

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 21 February 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
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
Vanessa Belton, Business Intelligence Service Manager (Performance and Quality)
Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Director of Enabling Services
Sarah Duxbury, Director of Strategy, Planning and Governance
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Virginia Rennie, Interim Director of Finance
Sue Robinson, Business Intelligence Service Manager
Louise Richardson, Lead Commissioner - Corporate Policy and Strategy
Kate Sullivan, Strategy and Commissioning Lead, Organisational Development
Max Taylor, Graduate Management Trainee

Others Present

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety)
Councillor Izzy Seccombe
Councillor Martin Watson (Portfolio Holder, Economy)
Penny Barry (Public)
Jill Machado (Public)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Boad and Butlin.

(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 December 2023 were approved as an accurate record, subject to an amendment to show that Councillor Watson was in attendance.

2. Public Question Time

Jill Machado addressed the Panel in relation to the ongoing resourcing to risk consultation by Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. She said that under the proposals there would be an increase in response times in the Stratford area. She noted there had been a recent incident at the Royal Shakespeare Company Theatre which had been attended by nine appliances attended, and said that under the proposals there would be eight emergency appliances available overnight from 10pm to 8am. She also noted the proposals said the planned surge model would be needed four times in five years, but stated her belief this needed to be reviewed.

Penny Barry also addressed the Committee on the consultation. She stated her belief the proposal out for consultation would not work and a more thorough analysis should have been undertaken. She asked if the removal of on-call firefighters had been properly understood.

It was noted that Councillor Boad had also asked to address the Panel on the points raised by the public questions. She would get a response from the portfolio holder, as would the two members of the public.

Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) said WFRS appreciated the engagement made by the public to the consultation, and all feedback was being considered. He said there would be eight full-time teams available overnight, in addition to the eight surge teams. He said the four to five incidents in a five-year period that a surge team might be needed for would be major incidents requiring up to 20 appliances. Regarding the incident at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he said the eight crews included some specialist appliances.

Councillor Crump said a significant number of responses to the consultation had come from the south of the county, and he appreciated the strength of feeling on the proposals. He reminded members the consultation would close on 10 March, and the responses would be considered by Cabinet and Full Council before a decision was made. He said there had been meetings with the Fire and Rescue Services Association and Fire Brigades Union, and the proposals were also being

independently reviewed by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services.

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

There were none.

4. Warwickshire Futures - looking ahead to 2030/40

The item was introduced by Max Taylor (Graduate Management Trainee), who explained the report looked to address large-scale challenges, but also look at potential opportunities, that would affect the Council going forward to 2040. To do this, analysis of long-term trends and short-term issues had been undertaken, along with examples of good practice and research across other areas of local government. This would be continually monitored and updated as time progressed. It was hoped all of this information, when collated, would put the Council in the best position to respond to the challenges it would face in the coming years. Examples of topics that were considered to be shorter-term priorities included the Levelling Up agenda, the increased cost of living, resourcing of services, and potential changes caused by election results.

Members were told five key themes had been identified: societal change; community and health; jobs, economy and technology; environment, climate and infrastructure; and transport and travel. Further issues that could have a potentially strong impact across all areas of the Council had also been identified. These were shifts in demographics; global economic and political uncertainty; climate change; artificial intelligence; and inequalities. For example, people were living for longer but also more of those people would suffer with serious illnesses. There would also need to be changes to help meet the needs of a younger demographic in terms of inclusivity. In respect of climate change, emergency planning teams had been established that would tackle climate events such as flooding or prolonged heatwaves. The use of AI was seen as more of a positive opportunity, as there were potentially ways for customer-facing teams to exploit its use for the Council's benefit.

In addition to the Council-wide issues, workforce challenges, political engagement, and digitalisation had all been identified as specific issues of relevance to the Committee. Among the workforce challenges to be identified were pay levels for senior staff and succession planning. It had been noted two thirds of Council staff were aged between 40 and 64, and just five per cent of the total workforce was under the age of 25. Engagement with local elections had been identified as an issue, with turnout across England being around 32 per cent at last year's local election. Members were told that 6G data was in the process of being developed and it was anticipated it would begin to be rolled out by 2030.

Responding to a question raised by Councillor Feeney, Louise Richardson (Lead Commissioner – Corporate Policy and Strategy) said town centre regeneration and work with district and borough councils was being undertaken by the Place team. She said Councillor Feeney's comments would be fed back to the team. In response to another question from Councillor Feeney regarding workforce challenges, she said feedback would be reported back to members of the Strategy Network. Bal Jacob (Director of Workforce and Local Services) said a lot of work was already taking place in relation to strategic workforce planning. Pilot schemes regarding staff recruitment and retention were taking place within eight areas that had traditionally been difficult to recruit for,

and analytical work would then take place. There would be a focus on talent management and acquisition.

Councillor Roberts noted some of the links embedded in the report were either invalid or mixed-up. Max Taylor said this would be revised and updated.

Councillor Seccombe said it would be important to ensure the aging population would be able to access the information it needed and kept well informed. She said AI would prove to be helpful, but it was important for alternative ways of communication to be considered.

Councillor Tromans said the report considered the future of the Council, but also Warwickshire as a county. Although there would be some overlap between the two, it was important for there to be a separation as far as possible. Councillor Tromans said the Council had a good track record of ensuring good value for money and it was important for this to continue, and for risks to be mitigated against. Councillor Tromans said the five key themes were very strong, but stated his belief the five priority issues did not add much value to the overall strategy. He noted the contents of the risk register and said the skills gap, and attracting and retaining staff, would be an important issue to address. However the Council had a good record with its apprenticeship and 'grow your own' schemes, he said.

Responding to a question from Councillor Birdi, Sue Robinson (Business Intelligence Service Manager) said the most recent population statistics available were from 2018. Data from the 2021 census would not be available until 2025.

Rob Powell (Executive Director, Resources) said feedback from the four Overview and Scrutiny Committees would help inform the Council Delivery Plan, which would be considered at Cabinet in April.

Members thanked officers for the report, and the Chair commended Max Taylor's presentation to the Committee.

Members noted the contents of the report.

5. Estates Master Planning

The item was introduced by Craig Cusack (Director, Enabling Services). He said usage of Shire Hall had doubled, and this had been done within the existing budget. Ways of continuing to expand this were being looked at. Partnerships had been established with other organisations for them to use Council buildings. Each building or asset would be kept under review to ensure it had a defined use and benefit plan. This would also help the Council to meet its net zero target.

Regarding the Warwickshire Property Development Group, Craig Cusack said delivery of its objectives was slightly ahead of schedule. Progress on this was being reviewed by governance groups and the Member Oversight Group.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Craig Cusack said a full option appraisal, including any usage and planning restrictions, was undertaken for each property asset. All options would be considered before any recommendations were taken forward.

Councillor Feeney noted there had been delays to four business cases relating to WPDG developments. Craig Cusack said these delays were unlikely to have an adverse effect on the Council, and they were close to being resolved. They were also covered by the financial commercial risk reserve. Craig Cusack said there may be a benefit, in that by the time the buildings were ready then a greater return yield may be possible. Rob Powell added the delays were beyond the control of WPDG, and the main projects were on track to be met.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Our People Strategy Annual Review 2023/2024 and Plan for 2024/2025

The item was introduced by Kate Sullivan (Strategy and Commissioning Lead, Organisational Development). She said the report outlined the achievements made through the previous year's plan, and it detailed the strategy's priorities for the next five years. These broadly tied in with the key priority themes that had been highlighted earlier during the section on the Warwickshire Futures Strategy, and fitted with the key priority themes that had been identified by Corporate Board. Kate Sullivan said the results of the staff Your Say survey had become available after publication of the report. This showed an increase in agreement of the statements made in the survey, from 76 per cent to 79 per cent. The overall response rate had increased from 40 per cent to 56 per cent. However there had been a small reduction in the number of people who had responded positively to the statement they felt safe to be their authentic selves at work. There had been an increase in absences associated with stress and mental health, which reflected a national trend. Kate Sullivan said an action plan to proactively tackle this was being produced.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding increased headcount, Kate Sullivan said this was due to successful recruitment and there had been a consequential reduction in the number of staff vacancies.

Councillor Feeney noted there had been no reference to the Council working with trade unions as part of the network groups. Kate Sullivan said there were good relationships with the unions with regular meetings, but these were business as usual items so did not need to be highlighted in the report.

Responding to questions from Councillors Feeney and Sinclair about absences, Kate Sullivan said a deep dive analysis of stress and mental health was taking place. As well as increasing instances of absence, there was an increase in the severity of issues faced which required more complex levels of support. A detailed report on this analysis would go to the Staff and Pensions Committee. It was agreed this could be made available to members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Kate Sullivan said an agency contract was in the process of being agreed and signed. However it was acknowledged there was a desire to try and minimise the use of agency staff. Strategic workforce planning was looking to develop ways of dealing with this, such as looking at improving the grow our own scheme or the graduate scheme.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. Council Plan 2022-2027 - Integrated Performance Report Quarter 3 2023/24

The item was introduced by Craig Cusack, who explained the Plan had been endorsed by Cabinet earlier in the month. Of the measures relevant to the Committee, 64 per cent were on track to be met. This represented an increase of 16 per cent since the previous quarter. Key themes to have been noted included increases in demand and costs, and the ability to access resources when they were needed more quickly than had been previously anticipated. Craig Cusack stated his belief that the term 'not on track' sometimes carried unnecessarily negative connotations, and sometimes could be accounted by time slippages rather than a decrease in performance levels.

Members were told there had been a £39,000 overspend, which technically represented a zero per cent variation. Craig Cusack said the capital programme was on track to be delivered, and any delays and the reasons demonstrating the understanding for them had been included in one of the report appendices. Attention was also drawn to the four main strategic risks that had been outlined in the report pack.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding fire service response times, Ben Brook said the long-standing target of responding to an incident that represented a risk to life or property within ten minutes 75 per cent of the time was unrealistic and had not been met at any point within the previous five years. The resourcing to risk proposals would instead generate a mean average response time across the county, rather than measuring it as a percentage. The fastest response times would be in places where resources were most likely to be needed. Ben Brook said the proposed arrangements would generate a 13.2 per cent increase in prevention and protection activity, which in the longer term would help save more lives. The proposals also sought to provide a greater level of transparency.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Ben Brook said a serious fire incident review took place following all incidents involving a fire-related death or serious injury. These would be done with partner agencies to see if more work could be done to prevent similar incidents; for example, working with agencies where there was a known hoarder, as this represented an increased fire risk. Councillor Crump gave an example of a light aircraft crash that had resulted in a fatality. Although the craft was returning to an airfield in a different county, where it was registered, because the accident had taken place in Warwickshire it counted towards the county's fatal incident statistics. Ben Brook added that although crews always sought to attend an incident as soon as possible, there was not necessarily a correlation between response time and death or serious injury resulting.

Councillor Sinclair noted the number of staff responding to say they agreed they were kept well informed of the work of the Council had fallen from 85 per cent to 79 per cent, and asked how this was being addressed. Kate Sullivan said since the report had been published, this figure had increased to 81 per cent, and any response of more than 75 per cent was a positive. More work was taking place to engage more with the community teams, who were less office-based. Feedback from managers of these teams suggested they were well informed of their own team's work, but not necessarily that of the Council as a whole and this was looking to be addressed. Rob Powell said scores for internal communications had increased significantly during the Covid pandemic, and the targets for further improvement that had been set subsequently may have been overly ambitious. However, he stated his belief internal communications was excellent and was evolving to meet the Council's changing needs.

Members noted the contents of the report.

8. Treasury and Investment Strategy

The item was introduced by Virginia Rennie (Interim Director of Finance). She said the key message was performance levels were good, and an additional three months' of forecast data showed the direction of travel would continue on a positive trajectory.

Virginia Rennie said treasury management was becoming increasingly regulated, following well-publicised financial difficulties affecting a number of local authorities. However, the details of those financial arrangements showed that authorities still retained a large amount of flexibility in their decision making. Good management and governance arrangements were therefore of great importance.

Members were told that at the end of Quarter 3, there was £336million in cash in the investment balance. Virginia Rennie said this had all been earmarked. Additionally, the average balance throughout Quarter 3 had been £392million, which Virginia Rennie said demonstrated the volatility of the market. There had been a significant withdrawal of cash in November following the pay award scheme and backdating of pay.

Regarding liquidity of assets, there had been no change to the credit worthiness of any of the assets the Council had invested. Members' attention was drawn to one bank that was mentioned in the report, but no money was currently invested in this. Virginia Rennie said there were no plans to change where money was invested as current return rates were good, and there was a guarantee of a return on investment. The Council would monitor which other local authorities were subject to Section 114 notices, and would not make any investments into them.

Regarding investment yield, Virginia Rennie said the expected earning of £3.5million had actually been £13.5million. This £10million windfall had been used to fund this year's overspends.

Members were told that £39million was invested in the asset net variation section. Virginia Rennie said these typically performed best when interest rates were low, and presently they were the worst performing of the Council's investments. A review was being undertaken to see if a change of strategy was required.

Borrowing currently stood at £273million, following an early repayment of £49million that had been made last year. The next repayment was scheduled for 2029. It was not anticipated the Council would need to borrow any more money this year or next.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Virginia Rennie said the Council's policy was that cash balances should not go below £100million. The Treasury Management Strategy was designed to prevent this from happening, otherwise the Council may be forced into a position where it needed to borrow money temporarily and this was not something that was desirable. Officers wanted to be proactive in reporting on the levels in the cash balances.

Members said they were reassured by the contents of the report that the Council's treasury was being well managed. Members noted the contents of the report.

9. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme, and that an additional meeting had been scheduled that would just consider the Resourcing to Risk item.

10. Any Urgent Matters

There were no additional matters to discuss.

The meeting rose at 3.17pm

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Chair