

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 23 February 2022

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

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 Andy Jenns, Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation
Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Economy and Place

Officers

Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Democratic Services Officer
Jan Cumming, Senior Solicitor and Team Leader, Corporate and Commercial Team
Rebecca Murphy, Service Manager, Business & Customer Support – Resources & Communities
Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources
Sarah Stear, Assistant Director, Business and Customer Services
Kate Sullivan, Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance
Rich Thomas, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD

1. General

(1) Apologies

There were none.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 December 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 that Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) had recently been appointed as Joint Climate Change Lead for the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC). She stated that this reflected positively on Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS). She asked what the Chief Fire Officer hoped to achieve in this role.

Ben Brook stated that the NFCC provided a voice for fire services nationally. It had established an Environment, Sustainability, and Climate Change workstream which would seek to develop a national 'toolkit' resource for fire and rescue services, leading to an improved understanding of the impacts of climate change and measures to reduce emissions.

In response to Councillor Boad, Councillor Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety) stated that it was positive that Warwickshire had a national profile in the response to climate change. WFRS was recognised as an exemplar to other fire and rescue services. He highlighted the progress made by WFRS, including utilisation of electric vehicles and replacement of diesel pumps. There were opportunities to learn from good practice elsewhere. The introduction of a national toolkit would support inspection processes, enabling fire and rescue services to be evaluated based upon a common approach to tackling climate change and lowering emissions.

4. Our People Strategy - Year 2 Plan

Rich Thomas (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD) introduced the report, stating that the Our People Strategy had been refreshed in 2020 and endorsed by the Staff and Pensions Committee following input from the Resources and Fire & Rescue OSC. It would enable progress to be made towards the vision of making WCC a great place to work where diverse and talented people are enabled to be at their best. He stated that, to meet this vision, the organisation would

need to attract, recruit, motivate and develop the diversity of talent required to deliver the objectives of the Council Plan.

In response to Councillor Watson, Rich Thomas advised that, predominantly, apprentices' pay was set marginally higher than the minimum apprentice pay rate. In future, it was proposed to raise apprentices' pay to the national minimum wage. This would help to attract candidates. He advised that there was a good level of interest in higher-level apprenticeships; however, there was less interest in lower-level apprenticeships where the Council was competing with other employers. The measures proposed would make WCC more attractive as a prospective employer to school leavers.

In response to Councillor Watson, Rich Thomas advised that 'claw back' clauses were in place within contracts where there was significant investment in a trainee, such as sponsorship for a professional qualification. In these circumstances, if an individual chose to leave the organisation prematurely, they would need to reimburse the Authority.

In response to Councillor Roberts, Rich Thomas advised that attention had been given to expanding Our People values and cultures to those indirectly employed by the Council, principally within the social care environment. Liaison had been coordinated by the People Directorate during the past 12 months, providing advice on matters related to the impact of COVID-19 such as vaccination take-up.

In response to Councillor Roberts, Rich Thomas advised that specific differentials applied between the National Living Wage and Real Living Wage; changes to government policy meant that the gap between the two had decreased. He advised that, by adopting the Real Living Wage, an employer was obliged to devolve control of its pay policy to an alternative party. The Real Living Wage was reset annually each November, meaning that an employer had six months to implement the required pay award. However, he advised that the merits of the Real Living Wage were being considered within the People Directorate as part of the Poverty Strategy.

Councillor Roberts stated that apprentices between the ages of 18 and 23 were often paid substantially less than other employees. He highlighted the advantages of aligning pay for this cohort to a level closer to the Real Living Wage. This would attract capable individuals and offset financial pressures associated with increased costs of living.

Councillor Tromans praised the comprehensiveness of the report and presentation. However, he commented that some of the assertions within the presentation were not substantiated by metrics. He suggested that these be included in future. He drew attention to some of the technical language within the Strategy and suggested that information be presented in terms more readily understandable to a layperson. He asked what specific measures were in place to embed a highly effective workplace culture.

Rich Thomas noted these comments which would inform future presentations. He advised that input had been sought from employees as part of the Employer Value Proposition. Their stories and experience of working for the Authority were used extensively within recruitment literature and on social media.

Councillor Birdi praised the effectiveness of the Apprenticeship Scheme to bring talented individuals into the organisation. He stated that there was a need to compete with the private

sector where more appealing salaries were often on offer. To do so, it was necessary to present an attractive package to prospective employees which included a clear career path and high standard of personal development.

Councillor Boad highlighted the importance of training to enable staff to make a positive difference to communities and enact a culture of professionalism.

Councillor Daniell highlighted the advantages of personality assessments to support recruitment and make good appointments. He commented that high staff turnover was not necessarily a serious problem provided quality talent could be retained; maintaining high standards would support continued recruitment of capable individuals.

Rich Thomas advised that personality assessments were utilised when making senior level appointments; however, this approach was not used more widely within the organisation. He stated that, by taking the right approach to development of a capable workforce, value could be added to the wider community should staff chose to move on.

In response to Councillor Spencer, Rich Thomas advised that exit interviews were undertaken and the information gathered was utilised to assess organisational performance. He stated that this process was also supported by engagement with current employees, facilitating a better understanding of the workforce and approaches to retain talented personnel.

The Chair stated that staff was the organisation's greatest asset, as exemplified by the dedicated response of highways officers during the recent heavy storms.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the work in the review of Our People Strategy and the proposed delivery priorities to inform the development of the Our People Strategy Delivery Plan for 2022/23.

5. WFRS HMICFRS Inspection Report

Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) provided a verbal report, stating that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) had undertaken an eight-week virtual inspection of Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) between March and April 2021. The inspection examined activities across the organisation with a focus on efficiency, effectiveness, and people.

Ben Brook advised that the inspection report had recently been published. He outlined the headline findings, stating that WFRS received three causes of concern within the areas of Prevention; Protection; and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The report also identified 41 areas for improvement. He stated that WFRS was committed to making the required improvements. An Action Plan had been developed to address the findings of the inspection; significant progress had already been made.

Ben Brook reported that delivery of the Action Plan would be enabled by means of a budgetary allocation of £775,000 for Year One of the Plan, and the same amount for Year Two.

Ben Brook advised that a re-inspection had occurred in February 2022. To date, verbal feedback had been received; a detailed assessment was expected in due course. However, HMICFRS indicated that WFRS had made good progress, particularly in Prevention. He emphasised that there was more work to do. Progress would be reported to the Integrated Risk Management Assurance Panel (IRMP). A further reinspection with a focus on Protection was scheduled in Autumn 2022. The next full inspection was likely to take place in early 2023.

The Chair expressed his appreciation for the efforts made in response to the inspection, stating that the Committee had confidence in the work of WFRS.

In response to Councillor Boad, Ben Brook advised that nationally, each fire and rescue service was inspected every two years. In cases where a cause of concern had been found, this was revised to an inspection every six months. Once causes of concern had been addressed, the inspection regime was likely to abate.

Councillor Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety) stated that substantial investment had been made to support delivery of the Action Plan. The IRMP Assurance Panel had expanded its remit in response to the findings of the Inspectorate; HMICFRS representatives had been invited to meetings to provide additional detail and commentary. He advised that the inspection had highlighted several areas where WFRS had performed well, such as partnership working (particularly with other blue light services) and the response to recent critical incidents. He commented that virtual inspections were different in character to physical inspections, this could account for some of the findings. He emphasised that the findings of the Inspectorate would be given full attention.

The Chair proposed that the Committee note the Inspection Report, as well as members' concerns relating to the frequency of inspections which placed a burden on WFRS. He proposed that a letter be produced from the Committee to HMICFRS registering these concerns.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the HMICFRS Inspection Report and writes to the Inspectorate to highlight the additional demands placed on WFRS by the regularity of inspections.

6. School Admissions Process Improvements

Sarah Stear (Assistant Director, Business & Customer Services) introduced the report, stating that liaison with Education colleagues had informed process improvements. The report provided details of progress made to date; there was still work to be done.

Sarah Stear advised that, in 2020, the Schools Admissions Service was under pressure with significant additional demands being placed on the Team. It was resolved that a review of processes, systems, resources, and capacity would support service delivery.

Rebecca Murphy (Service Manager, Business and Customer Support) provided an overview of measures to support improvement, stating that staff numbers had been temporarily increased to manage ongoing demand and deliver the required changes. A consultation was underway on a new operating model to address issues around roles, responsibilities, and capacity. Additional staff

training had been provided to ensure that knowledge was shared across teams. Measures to improve the customer experience for families had proved to be effective.

Rebecca Murphy reported that a strong working relationship was in place with Education colleagues to manage risks, leading to a reduction in the number of children not on the school roll. By working with parents to understand their priorities, it had been possible to make improvements leading to better communication and a reduction in the number of calls and emails being received. She advised that there was still work to be done, including improvements to the functionality of the Parent Portal which provides a digital interface between parents and WCC for school-related matters.

The Chair stated that the report outlined some areas of concern. It was encouraging that action was being taken to address shortcomings in the system. He suggested that an update be provided to the Committee in six months' time. It was agreed that this be added to the Work Programme.

Councillor Watson highlighted the wider environmental and financial implications of schools admissions processes, stating that home-to-school costs for the Council were significant, with some avoidable journeys being made.

Councillor Boad stated that schools admissions was a prominent point of interaction between residents and the Authority. It was important to ensure that it was a positive experience to instil confidence in the quality of Council services. She praised the initiative to provide advanced notification if it had not been possible to offer a school place, this would help to reassure parents during a stressful time.

Councillor Spencer stated that the initiative to contact parents who had not been successful in securing a school place for their child was positive. However, it was important to ensure that measures were in place to provide reassurance and a timescale for when a placement would be made available.

The initiative was widely praised as a positive intervention. Members would revisit the subject in six months' time.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

- i. Notes the progress made on improvements to the Schools Admissions Service;
- ii. Endorses the direction of travel set out for further work; and
- iii. Requests that a progress update be provided in six months' time.

7. Quarter 3 Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report

Sarah Stear (Assistant Director, Business & Customer Services) introduced the report, stating that 50% of the Key Business Measures (KBM) within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were judged to be 'on track'. She highlighted areas where performance had been good, including an increase in the number of social media followers, continued satisfaction with the Customer Service Centre, and a strong employee engagement score.

Sarah Stear highlighted the areas where improvements could be made, including an increased number of adverse decisions against the Council by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Work in this area has been impacted by the Pandemic; a plan of action was in place.

In response to Councillor Tromans, Rob Powell (Strategic Director for Resources) advised that Data Subject Access Requests (DSARs) often related to complex and sensitive cases that required detailed work to resolve. Additional resources had been allocated to address the backlog and a regular dialogue was in place with the ICO. The ICO has expressed satisfaction with the measures in place; however, detailed work was required which would take time to accomplish.

Resolved:

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

8. Work Programme

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the updated 2021/22 Work Programme, subject to inclusion of an update on School Admissions Process Improvements and notes the scheduled future meeting dates.

9. Any Urgent Matters

There were none.

The meeting rose at 15:25.

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Chair