

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 4 December 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

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

Officers

Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Sarah Duxbury, Director of Strategy, Planning and Governance
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Vanessa Belton, Business Intelligence Service Manager (Performance and Quality)
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Ruth Rollings, Service Manager - Customer Relations (Complaints Manager)

Others Present

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

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Sarah Boad, Yousef Dahmash, Mejar Singh and Martin Watson, and from Craig Cusack and Purnima Kandula.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair said he was pleased at the news Ben Brook was remaining as Chief Fire Officer with Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

2. Public Question Time

Penny Barry said there was uncertainty amongst current on-call staff about changing job roles, and asked when this would become clearer. She said incident attendance time and fire protection inspections were not meeting targets, and asked when this would be addressed. She asked when would proposed resilience cover at stations and closures of stations take effect. She also said there had previously been discussions about merging Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service with the West Midlands, and asked if this had been proposed again.

In response, Ben Brook said no fire stations would be closed. Regarding changing to staffing, he said there had been a number of briefings, including a whole-service briefing, and communication regarding the changes. They would be implemented throughout 2025 over a 12 month period, and any improvements made following the changes would be noticed once these had taken affect. He said no fire stations were closing, but they would be used differently. He said there had been a pause to fire inspections of buildings as a new digital risk management system was being tested and installed. A new state-of-the-art Hot Fire Training Facility had been completed in Rugby.

Councillor Andy Crump said the three year funding had come from a government settlement, which usually only provided one year of funding. He said this settlement, and the £460,000 capital funding, would align with the Community Risk Management Programme over the next three years. Councillor Crump said there had been no discussions with West Midlands Fire Service during his time as portfolio holder, which had been since 2018. He stated his belief that a merger would not be right for WFRS which would be better served remaining as its own entity.

It was confirmed the new hot fire training facility could potentially be used by other fire and rescue services, which would help to recover costs.

Jill Machado asked what recruitment was taking place for part-time firefighters at on-call fire stations, and when active recruitment for full-time roles last took place. She suggested some stations could close due to a lack of staff if there was no active recruitment. She asked how many full-time jobs were required, and how many current on-call firefighters had been offered either a full-time or part-time role.

In response, Ben Brook said under the new model there would be no part-time firefighters; they would either be full-time or on call. Greater flexibility would be offered, potentially through job sharing. Current on-call and community on-call firefighters would have the opportunity to apply for full-time roles, including those of watch and crew manager. This would mean there would be less

spending on training. Councillor Crump said this process would not be rushed as there was a desire to get the process correct at the first time of asking.

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

There were none.

4. Resources OSC feedback report

The item was introduced by Ruth Rollings (Complaints Manager). There had been a 30 per cent reduction in the number of complaints received by the teams covered by the Resources Directorate since 2021/22, and a 67 per cent drop in complaints for issues relating to WFRS. There had been a drop in compliments from 22 to 12, while WFRS had received no compliments during the last year. There had been a notable spike in complaints received in January 2023, which was attributed to the migration of data to a new system. One complaint received by WFRS in August 2023 had not been included in the trend analysis.

Of the complaints received, 36 per cent related to residents stating they had not received a service to which they felt they were entitled. A further 22 per cent of complaints related to a lack of communication from staff at the Council. The highest number of complaints received by the Resources Directorate were in relation to customer relations. However, this included all stage 2 and stage 3 complaints, and stage 1 complaints that could not be assigned to a team because their complexity meant they needed to be handled by more than one team. Ruth Rollings said 59 per cent of complaints had been closed within timescale. Over the last year letter templates had started to be included on the system to make query handling easier and processes had been put in place that made capturing outcomes more efficient.

Councillor Tim Sinclair said he was pleased at the improved report which picked up the feedback he had provided in previous years. He said it would be useful for future reports to show complaints made by 100,000 population. Councillor Sarah Feeney said it would be useful to know more information about the reasons why some timescales were not being met, such as the complexity of the complaint.

Councillor Rob Tromans noted the changes in processes that had been made, which he hoped would lead to an improvement in service and learning to avoid repeated service failures. He noted that 34 per cent of complaints were resolved at stage 1 and stated his belief this figure should be higher. Ruth Rollings said the letter templates should help to address this as it gave staff a set of bullet points as to what needed to be responded to in order to resolve a complaint.

Members noted the contents of the report.

5. Q2 Integrated Performance Report 2024/25

The item was introduced by Rob Powell (Executive Director for Resources). He reminded members the report showed the performance of key business measures being delivered against the Council performance framework, delivery against the Council Delivery Plan and latest position against the Strategic Risk Management Framework. There had been a significant amount of work to enhance the Council's risk management.

Rob Powell said performance had been stable compared to the previous quarter. One measure had moved off track since quarter one. This related to financial position metrics, which remained outside tolerance despite a significant improvement in the projected outturn following the implementation of the financial recovery strategy at the end of Q1. The projected outturn variance was now just above the two per cent tolerance threshold, compared to being over six per cent at the end of quarter one. Rob Powell said although savings delivery was off track this reflected the significant pressures in the main demand-driven service areas. He reminded members that 71 per cent of the Council's budget was in service areas that had significant financial pressures, which made it harder to make savings. The first steps of the budget setting for the next financial year were due to be taken at Cabinet the following week.

Staff sickness and absence rates had started to stabilise and then fall from September onwards. Rob Powell said this reflected the effort and investment that had been made in this area. However, he said this was an area that required ongoing focus.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding staff sickness, Rob Powell said additional measures were being considered to show a more accurate trajectory of absence rates. He said there were some service areas with increased levels of sickness and there had been significant work on improving wellbeing reflecting levels of stress and mental health absence. It would take time to notice the impacts of this. He added the Council had recently been awarded silver Thrive At Work accreditation, and more than half of Council staff had not taken any sick days in the previous year. Bal Jacob (Director of Workforce and Local Service) said there had been proactive attempts at managing long-term sickness in the service areas with higher rates. Additionally, there were a significant number of long-term sickness cases that were drawing to an end. Officers had met with clinical health partners to get advice on engaging with ill staff at an earlier opportunity and seeing what improved support could be given. There had also been increased proactivity in tackling short to medium-term illness, which was for periods of illness ranging from four weeks to three months. The staff Intranet had been updated to help staff and directors understand the different steps they could take, and be signposted to services. Members were reminded a paper on staff sickness would be coming to the next committee meeting. Councillor Sinclair said it would be useful for members to know if there was any correlation between sickness rates compared to demographics or geography, and if lengths of absences could be broken down.

Councillor Sarah Feeney asked if there could be information relating to how many people were awaiting procedures, as that could skew the sickness data. She said it would be useful to know if there were any recommendations from Occupational Health, such as setting reasonable adjustments or suggesting a staff member could be suitable for ill health retirement. Bal Jacob said arrangements relating to reasonable adjustments were being looking at. Currently this sat within each service area and consideration was being given to centralising it. Consideration was also being given to the potential for staff coming back into work after a period of absence to use their skills on project work outside of their team, if they were off sick but unable to return because of the nature of their work.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Warwickshire Property & Development Group (WPDG) Performance Update

The item was introduced by Rob Powell, who reminded members of the arrangements between Warwickshire Property Development Group (WPDG) and its Joint Venture with Vistry and Develop Warwickshire. Income was derived from dividend payments, interest on loans to the company, and capital receipts for WCC land transferred to the company. He said the company had made a strong start following its inception three years previously. It had been recognised through winning the national property award deal of the year in 2023 and the newcomer of the year in the Insider West Midlands property awards in 2024. So far three business cases had been agreed and two others had become put on hold due to circumstances outside WPDG's control. As a result Rob Powell said there had been some delay in receipt of dividend payments, which was covered by a commercial risk reserve set up for the purpose of covering any shortfall. There was confidence the dividends would be paid and the company would catch up on the developments that were behind schedule. Members were told the WPDG and Develop Warwickshire business plans were scheduled to come to Cabinet in January, following a period of due diligence to ensure they tie in with the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The Chair suggested some of the timeframes suggested at the outset may have been overoptimistic.

Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi said he was pleased with the progress of WPDG and there had been good progress on a project in his ward following some issues. He said the arrangement had also led to some indirect benefits for the Council.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Rob Powell said the balance sheet modelling showed that cashflows would remain adequate. There were no concerns money owed would not be received, but there may be a delay as timings were not easy to predict. Some developments, such as Top Farm in Nuneaton, had been making good progress.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Rob Powell said several councils had similar arrangements and an informal network of property companies now shared learning. The Council was in contact with other authorities that had similar arrangements or were considering them, and this had been useful. A need to make sure the company didn't overtrade had been noted, while maintaining a clear focus on the future pipeline of sites and opportunities to add greater value to core council services.

Councillor Peter Butlin said a lot of rents had been renegotiated through Warwickshire Property Management, the subsidiary company now managing the Council's tenanted estate, which had generated significant additional income for the Council.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. Extended Response Times Presentation

The item was introduced by Ben Brook, who reminded members they had requested additional information on extended response times to incidents. This related to an incident that represented a threat or danger to life or property, where there was a target to respond within ten minutes. Ben Brook said there was an overall target to attend all incident types within ten minutes 75 per cent of the time. Currently this was being met 67 per cent of the time, and the 75 per cent target had not been met for a number of years. Members were told there were no national standards requiring a response to an incident within a specific time period. Until 2004 incidents were categorised A-D,

with A being an incident involving a fire within a highly urban area that required a response within five minutes.

Ben Brook said the number of appliances that were available, and where they were positioned to have the best impact, were the main two factors within WFRS's control. Prevention work was an indirect factor, but there were other factors outside of WFRS's control such as traffic and weather conditions; an incident being in a rural or difficult to get to location; an incorrect address or inadequate location information being received; or simultaneous incidents occurring. During October 2024 wholetime appliances had been available 98 per cent of the time. An appliance may be unavailable due to a mechanical fault that needed fixing, or because of staff sickness. On-call availability was 36.3 per cent, and was harder to predict because staff could book off their availability on an hourly basis at short notice. However, appliances would be moved around the county based on cover to meet risk on a day-to-day basis. A new Dynamic Covering Tool system to assist with this was due to go live in the new year.

WFRS attended 4,398 incidents during 2023/24, with an average of 7.2 incidents during the day and 4.8 incidents overnight. This figure was the smallest of any Fire and Rescue Service in the country. Ben Brook said there was a greater number of extended responses during the day, and the distance an appliance had to travel was the biggest factor. There did not appear to be any geographical correlation leading to an extended response incident. In total there were 220 extended response times, which represented around five per cent of all incidents. However, there did not appear to be any direct correlation between response time and the outcome and the majority of property fires were contained to its room of origin. Members were reminded extended response time data only applied to life and property incidents. Other types of incident included primary fires, which could be a shed or car fire.

Responding to a question from Councillor Will Roberts, Ben Brook said the target response time had been chosen by WFRS and was in line with other Fire and Rescue Services. He added that WFRS had a good historical record on doing good work on prevention and protection.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Ben Brook said the movement of appliances to provide cover was based on professional judgement and looking at historical incidents over the past five years. Although there was no specific evidence base used, there was no significant change in risk levels so these were relatively straightforward to predict. The Dynamic Cover Tool that was due to be implemented would model the levels of risk using the data and track traffic incidents that may impact on response times.

It was noted there would be a further update on extended response times later in the municipal year. Councillor Sinclair said it would be helpful if a future report could include a bar chart that showed a breakdown of the response times in minutes, along with an explanation of any significant outliers. He said this could help to provide assurances to residents.

8. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

9. Any Urgent Matters

There were no additional items to discuss.

The Chair gave Committee members' thanks to members of the emergency services who would be working over the Christmas period.

The meeting rose at 3.16pm

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Chair