

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 15 December 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Piers Daniell
Councillor Sue Markham
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Will Roberts
Councillor Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans
Councillor Martin Watson

Officers

Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources
Benjamin Brook, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director - Finance
Martin Lewis, Service Manager
John Cole, Democratic Services Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Simon Lewis, Strategy and Commissioning Manager - Property Management
Spencer Payne, Service Manager (Business Intelligence)
Steve Smith, Assistant Director - Commissioning Support Unit

Others County Councillors

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property
Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Economy and Place

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety). Apologies were also received from Barnaby Briggs and Sarah Duxbury.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair informed the Panel of the passing of Kieran Amos, former Chief Fire Officer with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. The Chair said Kieran Amos was a true gentleman who would have stayed in contact with the Committee members, and would be missed by the Council and Fire and Rescue Service. The Chair sent his sympathies to his family and friends on behalf of the Committee.

Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) said Kieran Amos was a larger than life character, full of life and charisma, who had served in the fire service for 32 years. Not only would he be missed at Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service, but he would be missed by colleagues nationally.

Councillor Boad said she had found the tributes to Kieran Amos at Full Council the previous day to be very moving.

Councillor Butlin said he had been present when Kieran Amos was interviewed for the role of Chief Fire Officer and said he knew immediately that he was the right man for the job. Councillor Butlin said Kieran Amos had been one of the most likeable people that had ever been interviewed, and fully understood the Warwickshire way and was a great advocate for the county. He said he would be greatly missed.

Councillor Singh Birdi said that just before his retirement, Kieran Amos had approached him at an event and said the Fire Service needed to raise £5,000 to supply new uniforms for crew members taking part in marches. Councillor Singh Birdi made some enquiries and was able to raise some money, but when he next spoke to Kieran Amos he found he had managed to raise almost all of the £5,000 himself. Councillor Singh Birdi said Kieran Amos did not need to raise the money personally, but felt he had a duty to do so.

Members stood for a minute's silence in memory of Kieran Amos.

The Chair introduced members to Andy Carswell, who had just joined Warwickshire County Council as its new Democratic Services Officer and would be supporting the Committee at future meetings. The Chair thanked the previous support officer, John Cole, stating he had been very supportive and an excellent officer for the Committee.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 September 2021 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

Councillor Boad noted the discussions on fires at industrial sites at the previous meeting and asked if there was an update on this. Ben Brook said it was a national issue and since the last meeting there had been an increase in the number of risk-based assessments being undertaken. There had initially been 10,000 businesses due for an inspection and this had now risen to around 35,000. Ben Brook said there were 12 fire safety officers who could conduct the assessments in full, but over a 12 month period they would only be able to make 600 such inspections. The possibility of training operational crew members to assist with inspections was being investigated. Councillor Boad said she had seen some information on this on social media and hoped businesses had also seen it. The Chair suggested it may be possible for information to be circulated to businesses to help them.

4. Work Programme

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the updated 2021/22 Work Programme, as set out in the report, and notes the scheduled future meeting dates.

5. Quarter 2 Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report (April 2021 to September 2021)

Rob Powell (Strategic Director for Resources) introduced the report and stated that performance had remained strong and robust throughout the Covid pandemic. He said that of the 16 Key Business Measures of relevance to the Committee, nine were on track and six were not; of the six that were not, three related to best use of resources. Rob Powell reminded members that one of the KBMs was a target of having no fire-related deaths or injuries, which was acknowledged as being a difficult target to reach but an appropriate one. Of the KBMs not on target, Rob Powell stated that these related chiefly to capital expenditure. These had been caused due to interest rates and supply chain issues and expenditure on other projects locally, such as HS2 and preparation for the 2022 Commonwealth Games. Rob Powell said these KBMs were unlikely to improve in the short term. It was noted another off-target KBM related to the referral of complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Rob Powell said this followed a national pattern as there had been an increased demand for this following on from the Covid pandemic, and said he was confident this target would be met by the end of the year. It was noted that 89 per cent of revenue savings were on target to be met, which Rob Powell stated still represented a strong performance in spite of it being off target.

Members were told there had been a significant improvement in terms of the shortfall on the dedicated school grant and this was now on track to be met, although Rob Powell said there was still the possibility of volatility relating to this KBM. Rob Powell said there had been very high levels of customer satisfaction with the contact centre, which was in spite of a high increase in demand and increased complexities of some of the issues being dealt with. He said he had recently gone to the customer contact centre in Bedworth and seen for himself the high level of support being provided to residents.

Rob Powell said the Member Working Group was working on the development and leadership framework, regarding the refresh of the Council Plan. This was likely to be finalised during the next quarter.

Councillor Watson noted the resource pressures on the Fire and Rescue Service, particularly regarding the fire risk assessors as this had been raised earlier in the meeting. He asked if there were any external factors or challenges that could affect the figures in the report or impact on the service that could be provided. Ben Brook said the biggest challenge currently was delivery of fire safety interventions. There was a requirement for more fully trained fire safety officers; however Ben Brook explained that it took two years for the training to be completed in full.

The Chair asked for the Committee's thanks for the report to be passed back to the officers who had prepared it.

6. Estates Master Planning (EMP)

Martin Lewis (Re-Enabling Services Manager) introduced the item and began by explaining the system of agile working and new methods of working had begun to be re-examined 18 months ago. The Covid pandemic had then hit and this was used as an additional opportunity to trial new ways of working and broaden the scope of the Estates Masterplan. The programme had been run since July and had provided important information in terms of how teams wanted to work, and how to embed cultural and behavioural changes. Martin Lewis said the first stage of the Estates Masterplan would focus on Shire Hall and a pilot scheme would be introduced here first before looking at how the proposals would affect other office spaces. Simon Lewis (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Property Management) said the dynamics of different teams would change how the office buildings were used. It was important to understand how teams wanted to use the buildings before any cultural changes were implemented. The Chair said he was pleased that consideration was being given to how staff wanted to work, as this was an important point in terms of the Masterplan.

Councillor Boad said she was surprised the number of staff wanting to return to the office was low, as compared to a year ago a significant number of staff had expressed a preference for wanting to return to office working. She asked if any trends had been identified from different teams. She gave the example of social workers being an appropriate team to have located together as it was a team that could benefit from collaborative working, particularly in light of recent tragic cases that had been covered in the national media. She added some staff members may have missed the spontaneity of having one to one catch ups with colleagues. Martin Lewis said different teams were identified to test different ways of working, and in teams where a preference for home working had been identified then they had been supplied with the technology to allow them to do this.

Responding to a question from Councillor Tromans, Martin Lewis said collaborations meant different things to different teams. For example some teams would regard face to face meetings to discuss a confidential matter as collaborative whereas others would use technology to hold a hybrid meeting and consider that as collaborative. Simon Lewis added that workspace utilisation would vary from team to team; in some cases, 40 per cent of spaces being used might be appropriate whereas in other teams, such as in the call centre, 100 per cent utilisation would be anticipated. It was possible for a workspace to have more than 100 per cent utilisation if more than one person used it on any given day.

Rob Powell said there had been variations in the number of people coming into the office. Prior to the recent implementation of Plan B, numbers had been starting to increase. Rob Powell said each team had set its own agile working principles, and noting the earlier example given of the social care team said this was one that had been working together in the office more regularly than other teams might. Rob Powell added that office space had been available throughout the pandemic and some staff had been coming in on a regular basis, either because they did not have the physical space to work from home or for mental wellbeing reasons. Virtual working had been successful and consideration was being given to how this could be extended for those who wanted to continue working virtually from home.

Councillor Kaur (Portfolio Holder for Economy and Place) said check-in surveys had been taking place as part of the people strategy, which had helped gain insight into people's work/life balance. The success of agile working had increased as a result. She added the mechanisms were in place to allow staff to switch between home working and being in an office environment. Councillor Butlin said it was important for the Council to be confident that any repurposing of office buildings was done in the right way before it committed to any capital spending. He noted that a number of people had begun returning to office working, highlighting the number of people who had evacuated from the building after a fire alarm sounded during the May Cabinet meeting.

Councillor Singh Birdi stated his belief Members and officers would now struggle without the use of technology and it would be important going forward, noting there had initially been opposition to it. He asked if hybrid meeting rooms could be made available to Members for them to hold, for example, meetings with their constituents. Martin Lewis said this was being investigated and meeting rooms could be made available in other office buildings and not just Shire Hall.

Councillor Watson said although it was important to allow staff the opportunity to work from home if they wished, he noted that in one of the staff surveys only five per cent of respondents said they were more productive when working from home. Councillor Watson said it was important to take into account value for money and for home working not to be an excuse to not work. The Chair accepted this point, and added that home working meant fewer car journeys and this would help the Council achieve its net zero carbon emission challenge.

Rob Powell said there had been two cohorts of graduates through the LGA scheme who had taken up their placements during the pandemic. He said their contributions had been phenomenal, noting that of the first cohort one had won a national award and another had received an offer of a permanent job placement with the Council. Regarding the use of office space Rob Powell said final discussions were starting to conclude and there was an idea of the direction that would be taken, but there was still some uncertainty. He stressed the importance of taking time to finalise this plan, as the correct short-term solution could cause problems in the medium to long term. Regarding productivity, Rob Powell said there was anecdotal evidence to suggest an increase in productivity from home working and the performance indicators would seem to confirm this. Responding to a question from Councillor Roberts, Rob Powell said staff had used home working as a way of working more flexibly. He said staff with childcare responsibilities might find their personal circumstances meant it was better for them to work earlier in the mornings or later in the evenings, and he said this was the case for him.

The Chair asked for the Committee's congratulations to go to the graduates that Rob Powell had mentioned.

7. Update on the Voice of Warwickshire Residents' Panel

Spencer Payne (Service Manager, Business Intelligence) introduced the report and reminded members of the background to the item. There had been a lengthy recruitment process for potential members of the Residents' Panel and an initial 800 applications. Following this some gaps had been identified that prevented the Panel being truly reflective of Warwickshire as a whole, such as certain age groups, ethnicities and geographical location. There had been a more focused recruitment process to facilitate this and there were now 890 recruits. Members' attention was drawn to Appendix 1 of the report, which gave a breakdown of the potential members of the Panel. Spencer Payne said initial contacts would be made with those who had expressed an interest in the new year to explain more about the work of the Panel and the pilot work programme. The planned pilot exercise would then feed into a report that would come back to the Committee towards the end of next year.

Responding from a question from the Chair, Spencer Payne said elected Members in underrepresented areas had been contacted asking to help push the message out about the Panel. Relevant stakeholders and also been contacted and posts had been made on community groups' social media pages in the relevant localities. Regard had also been given to ensure would-be recruits were residents and not members of any pressure or campaign groups, which could distort the views being put forward by the Panel. Rob Powell said another recruitment drive was likely to take place in the new year, taking into account the groups that were still underrepresented.

Responding to a question from Councillor Roberts, Spencer Payne said the benchmark figures were generally within 2-3 per cent of what one would expect to see represented. Councillor Boad said asking focus groups for their input into recruitment would be unlikely to work, as the final Panel would effectively be a single focus group. Councillor Phillips suggested contacting higher education colleges and Neighbourhood Watch groups might be a way of potentially recruiting new members. Spencer Payne said every Sixth Form and further education college had been contacted, in addition to children's centres as they were used by young families.

Responding to a question from Councillor Singh Birdi, Spencer Payne said the ethnicity definitions used in the survey followed standard national guidelines. He said it was possible to use census data to potentially target demographic areas and groups but this information was now ten years old and the results of the 2021 census would not be available until March.

Councillor Tromans said contacting schools and colleges may not be that useful as only a handful of students attending would have turned 18 and thus be eligible to be on the Panel. He suggested a ready to go Facebook poster could be provided to all elected members in North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth, for them to post in relevant local community groups.

Responding to a question from Councillor Butlin, Spencer Payne said no information had been requested from respondents that related directly to their income/economic status. However they had been asked questions such as whether they were employed, unemployed or self-employed, and whether they owned their home, rented, or lived with parents/a family member.

8. Any Urgent Matters

There were none.

The meeting rose at 15:18

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Chair