that everyone cared about policing and crime and were worried about what they might lose. He decided that if he was to take a responsible position he must ask for more money. Central Government funding was being cut by £42 million over a four year period and there was nothing he could do about that. He discovered that Essex paid the least for policing (via the precept) than any other county. If Essex paid the average amount for its policing, then it could afford an extra 470 police officers. This has forced Essex police to be very efficient, but it had now become very difficult to make ends meet and he saw officers working very hard to keep up. He thought it would be prudent and responsible to put up the precept to nearly the maximum that he was allowed to, but he was only allowed to put it up by 2%. He asked the Home Secretary who agreed that those counties in the bottom 25% (of expenditure) could put up their precept by £5 a year, without the requirement for a referendum. He asked and it was agreed by the Police and Crime Panel, after a vigorous discussion, that it be put up by £4.77 a year on average. So based on that, he finalised his plan.

His plan had only one mention of a county wide target which was unusual for a PCC manifesto. About 49% of all reported Common Assault was domestic violence in this area. There were 25,000 incidents a year, or 85 calls a day, but the Home Office said that the real figure was nearer 44,000. About 25% of police effort goes into domestic abuse cases. Not only that, but there have been a number of murders resulting from domestic abuse. There had been three incidents in 2011 that the police had been heavily criticised for. Because of the scale of the problem he had decided to focus on Domestic Abuse.

He was not sure that that his response was quite right as yet and he was working to understand how to improve this at present. He had no other crimes to be addressed on a County wide basis.

He noted that there were four things that concerned the residents of Epping Forest and they were:

- 1) reducing Anti Social Behaviour;
- 2) Domestic Abuse;
- 3) Dwelling burglary; and
- 4) Theft from motor vehicles.

This was what we had said were our local priorities. He will tell the Chief Constable of our concerns and that we wanted them prioritised where possible.

He would also like to reduce youth offending as youngsters tend to get caught up in crime and the criminal system when young and this risks establishing the pattern for the rest of their lives. There was a need to look at this and to intervene at an early stage, putting people in the right rehab programme etc.

There was also a need to tackle drugs, alcohol and mental illness problems. Drink was often the cause of a lot of problems and there was a need to tackle this.

It used to be that about ½% of the police budget was spent on crime prevention. Mr Alston wanted to increase that to 1%.

He spoke every week to the Chief Constable. Once a month they did a performance review. Once a month they held a financial review. Once a month they reviewed current topics of concern and once a month they did a future visioning, looking at what would need to be different in the future.

With these four main meetings a month they were getting ready to publish the outcomes of the meetings and these would be put on his website. These are private meetings but with a public note of their outcomes.

He was looking for increased efficiency and collaboration where ever he could. He praised the system we have here with our Town Centre CCTV, which was exactly what towns should be doing; enabling communities to gather data so policing could be carefully targeted.

As for collaborative working he noted that Kent and Essex had joint management and IT facilities that saved both of them millions. He has a staff of eight and was currently working on appointing a deputy.

In conclusion he said that he did not want to reinvent the wheel but just to make things work better.

The meeting was then opened out to questions from all those present.

Q. What is your staff responsible for?

A. I have a Chief Executive and a Chief Finance Officer, he was also looking for someone to run his public relations and organise events, there was work for two people doing scrutiny, this was something that the public would expect us to do, to challenge and support the police. He also needed someone to do the commissioning work; he had a £2¼ million budget to spend. He also needed a PA and two support staff.

Q. Putting aside the budget for the Police Service itself, you have significant other resources to be used to fund initiatives and services designed to prevent crime and improve community safety. How will you decide to cut that cake?

A. I have a proposal for how I plan to spend my budget and how it was to be spread across the board for this year. I have managed to get an extra £500,000 for extra spending on victim support, youth crime prevention, the neighbourhood watch, analytical and support work and probation schemes. In time to come I may well decide on other priorities.

Q. Thank you for your kind words on our Safer Communities Partnership working, we have had outstanding success with them. I am not sure how you would develop partnerships with the Business Community and voluntary sector. What about arrangements with the Essex Communities Budget Board, would this affect public service delivery for Essex. The Board seems to be South and East heavy, it would need more West Essex members.

A. The point on the Essex Board, I will take that away. As for the business side it was an interesting and complex area. We would like the business community to sponsor our special constables. The special constables have the same powers as a constable and I would encourage more people in the remote rural areas to become specials to give us some cover in the remoter rural areas. Another point on businesses was that some shops tolerate high levels of shop lifting, they are also, incidentally, encouraging crime and I would like them to think on this.

Q. I must admit that I was sceptical about the whole PCC process and its relationship with the community with only about 4% of them voting.

- How do you see this developing?
- Why had you decided to politicise the role and not remain an independent?
- EFDC is very rural, but it also very close to London, was this challenging?
- Also, I had not realised that there was a draft Police and Crime Plan.

A. As for the relationship with the public. There are roughly 1.7 million people in Essex. I want to set the tone and the enthusiasm for what we are doing. To do this I need good PR and to establish a good relationship with the press and strike the right balance. To help in this I will be holding a major media seminar in June.

I am a Conservative and I joined the party to stand in the election. But I am here to represent everybody. To get elected you need a party and its apparatus behind you. But I am not whipped by the party. Irrespective of any party allegiances, it has to be recognised that this was a 'political' position.

As for the draft plan, maybe it was imperfect; I have put it on our website and 'twitter' about it. It will get better with time.

Proximity to London was a challenging point; we need to get our relationship right with the Metropolitan Police. The access to London works for criminals. We liaise at sergeant level, with joint patrols etc. It has always been a challenge and we hope it will be improved.

Q. I am confused about you wearing a political hat as it is a non-political post. Why should police commissioning be politicised?

A. If you elect someone to public office, that is a politics. There are not many independent MPs – elections are political and need an organisation. The PCCs are all trying to do their best, like the MPs.

Q. In what way is this system better that what was before.

A. The old system had 19 members appointed by the County and they were unrepresentative of the people. Chief Constables are smart people and it was difficult for appointed people to hold a Chief Constable to account.

Q. With the tough economic tensions we have today how would you focus the police to deal with these tensions? And what are your intentions for the future years of your 4 year plan?

A. The Police have to police whatever happens. They have to cope with the unexpected. I can do nothing to influence the economic stresses, such as benefit cuts. It may well be that a higher crime rate would result from this. We do need to plan how to respond to this and I know that the Police are aware of the challenges.

As for my plans for next year, well I may find that there are a lot of efficiencies still to be made. 83% of the budget is for pay. Essex is the most efficient county; we yet have to decide if we need so much property. This is big county and its people want localism, next year seems a long way off to me.

Q. Anti Social Behaviour and the standards of training for Essex Police Officers, would this be made comparable with other forces?

A. My second pledge is about prompt and professional policing, which has a lot of challenges. I know that police officers want to do better.

We get a number of calls a day about Anti Social Behaviour. They each get graded, as ASB covers a wide range of incidents. We make a difference where we can, we need to pre-empt and understand some of the ongoing problems. We have recently been doing covert patrols in some areas and discovered things that we were not aware of and had that not even been reported.

With less staff we need to get 100% from everybody and need to follow up our ongoing training and development. The drive is now to provide local training.

The view around the County was that there was no point in reporting things. But it was very important to build up intelligence for that area and build up a picture. People

should use the non emergency 101 number to let us know their suspicions and let us know of any problems.

Q. How will you engage with the youth of Essex?

A. I have prioritised youth offending but have not done as much as I would like so far as I am only eleven weeks into this job. I have made contact with some youth groups and would like to set up some sort of youth council or forum to engage with them. This was not yet at the top of my list and I am keen to find out what would work.

Q. I live at Limes Farm in Chigwell and the street lighting is inadequate. At a recent Limes Farm Youth Action Group meeting, some young girls said they don't like going out at night as they were scared walking through the estate, as there is a gang culture on the estate, therefore they don't feel safe. There is a police station but it's not staffed. Are there plans to:

- a) Improve the street lighting?
- b) Open the police station? And
- c) Improve police relationships within the community.

A. The voice of the County's youth needs to be heard. Can you let me know if there is a county structure that I can engage with?

As for your question. We need to make £42million savings in four years. We have identified that we need more people working out of Loughton and have more staff there working over 24 hours. Limes Farm estate is jointly covered with the Met Police. It is worrying to hear about a gang structure there. There is low level crime in this area and we need to be speaking to you to let us know what was going on. The police would be very interested to engage with the Youth Council on these matters.

The EFDC Safer Communities Manager commented that their Anti Social Behaviour officers do meet with the community and the police and there was a lot of joint work carried out at Limes Farm, including working with the neighbouring Met Police and school representatives to identify offenders.

It was noted that the County wide Youth Council would welcome the PCC and Police to their meetings.

Q. How seriously do the police take fly tipping in Essex, especially in rural areas? There are already CCTV cameras in some "black spots" to monitor fly tipping but what other measures have been put in place?

A. Fly tipping is a big problem, sometimes considered as a lesser issue than violence, but it is important and forms part of the anti social behaviour spectrum. There was more of a local authority role in the handling of this. There are a lot of things that affect our lives like fly tipping and parking. It can be criminal but was mostly down to Councils to handle.

The Director for Environmental Services said that they took it very seriously and noted that it was a growing problem. They have a team of officers who investigate and gather evidence. EFDC was doing more enforcement every year, using CCTV both covertly and overtly. They also work with the Police to stop vehicles and check out their paperwork and have a 'man in a van' service to collect smaller tips as quickly as we can, to stop other people adding to it.

Q. Theft of mobile phones are not seen as serious, how can you deal with this?

A. A lot of people tend to walk down streets talking on expensive phones. You can reduce the risks by modifying how and where you use it. It was crucial to report it so that any 'hot spots' could be identified.

Phones are expensive and their theft falls into two camps, they are either left unattended or are stolen. The Police would always investigate anything reported to them. Where there was a pattern forming they can use more covert methods to monitor it. However, sometimes we can't do a lot. There are a lot of apps you can use to track your phone and they can be useful.

Q. Rural areas feel vulnerable and we still have our share of crime.

We still see a lot of domestic abuse in the courts, a lot of this was caused by alcohol. As members of the Licensing Committee we find that the Police usually say they have no comment on applications which limits what we can do.

A. Rural areas are challenging and we are looking for new solutions. There was the potential for using Special Constables in these areas.

As for alcohol, this was a problem. I will ask the police to take a different view on licensing. If shops or clubs were not complying with their license conditions then we should take away their licence.

There was a lot of new legislation coming in that would affect this. We are also looking to explore this with our new business in partnership forums.

Q. Thank you for your kind words on our Safer Communities Team. A lot of people would like to see more of the proverbial 'bobbies on the beat'. I know you take a more balanced view on this; can you tell us your opinion on this.

A. I have talked a lot about visible front line policing. This is useful and tends to reassure people. However, we have to use our resources wisely. There is no good evidence that random patrolling has any impact on crime. But, patrolling based on intelligence work was better. Police Officers were always busy and the front line could be defined as anywhere they were needed, e.g. in a front room or on a computer.

Crime was getting more complicated and as for numbers of police, they needed to be paid for. If I thought it needed more officers then I would add to them. I am on a journey, learning what was needed at present.

Q. There were problems in Loughton with the late night economy. Was there a type of forum where we can have some sort discussion on businesses, alcohol and the police?

A. Yes we should be having that discussion. We must look at things that we have got and address the problem. I recently went to a night club with Eric Pickles to see the problem for ourselves. The people were quite well behaved and minimally policed. A lot of money was being spent and most of the young people were having a good time and behaving themselves. There was a need to find a balance and get expert views from people working with young people.

Q. I am delighted that you brought up our Safer Communities Team. We have used council money to help Police and our local residents by putting in CCTV in Epping, in December.

What was the difference between Essex and Hertfordshire in their precepts and what if you could not increase precepts this year?

A. We would have been short next year on the plan I had inherited by the equivalent of 42 police officers. I did inherit a four year plan and did not want to change more than I had to. The comparison figures are on the HMRC website.

Q. Good policing was due to local knowledge and the best way to get this was by having bobbies on the beat. There was also the problem of the paperwork they had to, could this be lessened.

A. Local knowledge was key to good policing and we use PCSOs and Specials etc. for this. Everyone should have access to a police officer that they could reach easily. As for paperwork, it has become a cliché, in my experience there was not as

many forms as it was thought. We need the background information that these provided but it may be that there was too much. Common sense says we have not got it quite right. I will not be setting any specific targets; I would just like to see all crime down across the county.

Q. The fear of crime plays an important role and communicating with the public was key; how could this be done better? There has been an increase in burglary in our district. What options do we have available for this. Also, are there any more changes planned for senior police posts in our district.

A. Any changes in personnel are up to the Chief Constable. We have had up to 2000 officer changes over the past year. We can do better with our communications; we are trying to get the facts out there. We need to be inventive about it such as using twitter or other social media to let people know what was happening in our area. It should be noted that we do live in a low crime area.

Q. As a Waltham Abbey Town Councillor can I say we have neighbourhood action panel – would you be able to come to one of our meetings.

A. I would love to come but there is a time challenge; please invite me and I will come if I can.

Q. You stressed the importance in reporting crime. I have had a complaint that someone could not get a crime number recently. Was this a difficulty, do you have targets for this. There must be a lot of pressure on the Police with a £42million cut. Also it was important to have rehabilitation programmes, what is your influence on them?

A. My increase in the precept would not put more police on the streets it will go on crime prevention. There is a lot I can do as I have influence over bits of the system; I would like a bigger role and this is being debated at present. Crime prevention and crime reporting is a complicated area; all calls to 999 and 101 are recorded. Police data is now very accurate and the audit process should be able to track it down. There is also a difference between an incident and a crime. There is a pressure to reduce crime; when it is reported is helpful, when it is not recorded it only gives us a partial picture.

Q. How would you judge the success of your term of office?

A. That there was less crime and fewer victims.

The Chairman thanked Mr Alston, Chief Superintendant Prophet and Chief Inspector Wells for attending the meeting and giving up their valuable time.

Mr Alston thanked the meeting and reminded them that they could either email or write to him if they had any more questions.