

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 13 December 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 Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans

Officers

Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Charles Barlow, Delivery Lead - Localities
Vanessa Belton, Business Intelligence Service Manager (Performance and Quality)
Benjamin Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Craig Cusack, Director of Enabling Services
Sarah Duxbury, Director of Strategy, Planning and Governance
Andrew Felton, Director of Finance
Liz Firmstone, Head of Finance Transformation and Transactions
Ayub Khan, Head of Libraries, Heritage and Culture and Registration Services
Chris Norton, Head of Investments, Audit and Risk
Emily Reaney, Lead Commissioner – Treasury and Investments
Mark Ryder, Executive Director for Communities
Dominika Stockham, Localities and Communities Officer (Stratford District)

Others Present

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety)
Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder, Finance and Property)
Penny Barry (Public)
Jill Machadro (Public)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Daniell had sent apologies as he would be late for the start of the meeting.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

2. Public Question Time

Penny Barry addressed the Committee in relation to Item 4 on the agenda. She stated her belief there were anomalies in the proposals, and the evidence provided in the report did not take into account 'over the border' incidents that WFRS might be required to attend. She noted the report said that response times in the Stratford area would increase to an average of 13 minutes and 49 seconds for the first vehicle and to 20 minutes and 15 seconds for the second vehicle. Penny Barry stated her belief that no evidence had been provided that surge teams would be able to cover large scale incidents.

Jill Machado also addressed the Committee in relation to Item 4 on the agenda. She stated her belief the figures used in the analysis were flawed as they did not take into the account the downturn in critical incidents during Covid lockdowns. She said there were now likely to be increased risks associated with electric vehicles and their charging points, and from a higher number of wood burners that had been installed in people's homes. She said one of the areas that had been identified as being high risk under the modelling criteria was not showing as high risk on the heat map provided in the report. She also said there was no evidence of the costings that had been used to determine the recommendations.

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

There were no questions to Portfolio Holders.

4. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service: Resourcing to Risk

The item was introduced by Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer), who reminded members the decision had been taken by Cabinet to publicly consult on option 2A. The consultation had now opened and would run until 10 March. A dedicated website had been set up that gave details of public meetings, data sets used in the modelling process, and how to take part in the consultation. Ben Brook said the costings had been independently verified by a Section 151 finance officer with more

than 30 years of experience in the fire and rescue and other public sectors, and the proposals had been examined by another Chief Fire Officer. Ben Brook said the five years of data that was analysed had been broken down into two sets of two years either side of Covid and trends were looked at in these data sets, in addition to the overall figures derived from the five year period to give a clearer overall picture that took the Covid period into consideration.

Ben Brook said five public meetings would be taking place, and WFRS would be meeting with town and parish councils and business forums. More meetings could be arranged if necessary. Residents would be able to respond to the consultation online or via a paper submission if one was requested.

Councillor Boad said there had already been a lot of interest in the consultation, but this had resulted in a lot of confused and incorrect information being circulated on social media. She asked how often the WFRS social media feeds were monitored so the correct information could be put out. Councillor Boad said a lot of concerns had been raised over cover in the Stratford area, particularly as it appeared there would be three appliances covering a significant portion of the county between 10pm-8am. She said there needed to be a greater explanation as to how this would work, and also what a surge team was and how it would operate. Councillor Boad asked if members could be kept informed as to what was happening with the consultation so they would be able to answer any questions residents may have. Ben Brook said it was important the correct information was put out, which was why the public meetings and workshops were taking place. He said WFRS was open to suggestions for other methods of obtaining solutions. Ben Brook said the rationale behind the proposed reconfiguration was so greater resources could be in place where they were more likely to be used. He said there were, on average, 85 incidents in Nuneaton each year where life and/or property was in danger, compared to areas like Bidford or Fenny Compton where the number of incidents was in single figures. He said if the WFRS budget allowed for appliances to be at a greater number of locations then they would be.

Responding to questions from Councillor Feeney, Ben Brook said WFRS was receiving a large number of requests for data and other queries. It was anticipated the frequently asked questions section of the consultation website would be updated every two weeks through the cycle of the three month consultation. Ben Brook said he was co-Chair of the Local Resilience Forum with officers from the other emergency services, and they had had the opportunity to input their views into the consultation.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Ben Brook said availability at some on-call fire stations was less than 50 per cent. Information on the surge teams and how they would work would be provided at the meetings and workshops. He said that work was already underway to analyse the results of the consultation, and for it to be reviewed by Cabinet prior to a final decision being made by Full Council in July. Members asked if the results of the consultation could be looked at by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and it was agreed this would take place.

Councillor Boad said it was important residents were not disenfranchised, and paper versions of response slips were available in appropriate locations such as libraries and fire stations. Members agreed to this, although Councillor Crump said not all fire stations were open all the time so it would not necessarily be feasible for people to pick up a form.

Members noted the contents of the report. They asked for the report to return to the Committee for an update prior to the decision being made by Full Council, and for copies of the consultation

documents to be made publicly available at libraries and fire stations to allow as many people as possible to participate.

5. VCSE Sector Support Services Progress Report

The item was introduced by Charles Barlow (Head of Community Partnerships), who reminded members it had been agreed to review the VCSE sector support service after a year of operation. It had been in place since 1 April 2022 and would run for three years, with an option to extend that for a further 24 months. Charles Barlow said at the end of the first year all services were performing well against their outcomes in each service specification. He said this was in spite of a challenging landscape for the community and voluntary sector. There had been extensive stakeholder engagement and strong elements of coproduction with the voluntary sector had been demonstrated. Two rounds of market testing had taken place, which identified how to apply social value to a greater degree than previously and how digital delivery would be implemented as among the key factors. How services would play their part in reacting to climate change had also been considered. The service specification also took into account community power, asset-based ways of working and the levelling up agenda. The specification sought to move towards an outcome-based service. A tendering process had been carried out and all services were now being successfully delivered.

Members said the report was very positive and provided a great level of detail of the successes of the three different delivery strands. Members agreed to record their thanks to officers for their hard work and efforts.

Responding to a question from Councillor Tromans, Charles Barlow said each of the suppliers had their own boards of directors that provided an additional layer of scrutiny. The performance metrics produced by each of the suppliers was uploaded into the Council's performance management system. Charles Barlow said the national Citizens Advice Bureau had a very robust scrutiny process and local data samples would be supplied on a weekly basis and go through vigorous overview and scrutiny.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Warwickshire Waterways Strategy - progress report and action plan

The item was introduced by Ayub Khan (Head of Libraries, Heritage and Culture and Registration Services), who reminded members that Cabinet had agreed to the creation of a Waterways Strategy in 2021. Among its aims were the promotion of safe travelling, water safety and combatting climate change. It was also intended to develop the sense of place by encouraging more visitors to use Warwickshire's waterways, including through the use of waterside paths by walkers and cyclists. Partnerships had been created, the most notable being with the Canal and River Trust and the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

Ayub Khan said the biggest piece of work conducted as part of the strategy was a survey of the towpath network. This highlighted where improvements needed to be made as part of the wider strategy to make Warwickshire more accessible for walkers and cyclists, with a report of more than 100 pages being compiled as a result. Members were also told the South Warwickshire GP Federation had helped to identify ways in which the strategy could help meet social prescribing needs.

Responding to a question from Councillor Boad, Ayub Khan said there would be annual progress reports on the development and implementation of the strategy.

Councillor Feeney said it was important to ensure that towpaths were wheelchair accessible. She said it was also important to preserve buildings with a cultural or heritage significance. She said there were still active communities associated with canal locks, and some buildings alongside lock gates had been demolished.

Councillor Butlin said consideration needed to be given to joint use of some paths by cyclists and walkers, because in some places paths were not wide enough to accommodate both. Ayub Khan said the Canal and River Trust had provided the Council with ways of measuring footfall to improve knowledge of which routes were seeing the most use, and where improvements needed to be made.

Members noted the contents of the report and the action plan.

7. Library Performance and Membership

The item was introduced by Ayub Khan, who said the report had a focus on the use of Warwickshire's libraries by children and young people. He said it had been difficult to provide comparative data on library as the way they were used and organised had changed during the fallout from the Covid pandemic. Once this had settled it would be possible to have a benchmark for future reports to the Committee, and it would be possible to get trend data. However it was positive to note there had been a 15 per cent increase in the digital use of libraries, and visitor numbers had returned to pre-Covid levels. Libraries had also been used as warm hubs throughout the winter to help members of the public with the cost of living crisis. New services had been introduced that enabled people to improve access to other digital services.

Ayub Khan said the registration service had been updated, so when a birth was registered the newborn would automatically be issued with a library membership card.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Ayub Khan said the library service had succeeded in its bid to become a National Portfolio Organisation. This would enable the library service to access funding through the Arts Council to provide additional activities, programme delivery and staff training. Ayub Khan said it was the only library service in the West Midlands with this status; other organisations with NPO status included the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. He said libraries were not usually eligible for funding because it was a statutory service, but evidence had been provided on the additional activities and programmes delivered by the Warwickshire library service. One of the programmes that would be introduced in the new year was the human library where a person could be 'borrowed' to talk about their experiences.

Responding to a question from Councillor Redford, Ayub Khan said libraries had been supplied with books for children with dyspraxia and autism, and group reading sessions were being encouraged. There had been a move to make libraries autism friendly and improved staff training had been given. Sessions at Stratford library that included the use of blackout curtains to prevent sensory overload had been trialled and had been successful. It was hoped this could be extended

to other libraries. Ayub Khan said permission had been sought to apply for funding for a sensory friendly vehicle, which could be driven to where it was needed.

Responding to a question from Councillor Boad, Ayub Khan said the number of young people using libraries tended to drop off through secondary school, before increasing again when the young people started attending college. This was a national trend. Different activities, such as video clubs, had been trialled at the libraries in Nuneaton and Rugby to encourage greater use. Ideas for further clubs was being sought.

Ayub Khan said since the Covid pandemic there had been fewer people volunteering at libraries. This was more of an issue in the south of the county compared to the north.

Regarding children who were electively home educated, Ayub Khan said they had additional privileges that enabled them to withdraw more books at a time and keep them for longer.

Ayub Khan said the library service had an existing link with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and schools could ask for an actor to attend and give a short performance and encourage children to get into acting. All libraries also had a link to the National Theatre.

Members noted the contents of the report.

8. County Councillors' Grant Fund 2020 to 2023

The item was introduced by Dominika Stockham (Localities and Communities Officer), who said the report outlined what had been covered by the Grant Fund. She said the first round of funding had been simplified to make money available more readily, and to make the eligibility requirements less onerous, to help a wider number of projects affected by the Covid pandemic. Over the last three years there had been a total of 1,494 applications for grants. Of these, 74 per cent had been successful in obtaining funding. For the 2023/24 financial year, the amount of funding available had been increased from £6,000 per Councillor to £8,000. This was a reflection of the Community Powered Warwickshire initiative. Dominika Stockham said the allocation of the grant funding had had a positive impact on residents' health and wellbeing, and this was something that had been noticed by the elected members.

Councillor Boad said the deadline for the next round of funding was June, but groups wishing to seek funding would either have to apply very early or very late as there may be issues associated with Purdah in the run-up to local elections.

It was confirmed that a joint bid for funding could be made by more than one councillor, if money was needed for a project going across more than one ward.

Members said they were unanimous in their support for the grant funds, saying they had given enormous benefits to their residents.

Members noted the contents of the report.

9. Quarter 2 Integrated Performance Report

The Chair informed members that Andy Felton (Director of Finance) would be leaving Warwickshire County Council and this was his final Committee meeting. He thanked him for his years of service and for all his help assisting the Committee.

The item was introduced by Craig Cusack (Director, Enabling Services). He said that of the key business measures relevant to this Committee, 52 per cent were not on track. Three of the measures that had been rated as being on track at the end of quarter 1 were now not on track. Craig Cusack said there had been an increase in demand, and costs and resources associated with those key business measures. This included a 59 per cent increase in the number of applications for the welfare scheme. However, there had been an improvement in the performance of the WRIF.

Councillor Boad noted that some of the targets relating to the Fire and Rescue Service were not being met, and this was why the future organisation of the service was being consulted on. She said some of the targets related to the number of casualties involved in traffic accidents, but there was little WFRS could do to prevent those accidents from occurring. Ben Brook said the number of collisions had increased, and but the severity of the injuries received had lowered. He said the information available on Power BI for members to view had helped to shape the proposed reconfiguration of WFRS that was now being consulted on. The Chair said the figures relating to traffic collisions and fires attended needed to be collated, but added that consideration should be given to the data not being used as a performance indicator.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Sinclair, Andy Felton said it was likely there would be an increase in the number of schools that would be running with a budget deficit. Audits had been taking place to check financial processes in schools. Some had had audits that provided limited assurances. Andy Felton said support was available directly through the education finance team and the schools action group, which would look to provide interventions at as early an opportunity as possible to prevent issues from escalating.

Members noted the contents of the report.

10. Capital Financial Management Project - Closure Report

The item was introduced by Liz Firmstone (Head of Finance Transformation and Transactions). She said a review had been undertaken, which listed a series of recommendations for improving ways of working. A long-term investment in infrastructure was essential to help deliver the priorities that had been identified, although this was being done against an increasingly challenging financial landscape of increased energy costs, borrowing costs, inflation and high competition for resources. These challenges, and cost increases and delays to some major projects, were key drivers to the project. Liz Firmstone said the project's recommendations, which would reduce risk and improve governance, had now been implemented. Capital management would now be more clearly driven by the Council's priorities.

A key change had been the creation and implementation of a Capital Strategy Group, which comprised directors involved in the key elements of the capital programme. Other priorities implemented included a new fund to resource costing exercises for new projects. These schemes could bid for funding that would enable them to do more detailed design work, so that future costings would be more accurate and reliable. There was also a revised budget monitoring model that included new performance measures to assess which schemes were delivering on time and

on budget. A report summarising examples of good practice and lessons learnt was due to be published in the new year.

Councillor Sinclair stated his belief there was a difference between delivery of a project, and what that project would achieve. He said future reports should outline whether a project's initial target was met. Councillor Sinclair gave the example of the Stratford park and ride scheme, which he said had had a large amount of capital spent on it but was still being under utilised. Liz Firmstone said the annual report included case study examples that showed the outcomes that were successfully delivered. Councillor Tromans said it was his understanding that it had previously been agreed that benefits realisations of capital projects were to be included in future reports. Rob Powell (Executive Director, Resources) said benefits were matters to be considered by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees, but that officers could consider proportionate mechanisms to report on benefits tracking in future, taking account of the significant resource constraints facing the Authority.

Councillor Butlin said many capital projects related to schemes that were vitally important, such as schools and road improvements. In many cases the amount of funding required and timescales had been too optimistic, leading to overspends and, in two instances, requests for more funding to be made available. He explained the report sought to address these issues.

Members noted the changes implemented as a result of the project and the outputs and benefits delivered, and agreed that the project had now been completed and any further continuous improvement activity should become part of "business as usual" activity.

11. Treasury Management Half Year

The item was introduced by Chris Norton (Head of Investments, Audit and Risk). He said £49million of debts had been repaid, which meant the amount of borrowing was now under £300million and had delivered a significant revenue saving to support the MTFS. Cash balances had fallen below £400million, which meant the Council was now able to borrow against its internal resources instead of having to go to an external loan board. Investments had been made in housing associations to improve the portfolio's diversification, and other investments had been withdrawn from other funds that were no longer considered suitable. Good returns on investments were being generated, as they were low risk.

Chris Norton said there had been the option to pre-pay pension fund contributions over 90 per cent. The decision had been taken not to do this due to the volatility of the market, and this had transpired to be a sensible choice. There were £200million in loans to other local authorities outstanding, but there had been no defaults on keeping up with any payments despite financial challenges across the sector.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Chris Norton said it was difficult to make any predictions and the Council's strategy did not rely on having to make market forecasts. The main issues relating to treasury investments were the security of the cashflow, and its liquidity as this would ensure money was available to finance what it was needed for. Andy Felton said it was anticipated interest rates would remain high for the foreseeable future, and the Council's cash balance would start to come down over time.

Members noted the contents of the report.

12. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme. It was agreed to add an update item regarding resourcing to risk to the work programme.

13. Any Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters arising.

The Chair thanked everyone involved with the Committee for their work over the last year and wished everyone a happy Christmas.

The meeting rose at 4.30pm

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Chair