

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 13 September 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Piers Daniell
Councillor Sarah Feeney
Councillor Wallace Redford
Councillor Will Roberts
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Robert Tromans
Councillor Peter Gilbert

Officers

Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Charles Barlow, Delivery Lead - Localities
Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Karina Bird, Trainee Solicitor
Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Jan Cumming, Senior Solicitor and Team Leader
Andrew Felton, Director of Finance
Chris Norton, Head of Investments, Audit and Risk
Emily Reaney, Lead Commissioner - Treasury and Investments
Louise Richards, Partnerships Projects Co-ordinator
Steve Smith, Director of Commissioning Support Unit

Others Present

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder - Finance and Property)
Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder - Environment, Climate and Culture)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Andy Crump, Yousef Dahmash, Rik Spencer and

Martin Watson. Councillor Pete Gilbert was attending as a substitute for Councillor Spencer. Councillor Sarah Boad had also sent apologies as she was attending another meeting and would be late for the start.

Apologies were also received from Sarah Duxbury. Jan Cumming was attending as legal advisor in her place.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair informed members that a report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) regarding Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service had been published that morning, and he was using his discretion to allow Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) to update the Committee on its findings. Ben Brook said he wished to place on record his thanks to the staff at WFRS who had worked hard to make improvements. He said the inspection report noted improvements had been made in almost all areas, with significant improvements being made in some. In particular, improvements to community risk management and the response to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion had been noted.

Ben Brook reminded members that three causes for concern had been identified during the 2021/22 inspection, and two of these had now been closed. The number of areas for improvement had reduced from 41 to 26. One notable area of good practice that could be shared with other fire and rescue services had now been identified. Ben Brook said although good progress had been made, more improvements were needed. A programme of work was being created to facilitate this.

The Chair stated he was giving a vote of thanks to Ben Brook and WFRS for the positive direction of travel that had been noted in the inspection report.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Public Question Time

There were no questions from members of the public.

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

There were no questions to Portfolio Holders.

4. Sustainable Futures Strategy

The item was introduced by Steve Smith (Director, Commissioning Support Unit). He reminded members the draft strategy had been reviewed by Cabinet in October before an extensive period of public engagement. Partners from industry, academia and the public sector had also been

consulted on and the findings from this had gone to the June Cabinet meeting. The newest draft was now being reviewed by all four of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees before being finalised by November.

Responding to questions raised by Councillor Will Roberts in relation to carbon offsetting and the timelines for it, Steve Smith said an offsetting strategy was still in the process of being created and several different scenarios being analysed. An adaptations officer had been appointed to assist with this. A biodiversity and woodlands strategy was also being created, which would tie in with the work on green spaces. Steve Smith said there was an aim to plant a tree for every resident of Warwickshire; however, Councillor Will Roberts said mature trees would be able to provide a greater level of carbon offsetting compared to one that had been newly planted. Councillor Heather Timms said the offsetting plan was due to be implemented during 2023/24, and this would be done jointly with Coventry and Solihull Councils. She added it would be helpful if members were able to attend a meeting with the Council's ecology experts to talk about how this strategy would be achieved.

Members noted an additional £3.29million had been awarded to the Council from the government towards electric vehicle charging points, and said this was welcomed. Councillor Rob Tromans said he had had conversations with representatives from the National Grid, who had expressed frustration that new local developments often lacked the infrastructure to provide charging points, and in some cases they could not be installed at neighbouring properties. He asked if the planning authorities at borough and district level were able to ask for a Section 106 agreement relating to improved infrastructure to provide additional charging points, as often the building contractors would not put them in as a matter of course. Steve Smith said discussions were taking place with the National Grid, who had been one of the consultees during the earlier engagement exercise. It was accepted that the number of charging points was not equal across the county. Councillor Sarah Feeney said in Oxfordshire some charging points had been installed directly into the ground, removing the need for unsightly charging boxes. Councillor Heather Timms said the transport team were prioritising how charging points might be installed in older areas of terraced houses which were not designed with cars in mind. Steve Smith said the transport team were also developing their own decarbonisation plan.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Sarah Feeney regarding care workers, Steve Smith said the Council wanted to engage with care providers that contributed to the Council's overall net zero carbon targets. However the Council had to be mindful of not enforcing new policies onto care providers that were not affordable. Councillor Sarah Feeney made the point care workers were low paid and were unlikely to be able to afford an electric car, which would help offset carbon emissions as they would also travel a lot for work. Councillor Sarah Feeney said thought needed to be given to behavioural change more generally and how this would assist with the Council's carbon emission and offsetting targets. Steve Smith said Warwick University had been conducting work on behavioural change, and the Council was taking this into consideration while also having regard for affordability. It was accepted some changes may be harder to implement in more rural areas of the county.

Councillor Sarah Boad said improved and more efficient public transport would help to meet net zero targets. She said buses in Warwickshire were often infrequent and in some cases did not turn up at all, meaning would-be passengers had to wait up to two hours. Councillor Sarah Boad stated her belief there ought to be lobbying of central government requiring statutory guidance on installation of solar panels on new build estates.

Responding to a question from Councillor Tim Sinclair, Steve Smith said the Council was taking into account examples of best practice from elsewhere in considering the development of the strategy.

The Chair said he welcomed the report and the work that had been done on the strategy so far. He said he would like to receive an update at a future meeting on the progress that was being made and asked for an item to be added to the work programme.

Members noted the contents of the report and draft strategy.

5. Quarter 1 Integrated Performance Report

Members were reminded the report covered the first three months of the new financial year.

Councillor Rob Tromans noted that 17 of the key business measures were not on track, which was around a fifth and, in his opinion, a high amount. Steve Smith said some measures had not yet been set or started. This might be because they are only reviewed after six months, or at the end of the financial year. Councillor Rob Tromans asked for more information on the handling of customer complaints. Rob Powell (Executive Director, Resources) said implementation of the online customer service platform had been slightly delayed as there had been some vacancies in the team handling it. The team was now fully staffed. Rob Powell told members a report relating to Ombudsman cases would be considered at Cabinet the following day, and it spoke favourably on the Council's handling of complaints. Councillor Rob Tromans said he was pleased to hear the complaints team was now fully staffed.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sarah Feeney about recruitment of on-call firefighters, Ben Brook said this had been a challenge for the last five years. Historically, on-call firefighters were required to live five minutes from their station, and since the Covid pandemic people had wanted to be less constrained by this requirement. Additionally, people living within five minutes of on-call fire stations were typically of a demographic that made them unsuited to being on-call firefighters. A fuller review of the on-call system was being made.

Councillor Sarah Feeney noted the number of staff sickness days had risen slightly. Rob Powell said these related predominantly to stress and mental health and wellbeing. The majority of service areas had sickness rates in line with national benchmarking, whereas areas with higher rates were due to service-related issues.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sarah Boad regarding the capital programme spending for the Fire and Rescue Service, Ben Brook said much of this was being spent on the new fire training facility.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Treasury Management Update Quarterly Report

The Chair said he was grateful for the work of the finance team for being prudent with the Council's finances.

The item was introduced by Chris Norton (Head of Investments, Audit, Insurance and Risk). He reminded members treasury investments related to ensuring there was sufficient cash available for the Council to use and differed from pension and non-treasury investments. The primary role of treasury investments was to ensure efficiency and security. Interest, inflation and market rates were all taken into account during treasury management, although these were hard to forecast. The Council had looked to diversify its treasury management portfolio into other local authorities, although it could not invest more than £10million per authority.

The current interest rate of 3.69 per cent was lower than the base rate. Fluctuating interest rates meant the Council's treasury management rates would lag behind the real time changes to the base interest rate.

Chris Norton said consideration had been given to an early pre-payment for the Pension Fund. However with fluctuating forecasts a decision was taken not to do this, and it had since been proven to be the correct decision. The Council was also looking to realign its borrowing profile. The Council had paid back historical borrowing of £49million.

Responding to a question from Councillor Tim Sinclair, Chris Norton said the Council worked with an independent treasury advisory company to look at low risk investments and to decide what would be an appropriate amount to invest. Investments relating to equities and the Pension Fund were longer term and would seek a higher return of investment. Poor treasury management could have negative consequences and implications for the Council's overall budget, such as having to increase rates of Council Tax.

Responding to a question from Councillor Rob Tromans, Andy Felton (Director of Finance) said borrowing would be required for the 2025/26 Capital Strategy, and to support the WRIF. The Capital Strategy would assume certain levels of investment.

Members said it was important to get treasury management right. Councillor Pete Gilbert said officers' management had been exemplary. Members thanked officers for their diligence, particularly noting what was happening with the budgets of other councils.

Members noted the report and voted to endorse its contents.

7. Cost-of-living support update

The item was introduced by Charles Barlow (Delivery Lead, Communities and Partnerships Service), who reminded members that in October 2022 Cabinet had approved a fund of up to £1million from the Revenue Investment Fund to help support cost of living initiatives. As of 15 August 2023, £730,000 had either been spent or committed to being spent. Sitting alongside the Revenue Investment Fund, an additional £1million from the Household Support Fund grant had been distributed through the Warwickshire Local Welfare Scheme. This provided direct support to vulnerable households around energy and water bills, food, and other related essentials. It was felt cost of living support needed to be put in place longer term as increasing costs were affecting individuals – either through increased mortgage costs, or rate increases caused by landlords' mortgage rates going up – and businesses, through higher operating costs. Charles Barlow said the report provided a summary of the investments, and greater detail could be provided to members if they wished.

Councillor Sarah Boad said she was pleased to see libraries would continue to operate as warm hubs. She said community pantries would help provide support for residents' longer-term issues arising from the cost of living crisis. Charles Barlow clarified that funding for the community pantries in the financial year 2023/24 has come from the Revenue Investment Fund, but that further investment for 2024/25 and beyond would need to be secured through the budget setting process, and that a budget pressure had been raised. A report relating to this would be coming to Cabinet soon. He added that libraries were able to do more to support vulnerable people when a volunteer co-ordinator was involved.

Responding to a question from Councillor Tim Sinclair, Charles Barlow said there was a small budget for communications in relation to cost of living initiatives. The Council worked with colleagues from the District and Borough Councils, as well as the voluntary sector. Information was also shared online. It was accepted there had been some duplications in service across the different councils, although attempts had been made to avoid this in future. Charles Barlow said that there had been some added value for money in doing this however.

Responding to a question from Councillor Pete Gilbert, Charles Barlow said grant applications for businesses had come through several routes. Applications from social enterprises had come through the various voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector grant streams, and applications from other types of business had come through grant streams administered by, among other agencies, the County Council's Economy and Skills Service. He observed that grant applications from businesses had increased over the last 12 months. Councillor Pete Gilbert said a number of businesses were struggling with recruitment, and there appeared to have been an erosion in the relationship between businesses and school leavers. Charles Barlow said it was hoped this could be improved through the conversations taking place as part of the Community Powered Warwickshire initiative.

Members noted the contents of the report and endorsed the continuing approach to addressing cost-of-living pressures.

8. Annual Review of Community Pantries

The item was introduced by Louise Richards (Partnerships Projects Co-Ordinator). She told members the report looked at the first 12 months of operation of the community pantries after they were commissioned by the Feed the Hungry initiative. Three pantries were set up, with a £5 membership fee. Each of them were now operating waiting lists as the demand for their use was so big. Pantry members with more complex issues would be signposted to other agencies who would be able to assist them. Members' attention was drawn to the case study examples included in the report, which demonstrated the positive impact the community pantries had had. Louise Richards said it had been agreed to extend the funding for the programme for a further 12 months. There was then a three-year transitional plan to transfer the pantries into community ownership.

Councillor Sarah Boad said one of the community pantries was in her ward. She said the staff did an amazing job and would go the extra mile for residents. She accepted it cost a lot of money to operate the pantries, but hoped that funding could be found so they could continue. It was noted that a user had been excluded for abusing staff. Councillor Sarah Boad said some users had severe mental health issues.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Tim Sinclair, Louise Richards said Feed the Hungry typically purchased the bulk of their food from FareShare. However depending on what was delivered that week, staff may have to top up and purchase certain fresh foods from supermarkets. She said Feed the Hungry had service level agreements for similar projects in Leicestershire and Coventry and were looking for similar deals in Warwickshire.

Members suggested the scheme could be extended, perhaps in Rugby and in Bedworth.

Members noted the contents of the report.

9. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

10. Any Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters arising for discussion.

The meeting rose at 3.45pm

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Chair