

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 16 September 2020

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor John Cooke
Councillor Judy Falp
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Wallace Redford
Councillor David Reilly
Councillor Alan Webb

Other County Councillors

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property
Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety
Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation
Councillor Keith Kondakor
Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Heritage and Culture

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Vanessa Belton, Delivery Lead, Business Intelligence
Jagdeep Birring, Technical Specialist, Production Systems
Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Ben Brook, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Assistant Director – Enabling Services
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director – Governance & Policy
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director – Finance
Steve Smith, Assistant Director – Commissioning Support Unit

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Jenns, Councillor Redford was present as a substitute. Apologies were also received from Councillor O'Rourke and Rob Powell.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Reilly declared a personal interest in the HS2 scheme as his house is very close to the proposed route. He advised that he was the Lead Member for HS2 for North Warwickshire Borough Council and Warwickshire County Council.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meetings

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 23 July 2020 and 24 June 2020 be approved as a correct record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Public Question Time

No public questions were received or presented at the meeting.

3. Questions to Portfolio Holders relevant to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

In response to Councillor Boad, Councillor Kaur reported that the Library Service had continued to adapt positively to the challenges imposed by the outbreak of coronavirus. She stated that libraries in the County had continued to reach out to the community in imaginative ways, this was exemplified by Polesworth Library which had made use of innovative digital strategies to engage with service users.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Councillor Kaur agreed to circulate a briefing note to members highlighting the innovative work being undertaken within the Library Service, including how the experience of Polesworth Library was being shared across the Service.

4. Work Programme

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the updated 2020/21 Work Programme, as set out in the report and notes the scheduled future meeting dates.

5. One Organisational Plan (OOP) Year-end Performance Report (1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020)

Steve Smith (Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit) introduced the report. He drew attention to the 64 Key Business Measures (KBMs), 33 of which were within the ambit of the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The report provided a summary of performance against KBMs.

Councillor Reilly highlighted Section 2.2 of the report which stated that 40% (13) of KPMs had not achieved target levels, commenting that this was an area of concern.

In response, Steve Smith drew attention to the remedial actions identified within the report and highlighted the improvements which could be seen within the Council Plan Quarter 1 Performance Progress Report (agenda item 6). He stated that the impact of COVID-19 had affected the Authority's performance figures in some areas.

Councillor Kaur commented that several factors had influenced performance reporting, including the 'revolving door' effect of measures being revised or discontinued, with new measures being introduced in response to changing demands. She stated that the Authority's response to coronavirus, which saw library staff being redeployed to support shielding hubs, or Business Support Services diverting resources in support of Communications, had affected the outcome of the report.

Councillor Kaur commented that key performance indicators would be reoriented based upon the COVID-19 Recovery Programme. She added that some areas of concern indicated by the report had been detected prior to the pandemic crisis and were subject to longer-term remedial action.

Councillor Reilly highlighted the importance of maintaining clearly monitorable standards of performance reporting. He stated that it would be regrettable to reorient performance indicators where the Authority had failed to meet its targets and noted that the majority of the report related to pre-coronavirus performance. He suggested that where challenges had been detected, the Council should acknowledge the causes and present a plan of action.

Councillor Butlin emphasised that it was important to acknowledge the disruption caused by the outbreak of coronavirus. This had led to resources being diverted across the organisation and postponement of key areas of work. For example, highway improvement work had been impeded by the requirement to introduce social distancing measures on site. He stated that the Council had performed well in difficult circumstances, to the extent that it had been presented as an exemplar by Westminster to other local authorities.

The Chair highlighted that the pandemic crisis had brought about rapid organisational change and the transformation process enacted during the initial six weeks of lockdown would have taken many years to accomplish in ordinary circumstances.

Councillor Kaur agreed, adding that Cabinet had resolved to introduce a cross-party group to track the performance of the COVID-19 Recovery Plan and develop the Council's priorities for 2021/22. This provided an opportunity for members to contribute to the development of a longer-term performance reporting strategy.

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) indicated that some figures relating to the performance of the Fire & Rescue Service needed to be viewed in context; for example, the Service would not set a target of anything other than zero in relation to the number of fire-related deaths. Anything above that would not be acceptable.

Councillor Crump expressed his support for this principle, stating that in many instances response time targets had been met but the Fire & Rescue Service was unable to save the individuals concerned. This underlined the importance of the prevention agenda.

Councillor Kondakor highlighted the progress made in the expansion of broadband coverage. However, given the reliance upon digital services imposed by COVID-19, he asked if broadband targets should be raised.

In response, Craig Cusack (Assistant Director, Enabling Services) stated that significant progress had been made in this area. However, he commented that raising the performance target may not yield the desired outcome; the Authority was entirely dependent upon BT Openreach for delivery of the broadband programme. He stated that the response of BT Openreach to the pandemic was impressive, but that work to assert the Council's priorities in the delivery of broadband services was ongoing.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress of the delivery of the One Organisational Plan 2020 for the period as contained in the report.

6. Council Plan Quarter 1 Performance Progress Report

Steve Smith (Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit) introduced the report. He drew attention to the KBM performance figures located in Section 2.3 of the report, as well as the sections which provided an analysis of the wider narrative affecting the Authority's performance in key areas.

In response to Councillor Cooke, Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) advised that fire-related injury figures were collated on a quarterly basis and aggregated in the year-end report. He advised that five fire-related injuries had been recorded between 1 April 2020 and 30 June 2020. This contrasted with seven fire-related injuries during the equivalent period last year (Quarter 1, 2019-20).

Barnaby Briggs reported that a reduction in serious incidents had been observed during the period of the pandemic. He stated that it was difficult to establish cause and effect, but the data suggested that fires were being spotted more quickly, enabling a prompt response by the Fire Service.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs agreed that the emergence from lockdown had prompted specific challenges during the period covered by the report. These included an increased number of road traffic collisions, which could be attributed to drivers being out of practice, or vehicles being compromised by a prolonged period of disuse. Incidences of fire at manufacturing plants had increased as production restarted; this could be ascribed to the 'mice in the wiring' effect. He commented that the year-end report would provide more insight into the effect of the pandemic on the Fire & Rescue Service.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress of the delivery of the Council Plan 2020 – 2025 for the period as contained in the report.

7. HS2: Operational Considerations for Early Stage Construction

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) introduced the report which followed on from the verbal update provided at the previous meeting of the Committee. Since the publication of the report, Barnaby Briggs was able to provide an update in respect of the proposed locations of the larger construction compounds in the County. These included sites at: (i) Kingsbury; (ii) on the M6 loop road, close to Coleshill Heath Road; (iii) the M6, close to the location of the new railway station; (iv) Kenilworth (A46); (v) Fosse Way, near to Offchurch/Welsh Road; and (vi) Long Itchington Way (Southam Tunnel).

Barnaby Briggs reported that Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) had provided support to Warwickshire Police during protests at Crackley, near Kenilworth. He emphasised that this was to enable access for police officers; WFRS did not participate in law enforcement activities.

In response to Councillor Cooke, Barnaby Briggs reported that HS2 Ltd. had communicated effectively with WFRS when temporary road closures were proposed. A WCC / HS2 Traffic Liaison Group (TLG) had been established to consolidate channels of communication. He advised that arrangements were in place whereby WFRS could utilise construction access routes on closed sections of highway if required, rather than face the prospect of lengthy diversions and the resultant effect on response times.

Councillor Reilly praised the response of WFRS to challenges posed by the HS2 scheme. He emphasised that the scale of the project was unprecedented, and that the construction phase of the scheme would set a rapidly evolving process in motion; the impact this will have on WFRS should be acknowledged.

Councillor Reilly advised that work was ongoing to examine the community safety impact of HS2. This included development of a dedicated Community Safety Strategic Assessment to consider the wider challenges of HS2, including its impact on the highway network, the effect on emergency services, and the implications of recent protests.

Councillor Kaur commented that she had witnessed protests in opposition to the HS2 scheme at Weston under Wetherley which had resulted in protesters straying into the highway, posing a safety risk. Barnaby Briggs advised that, although HS2 held responsibility for the security of their sites, instances of demonstrations 'spilling over' would need to be monitored by the emergency services.

Councillor Boad stated that HS2 was a contentious issue, attracting widespread opposition from residents. She commented that the construction phase would be in operation for many years, placing a burden on WFRS and local communities. She requested that WFRS continue to provide regular updates to the Committee.

The Chair indicated his agreement and requested that WFRS apprise the Committee of ongoing developments to be scheduled at future meetings.

Councillor Reilly drew attention to the additional risks posed by the construction phase of the scheme, including an increase in traffic. He stated that the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) would need to be attuned to these risks.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Notes the report and agrees the Service approach to operational planning for HS2 construction.
2. Acknowledges and takes account of possible changes in the Service's response arrangements which may be necessitated by the construction of HS2.

8. Update regarding development of an IRMP Assurance Panel

Ben Brook (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) presented a verbal report outlining the proposal to establish an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Assurance Panel. This Panel would enable the Authority to scrutinise the Fire Service's delivery of the IRMP and to monitor progress against annual action plans.

Ben Brook advised that it was proposed that the Panel would be cross-party in membership, based on political proportionality, and chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety. The Panel would be similar in nature to the Task and Finish Group previously charged with responsibility for oversight of the IRMP but would operate on a longer-term, on-going basis. He advised that the proposal would be presented to Cabinet on 8 October 2020.

Ben Brook advised that the proposal drew upon the recommendations of Sir Thomas Winsor's 'State of Fire and Rescue Annual Assessment Report' (2019), as well as guidance issued by the Local Government Association in respect of governance arrangements. It was considered that the Authority had a duty to ensure that the proper assurances were in place to make certain that Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) was working effectively and efficiently within the resources linked to the IRMP.

Ben Brook stated that it was proposed that the Panel would act as a 'critical friend' to WFRS, making use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence to develop an understanding of the performance of the Service and to identify any potential obstacles to the delivery of the IRMP. It was hoped that the initiative would be progressed promptly, subject to agreement from Cabinet.

In response to Councillor Boad, Ben Brook advised that the public consultation for the IRMP was underway and efforts had been made to engage widely with communities and stakeholders. He stated that the Communications Team had produced a high-quality animation and it was hoped that this would expand the reach of the consultation. He added that social media had been utilised, alongside direct approaches to key stakeholders, including town and parish councils. He invited councillors to utilise their networks to broaden awareness of the consultation and agreed to circulate a link to the animation to all members.

Councillor Boad expressed her support for the Assurance Panel, stating that members had demonstrated a good level of knowledge of WFRS during previous IRMP scrutiny groups.

Councillor Crump expressed his support for the proposal, stating that critical challenge was a positive aspiration. He commented that members had worked effectively during the IRMP Task and Finish Group and that he anticipated a good outcome. He added that HS2 would contribute to

increased pressure on WFRS, this underlined the importance of an IRMP which was dynamic and adaptable to the challenges ahead.

9. Any Urgent Matters

There were none.

10. Reports Containing Confidential or Exempt Information

Resolved:

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

11. Exempt Minutes

Resolved:

That the restricted minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The meeting rose at 15:04

.....
Chair