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'We're not a force in crisis any more': Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner marks year in job

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Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner Barry Coppinger secured a historic victory to be elected PCC in November 2012

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Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner Barry Coppinger

Picture by Peter Reimann

One year into his role as Cleveland Police and Crime Commissioner Barry Coppinger feels he is already more recognisable than any member of the Police Authority he replaced.

While “not being critical” of the 17 former authority members, Mr Coppinger said they were “largely anonymous”.

“Its not about having a media profile, it’s about having a community profile; it gives people a feeling they have got someone to go to,” he explained.

And **Cleveland's first PCC** says he has hit the ground running. In the last 12 months he has listened to the views of residents at 100 community meetings across all 82 wards in the 'Your Force, Your Voice' campaign.

"From the start it was important for me that people could see me out and about in their local area, so I have done just that," he said.

"I'm encouraged that people are positive about Cleveland Police and they do understand the pressures that the service is under.

"Ultimately I'm accountable to the public and will stand up for what is right for residents across Cleveland."

The former Middlesbrough Labour councillor, secured a historic victory to be elected PCC in November 2012, on a wage of £70,000-a-year.

Before his appointment - and in the months following - **Cleveland Police** has been rocked by massive cuts and morale-sapping scandals, including the sacking of both former Chief Constable Sean Price and his former deputy Derek Bonnard for gross misconduct. And the force has paid out huge amounts in court settlements, including one to Sultan Alam, the former officer wrongly imprisoned, and another to leading Teesside solicitor, James Watson, for wrongful arrest.

Cleveland is also still awaiting a decision on whether there will be any prosecutions as a result of the Sacristy investigations, the probe into possible corruption in Cleveland Police Authority.

But Mr Coppinger firmly believes the tide has finally turned for the better for the force.

"We used to be called a force in crisis – Cleveland is not a force in crisis any more," he said.

Another critical issue, high sickness levels, is also being tackled "with robust efforts" and force sickness levels "are coming down", said the PCC.

The biting spending cuts - £5m on top of £26m already made - have also seen officer numbers reduced to around 1,400.

Asked if he felt there was a limit to which the force could cut staff, Mr Coppinger said: "The level where we go down with this budget process will be the minimum which the Chief and Deputy Chief Constable believe we can operate at, so we will be cut to the bone.

"The bottom line were going down to is 1,333 police officers."

But he believes senior police leaders at a national level “should have been far more outspoken at the start of this process”.

“As result we’re now in a situation where police are in some difficulty nationally. They have managed the cuts but have left it too late to complain about them.”

In “a year of significant change”, highlights of the new PCC’s says initiatives launched have included:

The launch of a Teesside Victims’ Planning Group to further support victims of crime;

Promoting consistency in service delivery across all youth offending teams;

Hosting a series of seminars to discuss issues around anti-social behaviour, retail crime and hate crime;

Allocating £29,240 to community projects in Cleveland using the proceeds of unclaimed or unidentified property that has been auctioned. 29 projects have been funded so far, and

Establishment of a youth forum to hear the views of young people and promote positive work of youngsters from the area.

“It’s been busy and challenging, but I always expected it to be,” said Mr Coppinger.

“I said when I was elected that I’d do the very best I could to make this role work and that’s all I can do.

“I’ve got an election due in May 2016 so the public can decide whether the idea of a PCC has worked or not.”