

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 26 June 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Sarah Feeney
Councillor Wallace Redford
Councillor Will Roberts
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Mejar Singh
Councillor Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans

Officers

Rob Allen, Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Protection and Resilience
Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Director of Enabling Services
Sarah Cowen, Senior Solicitor
Monica Fogarty, Chief Executive
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Mark Ryder, Executive Director for Communities
Paul Spencer, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Nic Vine, Head of Legal and Governance

Others Present

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder, Finance and Property)
Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety)
Councillor Isobel Secombe (Leader of the Council)
Penny Barry (Public speaker)
Val Ingram (Shotteswell Parish Council, public speaker)
Susan Juned (Stratford on Avon District Council, public speaker)
Jill Machado (Public speaker)
Penny Taylor (Bidford on Avon Parish Council, public speaker)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Martin Watson 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

The minutes of the meetings held on 24 April and 14 May 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

2. Public Question Time

Five members of the public addressed the Committee in relation to Item 4.

Penny Barry said four fire stations had been reclassified as resilience stations, and asked for clarification on how these would be managed or staffed. She asked if the resilience model had been used elsewhere. She stated her belief that the south of the county was short of cover in the event of an emergency. She said she welcomed contracted on-call cover at night and stated her belief contracted daytime on-call could be feasible. She said the new arrangements would lead to increased response times in the south and south east of the county.

Jill Machado said she was pleased overnight on-call cover would remain in Bidford on Avon and asked how the station would be staffed. She asked if the roles of Retained Support Officers and station managers would be reviewed. She noted no extra funding had been required in the original proposals and asked what the additional funding in the revised model would be used for, and why it was now needed.

Val Ingram said an imbalance in response times would remain if the south of the county was compared to the north, and stated her belief there was insufficient resilience provided to residents in the south. She said she had heard there had been no uptake to staff the resilience stations. She noted there had been a fire in her village last year and it had taken 25 minutes for a fire engine to arrive from Wellesbourne.

Penny Taylor asked for reassurances that the need for an increase in the budget to achieve the revised model would not leave Bidford on Avon's overnight on-call under threat.

Susan Juned stated her belief there should be a further period of public consultation on the proposals. Concerns had been raised in Alcester regarding flooding, as there had been previous incidents where the town had been completely cut off, and the flood defences had come close to being breached six times during the last winter. Concerns had also been raised regarding the

response to traffic accidents on the A46 and A435, following an increase to traffic flow on both roads and an increase in the number of heavy goods vehicles in particular.

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

There were no questions for Portfolio Holders.

4. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service Resourcing to Risk Proposal

The Chair reminded members that the Committee was not a decision making body and had been asked to consider and comment on the report. He said there was a real pride in the work undertaken by WFRS and its firefighters were all brave and hardworking, and asked for this to be taken into consideration during the debate.

The item was introduced by Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer). He reminded members that the resourcing to risk consultation had identified four key issues that needed to be addressed: that more appliances were available at night, when there was a greater need for availability during the day; on-call availability was declining and had been identified nationally as not being sustainable in its current form; response time targets were not being met; and the Day Crewed Plus shift system was not nationally accepted and had been subject to legal challenge. The target was for an incident where there was immediate threat to life or property to be attended within ten minutes on 75 per cent of occasions, but this had not been met for several years.

Proposals that were intended to mitigate this were subject to a 13 week consultation, which included the week of Christmas. A total of 1,279 responses were received, along with 209 emails and questions. There were seven public meetings, eight meetings with town and parish councils, 28 workshops with WFRS staff and two sessions where WFRS staff were able to present alternative ideas. Ben Brook said this was a significant increase on previous consultations, but was mindful the feedback still represented less than one per cent of Warwickshire's total population. The outcomes and feedback from the consultation were then considered by a group of stakeholders from outside WFRS, including experts in Fire and Rescue Operations, Community Risk Management Planning, Human Resources, Legal and Communications. They developed and agreed a set of assessment criteria based on the four key challenges and produced a revised proposal. The revised model included the following:

- Guaranteed 14 fire appliances providing coverage during the day and 13 at night
- An extra four 'resilience' fire appliances available within two hours at any time
- A modernised on-call model that would be used at night-time, in specific locations based on risk levels
- Improved average first appliance response times across the county
- Increased capacity to deliver Prevention and Protection activity by 27 per cent
- Reconfiguration of shift systems.

The revised model would require a revenue investment of £556,000 each year for a three-year period. This figure took into account cost savings that had been identified, including the removal of the role of Retained Support Officers. There would be 30 new full-time firefighter jobs, and their salaries were included within the revenue investment figure. There would also be a £600,000 capital spend on modernising and modifying existing fire stations.

Ben Brook said the resilience fire appliances would have a dedicated crew that would be ready and available in two hours. They would either be used reactively in the event of a major incident, or plans could be put in place for them to provide cover if their use was able to be anticipated. Each resilience firefighter would be allocated a station, but their employment terms would be subject to consultation and negotiations with representative bodies regarding terms and conditions and hours of work. Every firefighter impacted by the changes would have a one-to-one discussion regarding their options. Ben Brook said there was nothing in the grey book regarding an on-call firefighter's turn-in time, hence why night-time on-call firefighters had a five minute turn-in time and resilience crews had two hours. He added the data demonstrated the new model was feasible with the introduction of more full-time firefighters but was not realistic if the on-call model was retained during the day.

Members were told a new digital system was being implemented that showed where risks were in real time. A tracking system that showed the locations of available fire engines had also been implemented.

Ben Brook said he had received legal advice that there was no need for the revised model to go back out for consultation. He reiterated the revised model would guarantee a greater number of available appliances during the day compared to the current system.

Councillor Andy Crump said the revised model would form part of the Community Risk Management Plan, which was reviewed on a rolling basis over three years. The revised CRMP would need to be approved by Full Council. Councillor Crump said the fact the proposals had changed from those that had originally been put out for consultation demonstrated that the views of the public had been taken into consideration.

Responding to questions asked by Councillor Sarah Boad, Ben Brook made the following points:

- The changes had been fully costed and the financial implications had been looked at by an independent expert and by the Council's finance team.
- Funding for capital projects, such as improving facilities, had been assessed by the Council's Estates team. Capital costs would be kept to a minimum.
- It was difficult to predict on-call firefighter availability; some were only available for 20 per cent of the time. Creating thirty new full-time firefighter posts alleviated this issue. However, discussions would take place with on-call firefighters regarding future employment options open to them.
- Payments for any redundancies would need to be met.
- Response times of secondary response appliances were not included as part of the data performance criteria, although they could be supplied if required. Around 75 per cent of all incidents were managed by one fire appliance. Overall response times across the whole of the county would improve by 58 seconds under the proposals. The data had been processed and analysed by ORH, a data modelling company that had been through five years' worth of statistics.
- Currently, on-call firefighters were able to choose how many hours they worked and could book on or off.
- Moving one appliance from Nuneaton to Bedworth would guarantee 24-hour cover for Bedworth, which currently had an on-call system for cover, whilst retaining a full-time crew to cover Nuneaton. This would significantly improve overall response times and allow for easier access onto the M6.

Councillor Boad noted no 'heat maps' of activity had been included in the report, and said in the past these had been very useful to improving visual understanding of where there were increased levels of risk. Ben Brook said the possibility of using these in future reports would be explored.

Councillor Crump said while it was important for members to provide scrutiny, it was for the Chief Fire Officer to choose how resources were deployed and councillors should not impinge on his operational independence, as this would be likely to be criticised by the Home Office and/or His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services.

Responding to questions asked by Councillor Tim Sinclair, Ben Brook made the following points:

- On-call availability fluctuated significantly, with fewer people being around during the summer. The new model guaranteed 13 available fire appliances at night, which the current system did not allow for.
- There was unlikely to be a shortage of applicants for full-time firefighter roles if they needed to be advertised if the proposals were approved. Discussions that had already taken place had indicated some on-call or part-time staff. Some on call firefighters had expressed an interest in becoming wholtime firefighters. would be able to fill four of the vacancies.
- At certain periods, and depending on the location of an incident, travel times would be longer and this would affect the response time. However the data showed that the overall average response time would decrease, and fluctuation would not be as significant.
- There had been a huge increase in the amount of prevention work that had taken place. This meant that the average of 15,000 incidents per annum 20 years ago had reduced to around 3,500 per annum. Compliance to revised building safety regulations and safer road partnership schemes had helped reduce the number of incidents.
- If given approval, the new model would start to take effect from January 2025 on a 12 month phased scheme, so it would be fully implemented by January 2026. Although it would be reviewed on an ongoing basis during this period, the first major review would be in May 2026.

Councillor Sinclair asked if the reviews could be assessed by the Committee as and when required. The Chair said members could be provided with a briefing note. Councillor Sinclair said he was pleased that prevention work had reduced the number of incidents so significantly and said this deserved to be more widely known about. Ben Brook agreed to discuss the guaranteed appliance availability with Councillor Sinclair outside of the meeting.

Responding to a question from Councillor Mejar Singh, Ben Brook said Atherstone fire station currently did not have guaranteed night time cover. Atherstone would have a daytime crew and night time cover would be provided by Polesworth. As there was no 24-hour cover currently provided in Atherstone, the proposed model provided a similar level of cover to the current arrangements.

Responding to a question from Councillor Rik Spencer regarding the current fire crew at Kenilworth, Ben Brook said discussions would take place to see how they could be absorbed into the proposed model. He said negotiations and consultations would need to take place in relation to training of on-call firefighters and where they would be allocated to, in response to a question from Councillor Wallace Redford.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sarah Feeney regarding an increasing number of new high-rise buildings in Nuneaton, Ben Brook said there was no significant evidence to show they posed a higher risk because, as new-builds, they would have to be compliant with the most up-to-date fire safety regulations. However, if evidence emerged that risk levels had been increased, then the configuration of resources could be reviewed and revised if necessary. Responding to another question from Councillor Feeney, Ben Brook said all alternative models to have been suggested during the consultation process had been analysed.

Councillor Will Roberts asked about funding, and if cuts would need to be made in three years' time if it was found the model was not financially sustainable. Councillor Crump said the CRMP would continually review the operating model and it would be noted if it was no longer appropriate, either in terms of resource provision or shift patterns. A Dynamic Cover Tool would be used to help position fire appliances against risk.

Councillor Rob Tromans said he was reassured by the improved response times in Nuneaton and Bedworth borough, and said the revised configuration provided a better spread of coverage in the event of congestion that could potentially impede a fire engine attending an incident. Responding to a point raised by Councillor Tromans, Ben Brook said there was flexibility for the plans to be amended if something was not working, or if it emerged something was causing a greater or lower than expected level of risk. He said WFRS regularly reviewed risks and risk plans at sites that represented increased levels of risk, for example the Kingsbury oil terminal.

Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi thanked the public who had taken the time to take part in the consultation. He added it was important for WFRS to maintain its level of prevention work.

Councillor Boad said she would have liked to have seen more detail as to how the proposals were to be financed, and it was unclear whether in future funding needed to come from the Council's base budget. With an election coming up and a possible change of government, she said it was possible local government funding may change within the next three years. Councillor Boad said it was possible a different model to the one that was initially put out for consultation would have been suggested had potential additional funding been known at the outset.

Councillor Boad proposed a motion that, because the resourcing to risk model had changed so substantially from what had originally been put out, a new public consultation should be put out taking into account the changes. Nic Vine (Head of Legal and Governance) advised that as a comprehensive public consultation had taken place to address the four key challenges, and response from this consultation had formed the basis of the revised plans, there was no requirement for a new one. Councillor Boad's motion was not seconded and the motion fell.

Members wished to place on record their thanks to Ben Brook and his staff for preparing the original consultation and the work that had taken place since, and all staff associated with WFRS for their ongoing hard work.

Members noted the contents of the report and asked for their comments regarding how the implementation of the proposed model would be reviewed; if there was any flexibility regarding change; how it would be funded from the end of the three year period of the CRMP; and how existing on-call and part-time staff might be incorporated into the revised staffing plan to be noted by Cabinet, and whether Cabinet could be assisted in their understanding of risk areas and how this affected decisions relating to resource provision through the use of the heat maps.

5. Year End Integrated Performance Report 2023/24

The Chair invited members to ask questions regarding the report. Councillor Feeney asked if changes to the Energy Strategy were incumbent on the outcome of the forthcoming General Election. A written response would be provided.

Councillor Boad noted there were no targets relating to fire-related deaths and injuries, and number of road traffic collisions attended by WFRS. The Chair said he had always been uncomfortable with the way this had been reported, while appreciating the importance of the need for the statistics to be recorded. He suggested a working party be put together to examine revised ways of recording the information. Councillor Sinclair said he was uncomfortable with it being given a RAG rating as it would inevitably be red, regardless of how much work took place to reduce incident numbers.

Councillor Sinclair asked about output delivery of schemes by the Property and Development Group and capital programmes, noting they were currently below target. Craig Cusack (Director, Enabling Services) said this was due to timings and complexities associated with some of the schemes, any delays would be recovered. Significant work had been undertaken to improve overall management of capital schemes which should reduce future slippage.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding sickness levels, Bal Jacob (Director of Workforce and Local Services) said robust data was available to managers via dashboards giving greater visibility. A more proactive approach was taking place and more support and awareness was available, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Bal Jacob said it was known which areas had more significant sickness levels and additional support is provided to these services. She added that rising sickness absence was a national issue and not one that was unique to Warwickshire.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Treasury Management and Investment Outturn 2023/24

Rob Powell (Executive Director, Resources) said the treasury management had been a big positive for the Council in the last year and had been instrumental in navigating significant financial challenges in the last financial year. The Chair noted there had been a significant increase in revenue generated from higher interest rates, but this may not continue in future.

Councillor Sinclair noted the weighted yield for internally managed funds recorded in the report was lower than the benchmark. Rob Powell said this was a lagging measure and that some of the rates were fixed.

Members voted to formally endorse the Treasury Management and Investment (Non-Treasury) outturn reports for 2023/24.

7. Work Programme

Arising from the earlier discussions regarding sickness levels, members said they would like to receive a briefing note that went into more detail on which service areas had identified issues, any

trends and additional information that would provide context, and if any activity was taking place that would address this. It was agreed that a briefing note would be provided by Bal Jacob.

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

8. Any Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters arising.

The meeting rose at 4.24pm

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Chair