

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Councillor John Holland
Councillor Jenny Fradgley

Officers

Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Sarah Duxbury, Director of Strategy, Planning and Governance
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance
Chris Norton, Head of Investments, Audit and Risk
Spencer Payne, Head of Data and Business Intelligence
Kate Sullivan, Head of Strategic HR
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer

Others Present

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Birdi, Boad, Dahmash, Feeney, Roberts, Singh and Tromans. Councillors Fradgley, Holland and Humphreys were all attending as substitutes.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair informed members that Councillor Birdi's wife had sadly passed away recently. He

said he would like to offer members' condolences to him, and that he and his family would be in their thoughts.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2024 were unanimously 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 from members of the Committee.

4. Review of Absence Levels

Members were reminded they had asked for a more detailed report on staff absence rates, particularly in relation to trends and reasons for absences. Although lots of work had already taken place, it would take time for the results of new practice to become apparent. It was noted the increase in sickness levels was in common with the rest of the private and public sectors. Overall sickness rates were 8.78 days FTE per employee; however, 40 per cent of the workforce had had no absences in the last year and 37 per cent had had fewer than ten days absent.

Bal Jacob (Director of Workforce and Local Service) said there had been a particular focus on very long-term absences, which often involved complex conditions. A key feature had been targeted actions to help managers support their team members in resolving long-term absences. Access to the data dashboard that allowed managers to look at the data had been improved. There had also been a refresh of the attendance at work policy, which improved the support available to individual staff members and helped them to be more proactive in managing their short-term absences. CIPD best practice had been followed as part of a review to help make early referrals to occupational health, particularly in cases regarding stress and mental wellbeing, and to improve an employee programme to get earlier intervention. The health and safety team had been working on organising an education programme relating to musculoskeletal problems.

The highest long-term absence rates were due to stress or mental health issues, which accounted for 46 per cent of absences; musculoskeletal injuries (16 per cent); and cancer (six per cent). Bal Jacob said the data in the report showed a 'lagging' measure for the previous 12 months, whereas the leading measures showed greater traction.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding staff members with disabilities having a proportionally higher rate of absence, Bal Jacob said the data may be skewed as there wasn't a full data set. Kate Sullivan (Head of Workforce Planning and Development) said additional work had taken place with disabled colleagues regarding how their working arrangements could be improved, both generally and in terms of underlying health conditions. Bal Jacob said the Council needed to have regard for the Equality Act and ensuring there was the right environment for people with disabilities to be able to flourish at work.

Councillor Holland said staff were often prone to dealing with stressful or distressing situations. He said it was important there were procedures in place for supporting staff, especially those who helped members of the public. Councillor Humphreys said she was pleased staff were now receiving support resources that had not existed previously. Bal Jacob said she was pleased to give assurances to members that additional support was being given to support employees and it continued to be a priority area. Members said this should be an area of focus and there should be period updates at future meetings.

Members noted the contents of the report, and praised its quality and the depth of work being undertaken.

5. Q3 Integrated Performance Report 2024/25

The item was introduced by Spencer Payne (Head of Data and Business Intelligence). He reminded members the report focused on the Council Delivery Plan, performance measures, the Council's financial position, and risk management. He also reminded members of the performance portal, which they could use to look at all the performance measures relating to the Committee and view any commentary on them. He said there had been a slight improvement in performance in quarter 3 compared to the previous quarter, with 12 of the 18 key performance indicators on target to be achieved by the end of the year.

In response to a question from Councillor Sinclair, it was confirmed the target relating to the arrival of a first fire appliance at an incident was under the existing structure rather than the performance metric that would be used following the introduction of Resourcing to Risk. Councillor Crump said Resourcing to Risk had been included within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, and by the end of year five of the Strategy Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service would have an additional income of £614,000 to pay for additional resources. This would include 30 whole time firefighters, who would help with increased prevention and protection work. Councillor Crump said that through the introduction of Resourcing to Risk there would be a 57 second improvement in response times in Nuneaton to incidents involving life or property. Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) said as part of Resourcing to Risk, a dynamic cover tool that showed the placement of appliances in real time had been introduced and was now active. He said he was happy to show this to members if they wanted to.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair regarding delivery of items under the planned capital programme, Purnima Kandula (Director of Finance) said the wording of this would be changed in future reports to show the difference between controllable and non-controllable items. A non-controllable item is one where the Council would not be able to influence its progress.

The Chair thanked the finance team for its work this past year for the improved returns they had managed to generate.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Treasury Management Quarter 3 Update Report

The item was introduced by Chris Norton (Head of Investments, Audit and Insurance). He said the cash balance had continued to reduce from approximately £350million to approximately £280million, and this was expected to reduce further due to the strategy of borrowing internally, the

revenue spending position, the use of reserves and pressures from the rising SEND High Needs Block deficit. Although cash balances had reduced, the Council's liquid assets had remained steady at £97million. Investment returns had remained steady at around five per cent. Overall, returns were exceeding those anticipated in the budget and were supporting the MTFS. Chris Norton said treasury investments are relatively low risk by nature, and rates of return were steady and had not been significantly affected by recent geopolitical events.

Members were told the largest proportion of investments was in other local authorities, which accounted for 46 per cent. The next biggest investment was in money market funds, which had 22 per cent of the total investments. These money market funds were very liquid, and in some cases allow for same day access to funds. Chris Norton said the local authority lending market was currently very active, although the number of authorities looking to lend may reduce over time. Members were told that Warwickshire County Council was a lender in that market and not a borrower. Chris Norton said there had been no new external borrowing in this quarter, although it was expected there would be borrowing next year if the capital programme and MTFS plays out as planned. Members' attention was drawn to the charts in the report that outlined the liability benchmarks, which showed the position before and after management action.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

8. Any Urgent Matters

The Chair noted this was the final meeting of the municipal year. He thanked officers for their help, members for their work on the Committee, and Democratic Services for their support to the Committee.

The meeting rose at 3.32pm

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Chair