

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 8 June 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

Officers

Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources
Benjamin Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Jan Cumming, Senior Solicitor and Team Leader

Others Present

1. General

The Chair welcomed Paul Whitaker of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) to the meeting, who was attending as a Response Support Officer.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Pete Gilbert and Sarah Duxbury.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meetings

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 23 February 2022 and 15 May 2022 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

There were no questions for portfolio holders.

4. Approach to Levelling Up

Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) introduced the item and reminded members that levelling up was a key national priority. A lot of work had already begun in Warwickshire; the Council Plan, which had been approved in February, had a strong emphasis on levelling up, as did the Delivery Plan, which had been approved in May. Work with partner agencies was now underway to shape a countywide approach to Levelling Up which would be presented to Cabinet for approval in July.

Rob Powell said the Levelling Up White Paper had four objectives: to boost productivity, pay and living standards by growing the private sector; improve public services and spread opportunities, particularly in places where they were weakest; restore a sense of community and local pride; and to empower local leaders and communities. Additionally there were 12 national missions to help achieve these objectives; one of these was devolution. There would be a national measurement and accountability framework to monitor achievement of the objectives. The notion of levelling up was a long-term aim towards 2030, but Rob Powell said there should be a longer focus beyond then. The emerging countywide approach envisaged a dual focus on specific communities of place and communities of interest (particular cohorts and groups of people where levelling up would be most relevant) for levelling up.

The Levelling Up approach to Warwickshire was due to be discussed at July's Cabinet. This aimed to make sense of the national Levelling Up missions and policy for Warwickshire; to share the Council's commitment to Levelling up with its communities; to complement everyone's organisational plans and strategies; to influence current and future strategies; to recognise and build on the power of Warwickshire's communities, partnerships, networks, and forums; and to inform the future collective work on devolution. Rob Powell said this was not intended to supersede any existing plans or strategies, but would complement them and help influence future strategies. The approach has been shaped through engagement with key partner organisations,

and would identify targeted places, cohorts and priorities for levelling up that affected the whole county or certain places, including those at a hyper-local level.

Of the 12 national missions, four had been identified as being particularly relevant to the scope of the Committee. These were reducing crime; securing a devolution deal through a long-term financial settlement; improving residents' pride in place and narrowing the gap between the top and bottom performing areas; and increasing investment and stimulating growth in research and development.

Members' attention was drawn towards the various existing strategies and areas of work and how they would link in the Levelling Up programme, and what funding streams were available. Rob Powell reminded members that £1million had been distributed to address post-Covid inequalities through the Social Impact Fund and up to £140million was available via the Warwickshire Recovery and Investment Fund. Additionally the Warwickshire Property and Development Group had a key role in the regeneration of town centres and provision of housing and commercial premises.

Six principles for levelling up had been identified. The first of these was to take a holistic approach and involve partner organisations. Rob Powell said 30 representatives of WCC and partner groups had been involved in a workshop to shape the countywide Levelling Up programme the previous day. The second principle was to take a long-term approach and improve things for future generations. Rob Powell said although a long-term vision was required, the Council would also seek to take advantage of quick wins where appropriate. The third principle was to identify root causes of issues, particularly the complex ones that created longstanding inequalities within communities. Rob Powell said in some cases problems had existing for a number of years as the root causes had not been adequately addressed. The fourth principle was to use the strengths of individuals, communities, places and interest groups to improve their quality of life, whilst not holding back other places or groups. The fifth principle was to use data to monitor progress and evolve the approach to levelling up. The final principle was to prioritise the communities of place and communities of interest, which had been identified through the use of data, that needed the most support. Rob Powell said it was important to acknowledge there was no one size fits all approach to levelling up across the county.

A 'working definition' of what levelling up meant for Warwickshire had been created and four pillars to support it had been identified. These were increasing opportunities and social mobility; reducing disparities; building community power; and creating sustainable futures. Members were shown a diagram outlining how the 12 missions fitted in with each of the four pillars. Rob Powell gave examples of disparities in the amount of good affordable housing, educational attainment, gross disposable household income and healthy life expectancy, as well as stimulating economic growth, as areas the Levelling Up approach hoped to address.

Members were told the Voice of Warwickshire residents' panel had taken part in an exercise specifically relating to levelling up, and there had been around 500 responses. Initial analysis showed strong support for the four aspects of the levelling up definition for Warwickshire. The panel had identified access to health provision, levels of safety and the quality of high streets as its priorities for improvement. In addition to parks and open spaces, the panel had however also identified levels of safety as one of the three things that made them proud to live in their local area. The panel considered the three most important things for a great place to live as being parks and

outdoor spaces, shops and local facilities and education provision/schools. Levels of pride in local area were typically lower in Nuneaton and Bedworth than elsewhere.

Rob Powell said there needed to be a focus on prioritising places where action was needed, while avoiding a one size fits all approach, particularly considering areas in the bottom two deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Councillor Caroline Phillips said she welcomed the report, but said its contents reflected what had been known for some time. She said she represented a ward in Nuneaton which had fallen into a state of disrepair. She said there were some care homes specialising in care for those in wheelchairs, but there were no dropped kerbs in the vicinity that allowed residents to get around more easily. She said pavements were broken and only patchwork repairs had been made to roads, and this meant it was hard to have pride in the community or a sense of belonging. Councillor Phillips said drug dealing was rife due to people coming out of prison and reoffending, and lack of opportunities for young people. As well as this there were long waiting lists for housing. The Chair said he had used some of his delegated budget to install dropped kerbs; Councillor Phillips said she had done the same but the problem was so bad she was unable to resolve the issue by herself. Rob Powell said some of these issues were long standing, which demonstrated why it was important to work with partner agencies to examine the root causes.

Councillor Robert Tromans said it was important that the correct and most up-to-date data was used when considering which areas to prioritise. He said he agreed with the four key elements of levelling up and stressed the importance of working with partner agencies. He said there had been examples of failing schools across the county, and these had direct consequences for children's opportunities. It was important to make early interventions to stop this happening, and to give officers the provisions to do so. Councillor Tromans said although the programme was aimed towards 2030, it was important to think of the project as urgent rather than long-term.

Councillor Sarah Boad questioned if the Levelling Up Approach would work, citing examples of previous projects such as the Single Regeneration Budget and the Bus Service Improvement Plan that in her opinion had not delivered on their promises. She also queried how the Council would be able to assist schools to level up educational attainment when its involvement was diminishing due to the government's plan to convert all schools to academies by 2030.

Councillor Sue Markham said although it was important for the exercise to be data driven, the figures should be used properly. Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi said census data could be used to help provide a better quality of data. For example someone of the Sikh religion would simply be identified by their ethnicity rather than their religion. Councillor Singh Birdi said he was concerned certain community groups would appear to be invisible if the data was used incorrectly. Councillor Piers Daniell said it was important the Levelling Up Approach did not become a political issue. He suggested grouping targets into short, medium and long-term initiatives to help see the benefits of the programme and what was being achieved.

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder, Finance and Property) said it was known where the pockets of deprivation were. Although steps had been taken to tackle this previously, it had not been done for some time. Councillor Butlin said the concept of levelling up varied across the county; for example, in rural areas it might be to reduce isolation, whereas in the former mining areas in the north of the county it could be the lack of opportunities. He agreed with the concerns

raised at using the data correctly, noting that although Nuneaton had shown a record increase in GDP this was because it had come from a record low.

Following a suggestion from Councillor Boad, it was agreed to use the Camp Hill community supermarket as a case study example of something that had worked well in terms of levelling up.

Members agreed the comments they wanted to record and go forward to Cabinet related to using the correct data ranges; make use of quick wins where appropriate; divide targets into short, medium and long term; and highlighting the importance of investment.

The Chair said the item should be added to the work programme and brought back to the Committee in six months' time.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the report and asks Cabinet to consider the following:

- Ensure the most up-to-date data ranges are used when prioritising work
- Divide targets into short, medium and long term
- Make use of quick wins where appropriate
- Highlight the importance of investment

5. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service Improvements

Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) introduced the item and reminded members of the outcomes of recent inspections carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), which recorded three causes of concern and 41 areas for improvement. The first cause of concern related to Prevention and the lack of a formal Prevention, Protection and Response Strategy. Ben Brook said one had been drafted and gone to Cabinet, and would shortly be going out to consultation. The data sets included in the strategy consisted of seven that looked at historical data and the remaining 10 were future focused. Since the 2021 inspections there had been six significant incidents involving fatalities by fire that had enabled serious fire reviews to take place, which had identified issues that have been worked on with partner agencies. Ben Brook said that HMICFRS had stated in its February 2022 reinspection that once the strategy had been formally adopted and the automated system for Safe and Wells put in place then the cause of concern relating to prevention could be discharged.

In relation to Protection, Ben Brook said a new digital ICT system was required. WFRS was following due diligence through the procurement process to enable this to take place. Ben Brook said although good progress was made with this, it was likely the new system would not be in place until September or October 2023. Since the initial inspection it had been established there were 33,000 regulated commercial premises in Warwickshire that are now on the Risk Based Inspection Programme. Ben Brook told the Committee a recruitment and training process was taking place, but reminded members that it took two years to fully train a new fire protection officer.

In relation to equality, diversity and inclusion, Ben Brook said the staff engagement network had been relaunched to understand from staff how engagement could be improved. Regular appraisals were taking place which include a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion. Ben Brook said he was now chair of the newly-established EDI group to ensure quick decision making. Consideration

was being given to how to address breaches of WFRS's values. The Committee was told some breaches had resulted in disciplinary action being taken, with the results of some of these being appealed.

It had been proposed in the Fire Reform White Paper to have a firefighters' oath and as a result of this consideration was being given to how WFRS's behaviours, values and ethics could be incorporated into employees' contracts. A dignity at work review was taking place as part of the Warwickshire County Council property strategy to ensure all WFRS-owned properties had the correct facilities, and to ensure work was taken to address any issues. Ben Brook said a reinspection relating to Protection was due to take place in the autumn and a full reinspection was planned for spring 2023.

Members said the update was positive, and reiterated that WFRS had the continued support of the Committee.

6. Fire Reform White Paper

Ben Brook introduced the item and explained the Fire Reform White Paper had been published on 18 May, having been anticipated for several months. There was now a consultation period leading up to 26 July, and it was possible the outcomes of the White Paper and consultation would lead to changes in legislation. There had been no White Papers relating to reform of the Fire Service since 2003, which had led to the implementation of the Fire and Rescue Act 2004.

The White Paper focused on the three topics of People, Professionalism and Governance. The section on People included guidance on how pay for Fire and Rescue Services personnel was set, which was likely to impact on budgets. There had also been proposals to introduce direct entry to certain positions above that of a firefighter, such as station or area manager.

Under Professionalism it had been proposed to establish a firefighters' college, in a similar manner to the College of Policing, and also a firefighters' oath. Regarding Governance, three proposals had been put forward relating to the future governance of fire and rescue services with a view to potentially scrapping the existing executive committee system. These were: the creation of the post of Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner; the service being governed by an elected Mayor; or being governed by a Council Leader. The Governance section of the White Paper also referred to a greater requirement for transparency regarding budgets. Ben Brook said responses to the consultation were through a series of questions and there was little room to add individual comments. He said he was drafting a response on behalf of the wider Fire Authority and it was not intended for WFRS to submit their own response.

The Chair asked if members wanted to make any comments to go towards the consultation on behalf of the Committee. Councillor Caroline Phillips said the proposed direct entries could work, but it was important that equal opportunities to apply should exist. For example there could be people interesting in applying who had the required skillset but not the experience of working within the fire service. Members agreed there should be multiple pathways available to give job opportunities to people from outside the fire service, as it gave people more career change opportunities. Councillor Andy Crump said it was important to be flexible around recruitment and retention of staff, noting that WFRS was losing staff to other employers.

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety) said he and Ben Brook had recently attended a meeting where the relevant Minister had stated their belief there were too many fire authorities. Councillor Crump stated his belief it was necessary for Warwickshire to have its own fire and rescue service due to the unique nature of the county, and stated other emergency services in the area were not reaching call-outs as promptly as might be required due to it being a more centralised service. He also stated his belief the inspection process was not always as efficient as it could be, and communication had been sent to HMICFRS indicating this. Councillor Crump said he remained to be convinced as to the merits of the creation of the post of Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and said he believed the existing committee setup was best for Warwickshire. He also raised concerns at proposals to ring-fence certain funding, and how this would be monitored by external auditors.

7. Work Programme

Members agreed they would like an update on the Levelling Up programme to be brought to the December meeting. The contents of the work programme was noted.

8. Any Urgent Matters

There were no other urgent matters for discussion.

The meeting rose at 3.21pm

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Chair