

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 16 December 2020

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor John Cooke
Councillor Judy Falp
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Maggie O'Rourke
Councillor Wallace Redford
Councillor David Reilly
Councillor Alan Webb

Other County Councillors

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property
Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety
Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Officers

Kieran Amos, Chief Fire Officer
Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Vanessa Belton, Delivery Lead – Business Intelligence
Jagdeep Birring, Technical Specialist, Production Systems
Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Assistant Director, Enabling Services
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director, Governance & Policy
Richard Ennis, Interim Programme Director – Place Shaping
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director, Finance
Allison Lehky, Service Manager, HR Enabling
John Parmiter, BDUK Manager
Rob Powell, Strategic Director, Resources
Virginia Rennie, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Strategic Finance)
Steve Smith, Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit
Kate Sullivan, Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance
Rich Thomas, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD
Peter Wren, Service Manager – Digital and ICT

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Jenns, Councillor Redford was present as a substitute.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2020 be approved as a correct record.

There were no matters arising.

2. Public Question Time

No public questions were received or presented at the meeting.

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

Councillor Falp praised the Authority's Heritage and Culture Strategy. However, she commented that there was concern that some of the Council's partners would struggle to meet their targets due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. She asked what measures were in place to ensure delivery of the Council's priorities in this area.

Councillor Kaur advised that the query related to work under the Environment and Heritage & Culture Portfolio led by Councillor Timms. She reported that work was underway to secure museums in the County against coronavirus with an aspiration to welcome visitors when practicable. She would refer the query to Councillor Timms.

Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) advised that the Committee would receive an update on the implementation of the Heritage and Culture Strategy at its meeting in March 2021.

4. Work Programme

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the updated 2020/21 Work Programme, as set out in the report, and notes the scheduled future meeting dates.

5. Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report (April 2020 to September 2020)

Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer) introduced the report, stating that Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) had maintained a focus on improving performance levels during the period with an emphasis on attendance times, improved availability of on-call and retained firefighters, and commissioned work to examine the County's risk profile.

In response to Councillor Redford, Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) advised that a centralised database of local employers was not held by WFRS for the purpose of recruiting retained firefighters. Contact with local businesses for this purpose was delegated to local station managers and on-call watch managers. He added that, where a local station had a strong on-call unit, recruitment tended to thrive. However, in instances where fewer retained firefighters were available, WFRS would intervene.

Councillor Crump stated that in fatality cases, in many instances response time targets had been met, however, WFRS had sadly been unable to save the individuals concerned. This underlined the importance of the prevention agenda.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs advised that WFRS experienced a reduction in the number of staff absences during the period of the pandemic with improved availability of on-call firefighters who were furloughed from their regular employment. He reported that incidences of COVID-19 within the Service had been limited, and the risk of transmission of the virus had been acted upon promptly.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs reported that response times had increased during the period of the report. He stated that a reduction in the number of serious incidents had been observed during the pandemic, however, a disproportionate number of serious incidents had occurred outside of the areas of the County which WFRS was capable of reaching within a ten-minute period.

Sarah Duxbury (Assistant Director, Governance & Policy) advised that a decrease in sickness and absence levels had been observed across the wider organisation during the period of the report. She stated that the introduction of agile working had helped to facilitate this improvement, with a greater likelihood that staff would work from home in circumstances when they felt unwell but well enough to work. Additionally, agile working had enabled staff who were obliged to self-isolate to continue working during the pandemic. She stated that a good level of support for mental health and wellbeing had been provided by managers during a difficult period, improving the resilience of the organisation.

In response to Councillor Boad, Rich Thomas (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD) reported that, in 2019, around half of WCC employees had not taken any time off for sickness; the average number of days taken as sick leave was estimated to be 11 days per person. Since then, the number had significantly reduced. He advised that, on average, two-thirds of absences pertained to longer-term sickness (for a duration of a month or longer).

In response to Councillor Reilly, Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) advised that the variation in levels of reported performance was attributable to the unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic. He advised that the narrative statements within the report provided contextual information for targets which had not been reached in areas such as debt collection,

where the Authority had sought to recognise the financial pressure on providers as a result of COVID-19.

Rob Powell stated that a refreshed performance framework was being developed which would adopt a slimmed down, tiered approach to bring greater clarity to reporting.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress of the delivery of the Council Plan 2020 – 2025 for the period as contained in the report.

6. Our People Strategy

Rich Thomas (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD) and Allison Lehky (Service Manager, HR Enabling) introduced the report and provided a presentation to members highlighting the key themes of the Our People Strategy (OPS). He advised that the OPS had been refreshed to align with the Council Plan 2020 – 2025 and requested that members consider the proposed delivery priorities which would inform the Delivery Plan for 2021/22.

In response to Councillor Webb, Allison Lehky advised that measures had been implemented to support new starters to the organisation during the period of the pandemic. She acknowledged that it was difficult to replicate the immediacy of communication as would be the case within the conventional office environment, however, by encouraging the use of group chat facilities on Microsoft Teams it would be possible to support new starters' development and integration. She agreed to explore the prospect of sharing guidance information with local businesses to support their response to remote working during the pandemic.

Rich Thomas advised that work was being undertaken as part of the wider estates master planning programme to develop collaboration spaces within the office environment in anticipation of a physical return to the workplace.

Councillor Reilly praised the report, however, he observed that the Strategy had not outlined any specific targets.

Rich Thomas advised that, in most cases, measurement frameworks were already in place; employee turnover rates were tracked, alongside attendance, and employee satisfaction and engagement. These provided a basis to measure morale across the organisation.

Rob Powell emphasised that the OPS was a high-level strategy, rather than a delivery plan. It included key metrics which were monitored by the organisation with greater regularity in the era of coronavirus through check-in surveys. He stated that a robust Performance Framework underpinned the delivery of the Strategy.

In response to Councillor Birdi, Rich Thomas advised that the Vivup platform had been developed to bring together the benefits on offer to WCC employees, including discounts on products (such as electrical goods and home shopping), alongside initiatives such as the Employee Assistance Programme, Cycle to Work scheme, and childcare vouchers.

Rich Thomas acknowledged the importance of the role performed by line managers. He emphasised that measures had been implemented to consolidate channels of communication to ensure that line managers were kept well informed. Line managers would be supported by the organisation to access the knowledge and skills required to enable them to perform effectively.

In response to Councillor Boad, Allison Lehky stated that, at the beginning of the pandemic, a £100 allowance was made available to employees as an immediate response to support homeworking arrangements. Since then, the £100 cap had been lifted in acknowledgement of the ongoing requirement for widespread homeworking. She advised that employees had been encouraged to undertake a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessment to ensure that they were able to work safely and comfortably. Employees were encouraged to discuss their ongoing homeworking requirements with line managers.

In response to Councillor Boad's query in respect of workplace arrangements for individuals at risk of domestic abuse, Allison Lehky advised that employees could confidentially apply for a fixed workplace setting in order to prioritise safety and wellbeing.

Resolved:

That the Committee supports the proposed delivery priorities set out in Appendix 2 of the Report to inform the development of the Our People Strategy Delivery Plan for 2021/22.

7. Operational Benchmarking Performance Report of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service 2019/20

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) provided a summary of the report which was orientated to benchmark the performance of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) against the other 43 Fire and Rescue Services in England.

Barnaby Briggs advised that a National Audit Review process was no longer in place, therefore it was not possible to guarantee that all Fire and Rescue Services were recording data in the same way. However, he stated that the report still represented a good indicator of performance.

In response to Councillor Redford, Barnaby Briggs advised that in cases where a faulty electrical device was found to be the cause of a fire, details were passed on to a national agency. This data was collated to enable manufacturers to be held accountable for fire-prone equipment.

In response to Councillor Redford, Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer) advised that the 'Hospital to Home' scheme had been expanded to cover all three of the County's major hospitals. The scheme had proved to be an asset during the pandemic and presented opportunities to WFRS to expand its range of community services.

Kieran Amos advised that the 'Fire Fit' campaign had proved to be an effective means of community engagement to promote fitness and wellbeing. He added that WFRS provided opportunities to young people to enable them to gain an accredited qualification in physical training and health.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Kieran Amos stated that WFRS benefitted from its status as a County Council Fire and Rescue Service. By working in partnership with colleagues in Adult Social

Care, Public Health, as well as Warwickshire Police and the Safer Warwickshire Partnership Board, WFRS could continue to build upon the quality of services it had delivered to date.

In response to Councillor O'Rourke, Barnaby Briggs advised that monitoring of long-term outputs provided scope to measure the success of prevention initiatives. For example, Home Fire Safety checks had been implemented around 25 years ago with an aspiration to lower incidence rates of primary fires; it was apparent that this approach had delivered benefits.

In response to Councillor O'Rourke, Kieran Amos advised that he foresaw challenges ahead for WFRS in the areas of climate change, economy, and levelling-up. WFRS would benefit from its status as a County Council Fire and Rescue Service to address these issues by working collectively with other service areas.

Kieran Amos advised that there were opportunities for WFRS to flex its service to provide capacity in support of the COVID-19 vaccination programme, if required. This could include providing transport for vulnerable or elderly people who might otherwise struggle to reach a vaccination centre.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the content of the report.

8. Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire Superfast Broadband Project and Future Digital Connectivity

John Parmiter (BDUK Manager) introduced the report, stating that the importance of superfast connectivity had been underlined by the introduction of widespread homeworking during the pandemic. Broadband connectivity now represented a fourth utility for many households; it would be necessary to keep up with the pace of change to ensure that connectivity speeds were aligned with modern demands on the system.

In response to Councillor Birdi, John Parmiter advised that developers were not legally obliged to provide a full fibre connection to new housing developments. This represented a missed opportunity.

In response to Councillor Webb, John Parmiter advised that effective partnership arrangements were in place between WCC and borough and district councils to encourage prioritisation of broadband connectivity within the planning process. He added that liaison with central government to seek a change to planning legislation would be welcomed, however, it was acknowledged that making such representations on behalf of the Council fell outside of the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In response to Councillor Boad, John Parmiter stated that mobile connectivity was a cost-effective and expeditious solution to connect to remote locations. He praised the commitment and level of support shown by the Council to broadband connectivity over the past ten years. This had demonstrated foresight; digital connectivity was now a key element of the Authority's COVID-19 Recovery Programme.

In response to Councillor Reilly, John Parmiter advised that work had been commissioned to test 4G coverage across Warwickshire. This data had been utilised to produce a heat map of 'hot spots' (where the network was overburdened) and 'not spots' (where there was no signal). This resource would be utilised to identify areas where improvements were required. In response to the Chair, he agreed to circulate details of this resource to members of the Council.

Resolved:

1. That the Committee notes the progress that the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire (CSW) Superfast Project has made to extend Superfast connectivity across the sub-region.
2. That the Committee notes proposals for Digital Connectivity, including mobile technologies.

9. Any Urgent Matters

There were none.

10. Reports Containing Confidential or Exempt Information

Resolved:

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

11. Warwickshire Property and Development Company

The Committee received a confidential briefing.

At 17:00, the Chair moved that the meeting continue beyond three hours' duration. Councillor Birdi seconded the motion.

The Chair called a vote on the motion which was accepted unanimously by those present.

The meeting rose at 18:10

.....
Chair