

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 9 March 2021

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 Andy Jenns
Councillor Maggie O'Rourke
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

Officers

Kieran Amos, Chief Fire Officer
Emma Andrews, Development and Operations Manager, Heritage & Culture
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
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director, Finance
John Findlay, Service Manager, Business & Customer Support
Stephanie Gardner, Service Manager, Customer Contact – Connect
Ayub Khan, Service Manager, Universal Services
Richard Lewis, Collections and Development Manager
Ade Mallaban, IRMP Manager
Rob Powell, Strategic Director, Resources
Steve Smith, Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit
Nichola Vine, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Legal & Democratic

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor O'Rourke (who was unable to attend for the initial part of the meeting) and Kushal Birla (Assistant Director, Business & Customer Services).

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

Councillor Boad declared that she was a member of Leamington Spa Town Council, which had responded to the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) consultation.

(3) Chair's Announcements

None.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 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 advised that a relaunch of the strategy to promote the Library Service's offer to young families would be scheduled once a date for the reopening of services had been confirmed.

Ayub Khan (Service Manager, Universal Services) reported that the Bookstart scheme had continued to operate effectively and had been supported by registrars during the period of the Pandemic.

4. Work Programme

Resolved:

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

5. Update on Heritage and Culture Strategy

Ayub Khan (Service Manager, Universal Services) introduced the report, stating that the Heritage and Culture Strategy had been launched prior to the outbreak of coronavirus in 2020. The Strategy had made considerable progress despite the limitations imposed by the Pandemic.

Ayub Khan reported that efforts had been made to signpost organisations to funding opportunities, including the Culture Recovery Fund. He stated that the Heritage and Culture sector had been severely impacted by COVID-19 with widespread loss of revenue.

Emma Andrews (Development and Operations Manager, Heritage & Culture) reported that a sector-wide survey had been undertaken to gauge the impact of the Pandemic. There was an awareness that medium-sized organisations had needed to furlough staff, and that a reduction in the availability of volunteers had detrimentally affected smaller organisations. The survey sought a view on how support could be most effectively orientated.

Emma Andrews stated that the findings of the survey suggested that funding was not a primary concern; many organisations had acted promptly to access government funding. It was considered that marketing and peer-to-peer support were required to attract people back to cultural events once the risk of transmission of the virus had subsided. For instance, people might be reluctant to return to an enclosed space, such as a theatre.

Ayub Khan advised that the report outlined priorities for post-pandemic recovery which were linked to the Authority's COVID-19 Recovery Plan. Work in partnership with Coventry City of Culture 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games was on-going to ensure that the opportunities to capitalise on these high-profile events would not be overlooked.

Councillor Falp stated that marketing constituted a key challenge; intervention would be required to encourage people to return to spaces such as theatres. She advocated that specialist support for marketing be provided.

In response to Councillor Boad, Ayub Khan advised that work with schools and young people had not been overlooked. With support from the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Warwickshire Education Partnership would enable children to access cultural activities.

Councillor Jenns stated that a high proportion of volunteers were of retirement age and may be reluctant to return to the organisations they had previously supported. He highlighted the importance of the Strategy and the measures outlined to support valuable assets within the County.

Councillor Gilbert stated that he was confident that the Heritage and Culture sector would make a strong recovery. He emphasised that consistent messaging would reinforce a confident outlook. He commented that there was a need for theatres to work together, rather than compete for audiences, and to ensure that their initial productions were of high quality in order to attract visitors.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

- a) Notes the contents of the Progress Report;
- b) Supports the direction of travel as set out in the report;
- c) Supports the proposals outlined for provision of specialist marketing advice to organisations to promote a strong post-pandemic recovery; and
- d) Supports proposals for engagement with schools and young people to provide opportunities for engagement in cultural activities emerging from the Pandemic.

6. Update on Scrutiny Review

Nichola Vine (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Legal & Democratic) introduced the report, stating that an independent review had been commissioned to examine the Authority's approach to scrutiny and to consider opportunities to improve upon current arrangements.

Nichola Vine advised that the independent report produced by Dr Jane Martin provided some positive feedback, particularly in relation to members' commitment to continuous improvement, and the work undertaken by Democratic Services. The report outlined several opportunities for improvement culminating in a series of recommendations. The Committee's view was sought in respect of the report and future arrangements for scrutiny.

Nichola Vine stated that a relaunch of the scrutiny function had been proposed with a stronger alignment with corporate objectives and a focus on collegiate, constructive and challenging discussion. This could be accomplished by a restructuring of committees to foster improved scrutiny of corporate themes and objectives; or to align committees more closely with change portfolio themes.

Nichola Vine advised that the report highlighted the opportunities presented by virtual meeting technology, including improved scope to engage with members of the public and external partners.

Nichola Vine highlighted the potential for the timetable for meetings to be reviewed to ensure that scrutiny committees could be held at the optimum time to facilitate input into decision-making. The report also highlighted the value of dynamic task and finish groups, drawing upon the experience of the COVID-19 Recovery Member Working Groups held in July 2020.

Nichola Vine advised that an opinion on the recommendations of the report was being sought from each scrutiny committee, as well as from members on an individual basis, to identify a plan to be presented to councillors following the May 2021 election.

The Chair emphasised the importance of the report. He highlighted the role of scrutiny to act as a 'critical friend' - to examine issues and work alongside members of the executive to identify scope for improvements to be made.

Councillor O'Rourke highlighted the advantages of select committees for effective scrutiny. This arrangement provided scope to interact directly with service users and stakeholders to examine areas where the Authority had performed well and areas where improvements could be sought.

Councillor Falp welcomed the report, stating that, at other authorities, it was not uncommon for scrutiny committees to be chaired by members from across party groups. She advocated that WCC adopt a similar arrangement. She suggested that a focus on joint working between committees would confer benefits.

The Chair highlighted the recommendation for a 'chair of chairs' with oversight of scrutiny across the organisation; this would facilitate improved cross-panel cooperation.

Councillor Boad commented that portfolio holders, group leaders and chairs of scrutiny committees had been interviewed by Dr Martin. However, with two exceptions, members of scrutiny committees had been overlooked. This constituted a missed opportunity.

Councillor Boad advocated that the chairs of overview and scrutiny committees be drawn from parties outside of the majority group. She highlighted the opportunities presented by Microsoft Teams to facilitate a broader range of scrutiny activities, enabling a focus on specific issues. She underlined the importance of performance data to inform scrutiny.

Councillor Reilly stated that, despite the shortcomings of the consultation, the report had arrived at a constructive critical framework. He commented that existing arrangements were constrained by the absence of a clear performance framework, stating that effective scrutiny depended upon clearly defined parameters of individual responsibility.

Councillor Gilbert indicated his agreement that chairs of scrutiny committees be drawn from outside of the majority group. He underlined the importance of scrutiny which adhered to the principle of acting as a 'critical friend' whilst prioritising rigorousness and objectivity. He suggested that an independent chair would meet the criteria for objectivity to hold the executive to account.

Councillor Jenns indicated his agreement that chairs be drawn from outside of the majority group. He stated that the report was well-timed; an opportunity was present to examine the efficacy of scrutiny arrangements. He expressed his support for the introduction of an overall chair of scrutiny committees, and wider utilisation of virtual meeting technology.

The Chair stated that an emphasis on the substance of the issues under consideration, rather than party politics, had served to benefit the work of the Resources and Fire & Rescue OSC. He stated that effective scrutiny sought the best outcome for residents; a fair and inclusive approach was a means to accomplish this.

Councillor Webb commented that, when scrutiny committees were introduced, members were encouraged to examine the relevant issues carefully to reach a combined understanding. He emphasised the importance of constructive conversation in an informal setting to achieve effective outcomes.

Councillor Gilbert highlighted the limitations of remotely-held committee meetings, stating that an improved standard of governance could be achieved by meeting in-person.

The Chair sought the views of the Committee to frame a resolution. There was a consensus that the Review would have benefitted from a broader consultation with members. The prospect of holding dynamic task and finish groups was welcomed by the Committee. There was support for

the utilisation of digital technology to enable a wider range of scrutiny activities. However, it was felt that committee meetings should be held at Shire Hall once it was safe to do so.

The Chair stated that the prospect of independent chairs warranted attention and that the Authority stood to benefit from the introduction of external expertise.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

- a) Notes the findings of the Independent Review into Overview and Scrutiny;
- b) Recognises the opportunities presented by the utilisation of digital technology, whilst acknowledging the importance of committee meetings being held at Shire Hall;
- c) Recognises the potential benefits of engagement with external experts, stakeholders, and service users;
- d) Recognises the potential advantages of independent chairpersonship of overview and scrutiny committees.
- e) Supports the introduction of an overall chair of overview and scrutiny;
- f) Notes that a wider consultation with members during preparation of the report would have conferred advantages.

7. HMICFRS COVID-19 Inspection Report

Ben Brook (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) introduced the report, stating that between 28 September 2020 and 9 October 2020, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) undertook an inspection of the response of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) to COVID-19.

Ben Brook stated that it was clear that HMICFRS recognised the quality of the Service's response to the Pandemic. In the report, HMICFRS acknowledged the breadth of services delivered by WFRS including expansion of the Hospital to Home scheme which had helped to relieve pressure on the NHS during a critical period.

Ben Brook reported that HMICFRS had praised the ability and willingness of WFRS to maintain its delivery of statutory functions whilst supporting the community with a wide range of activities during a demanding period.

Ben Brook acknowledged the effectiveness of the combined response to COVID-19 from across WCC as well as Warwickshire Police, Public Health England, and the NHS. He stated that the report had identified four areas of future focus which had been acted upon promptly to ensure that communities would receive the best possible provision of services.

Members praised the outcome of the inspection and findings of the report.

In response to Councillor Boad, Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer) advised that the Resources and Fire & Rescue OSC provided an effective forum to enable members, as representatives of the Fire and Rescue Authority, to examine relevant issues. He added that the development of an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Assurance Panel would enable a specific focus on delivery of the IRMP.

Kieran Amos advised that WFRS had taken a leading role in raising the potential issue of whether furloughed on-call firefighters would continue to qualify for payments from their primary employer. This had been responded to promptly by the National Fire Chiefs Council, enabling on-call firefighters to continue to play a part. This advice had helped other fire and rescue services and was noted by HMICFRS in their report.

Councillor Crump highlighted the impressive contribution WFRS had made to provide support to communities during the Pandemic. He offered his congratulations to Henley-in-Arden Fire Station which had maintained around-the-clock uninterrupted availability for two years consecutively. This was a substantial accomplishment.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

- a) Notes the summary findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) COVID-19 Specific Inspection of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS);
- b) Commends WFRS for the positive outcome of the inspection; and
- c) Expresses its thanks to WFRS for its continued delivery of high-quality services to the communities of Warwickshire.

8. Draft Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2020-25: Post-Consultation Report

Ben Brook (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) introduced the report, stating that Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) had a statutory duty to prepare an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) which is regularly reviewed and consulted upon.

Ben Brook reported that, on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Authority, WFRS had prepared an IRMP based upon detailed risk analysis. The Committee's view was sought on the five proposals outlined within the recommendation of the report.

Ben Brook advised that the report provided details of the outcome of the public consultation on the five proposals. He stated that a diverse range of views had been received with majority support for the five proposals. The proposals would form the basis of an action plan for the next 12 months. He praised the contribution of Ade Mallaban (IRMP Manager) and his team for their hard work and commitment to the project.

Councillor Boad highlighted Proposal 1 ('ensure our workforce and ethos reflect the diverse communities we serve') which received the highest proportion (22%) of responses in disagreement. She expressed concern that these figures could suggest intolerance, or a failure to comprehend the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Kieran Amos stated that it was likely that respondents who indicated disagreement to Proposal 1 held the view that WFRS was a tolerant organisation which did not require specific attention to be given to EDI. He commented that this was symptomatic of a broader misconception and justified WFRS's continued emphasis on EDI. He stated that it was crucial to maintain a position where anybody, including prospective employees, felt welcome, protected, and secure.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Kieran Amos advised that the IRMP would enable a clear mandate to seek a reduction in the number of road traffic collisions resulting in injury or death. Work with the Business Intelligence Team had informed an improved understanding of the causes of road traffic collisions, the areas of the highway network that presented the greatest risk, and where intervention should be targeted. He advised that continual improvement in this area was a priority.

Councillor Crump advised that in 2019/20, 34 people had been killed or seriously injured on Warwickshire roads, the majority of whom had been pedestrians, cyclists or motorcyclists. This provided a sense of the risk profile. He stated that speed cameras had proved to be an effective means of reducing road traffic collisions in the West Midlands area, and the Safer Travel to School scheme had shown benefits.

The Chair praised WFRS Officers for their support throughout the municipal year and for the exemplary performance of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the view expressed by Cabinet on 11 February 2021, and recommends that Council:

- a) Note the outcome of the eight-week Draft Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) 2020-2025 consultation process.
- b) Approve the IRMP 2020 - 2025 and the proposals therein:
 - Proposal 1 - Ensure our workforce and ethos reflect the diverse communities we serve
 - Proposal 2 - Assess our capabilities to improve our ways of working in response to any future pandemics
 - Proposal 3 - Assess our overall resource capacity to ensure our personnel and physical assets are in the right place and at the right time to deliver our statutory duties
 - Proposal 4 - Develop further opportunities to support the wider community health outcomes and help to protect Social Care and the NHS
 - Proposal 5 - Implement digital solutions to enhance our service delivery.
- c) Authorise the Cabinet to approve the annual action plans to deliver the IRMP.

9. Update on Customer Experience Strategy

John Findlay (Service Manager, Business & Customer Support) introduced the report, stating that the Customer Experience Strategy had been approved in December 2019 leading to development of an Action Plan. He reported that COVID-19 had resulted in significant delays to the delivery of the Plan whilst resources were diverted to provide relief during the Pandemic. He advised that the objectives of the Strategy had not altered, and a revised Action Plan would be developed to progress work in this area.

Councillor Falp praised the quality of on-line resources on offer. However, she stated that intervention was necessary to promote on-line services, such as the facility to report faulty streetlighting.

Councillor O'Rourke commented that the two tiers of local government (borough/district councils and Warwickshire County Council) in operation made it difficult for residents to determine which services were provided by which organisation. She stated that customer service messaging should be communicated in a clear and accessible way.

Councillor Kaur praised the response of the Communications Team to the challenges of coronavirus, including the focus on a strong on-line offer for residents. She stated that there was a need to signpost services in a clear, simple way. This would be priority for the organisation emerging from the Pandemic.

The Chair praised the digital offer to customers during the period of the Pandemic. He expressed his gratitude to the Portfolio Holder and Business & Customer Services Team for the effectiveness of the response to COVID-19.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress on year one of the implementation of the Customer Experience Strategy.

10. Any Urgent Matters

As this was the final meeting of the municipal year, the Chair expressed his thanks to the members of the Committee. He praised the contribution of the Vice-Chair and group spokespersons, the commitment of portfolio holders, and the efforts of officers. On behalf of the Committee, he expressed gratitude to Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service, and all emergency services, for their hard work during a challenging 12 months.

11. 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 Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972'.

12. Exempt Minutes

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2020 were received. There was discussion regarding the length of meetings and the advantages of scheduling additional meetings when items of significant importance required detailed scrutiny. This was acknowledged by officers.

Resolved:

That the exempt minutes of the meeting held on 16 December 2020 be approved as a correct record.

The meeting rose at 15:55

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Chair