

AUTHORITY FACES TOUGH DECISIONS

Suffolk Police Authority will be considering next year's budget for policing at its meeting next week (Friday, January 20) – including an option to increase council tax.

In a joint report from Chief Constable Simon Ash and Police Authority Treasurer Chris Bland, members will be told how the financial challenge facing the Constabulary has become greater over the last few months.

And they will hear that the decision made on council tax this year will have major implications for the future of policing in Suffolk – including the number of officers available to police the county.

The report sets out the latest savings plan for the Constabulary for the next four years.

It shows that the Constabulary has already cut £4.7 million over the last year, mostly generated through an ambitious programme of collaboration with Norfolk Constabulary.

However, it sets out how the total savings required over the four years from 2011/12 to 2014/15, has now increased from £13.6 million to more than £16 million, due to unforeseen national cost pressures.

The report will also set out two options for council tax in 2012/13. They are:

Option 1: freezing council tax at 2011/12 levels – and accepting a one-off government grant of £1.25 million for one year; or

Option 2: not accepting the government grant but increasing the policing element of the council tax by 3.75%, to generate £1.55 million.

Mr Ash will explain to members that, regardless of which option is chosen, the year ahead will be extremely challenging, with a series of operational commitments coinciding with cuts of more than £6 million.

However, Option 1 would result in at least £1.6 million less in funding in the years following – because the government grant is a one-off payment and council tax income will be reduced as a result of the freeze.

Mr Ash will tell members that he would have concerns if the Constabulary's strength fell below 1200 officers.

Option 1 would result in officer numbers falling below that number.

However, Option 2 would enable the Constabulary to keep officer numbers above 1200 in the years ahead.

Police Authority Chairman Joanna Spicer said: "The budget setting process is particularly difficult this year, with significant pressures coming to bear on all sides.

"We recognise that these are difficult times for everyone – and want to do everything we can to keep costs down for council tax payers across the county.

"However, our role as an authority is to secure an efficient and effective policing service for Suffolk, which already has one of the lowest cost forces in the country.

"We need to get this balance right.

"No decisions will be made until we have thoroughly examined all the financial scenarios in detail.

"It is clear that our decisions over the next few weeks will have major implications for policing both today and in the years ahead."

Members will make final decisions about the budget and council tax at the Police Authority meeting on Monday, February 20.

ENDS

Note to Editors

Chief Constable Simon Ash and Police Authority Chairman Joanna Spicer are available for interview. Please contact the news team on 01473 782722 if you would like to speak with them.