

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 24 June 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 Andy Jenns
Councillor Maggie O'Rourke
Councillor David Reilly

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 Izzi Seccombe, Leader of the Council

Officers

Kieran Amos, Chief Fire Officer
Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Barnaby Briggs, Deputy Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Assistant Director – Enabling Services
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director – Governance & Policy
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director - Finance
Simon Lewis, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Property Management)
Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources
Louise Richardson, Policy Lead (Corporate Policy)
Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities
Steve Smith, Assistant Director - Commissioning Support Unit

1. General

(1) Apologies

No apologies were received.

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

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair acknowledged the lengthy interval which had passed since the last meeting of the Committee owing to the cancellation of meetings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He expressed sympathy for all those who had experienced loss during this period. He drew attention to the recent passing of Councillor Richard Chattaway and Councillor Bill Olnier, stating that both men had been esteemed colleagues and exceptional politicians; their loss would be felt keenly as the Council faced the challenges ahead.

Councillor O'Rourke paid tribute to both Councillor Chattaway and Councillor Olnier, stating that they would be missed as both cherished friends and respected colleagues. She offered a quote from Nelson Mandela: "what counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

Councillor Boad praised the contribution that Councillor Chattaway and Councillor Olnier had made to this Committee and to the Council as a whole. She commended the knowledge and commitment demonstrated by both men and expressed her sympathies to their families and to the Labour Group.

Councillor Falp commented that the passing of Councillor Chattaway and Councillor Olnier constituted a great loss to the Council and community. She added that they had each made an exceptional effort to offer support and guidance to new members.

Councillor Gilbert expressed his sympathy for the loss of well-liked and respected colleagues. He added that Councillor Olnier had made considerable efforts to offer support and guidance to him irrespective of party-political differences; both men would be missed.

A minute's silence was observed to remember Councillor Chattaway and Councillor Olnier.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair expressed his gratitude for the contribution made by Councillor Olnier as a member of this Panel.

(4) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 December 2019 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 the Portfolio Holders relevant to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Boad requested an update in respect of the response of the Fire and Rescue Service to the coronavirus pandemic and the impact of social distancing measures on operational procedures.

Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer) advised that the impact of coronavirus was felt most acutely at the outset of the pandemic. He reported that innovative approaches had been adopted by the Fire and Rescue Service which modularised each Fire Station and limited the spread of the virus across the organisation; this had helped to maintain a resilient service and cases of the virus were relatively low. He praised the support which had been provided by the wider County Council.

Kieran Amos advised that the scope for fire crews to adhere to social distancing recommendations within the confines of a fire engine was challenging but that the revised governmental guidance from 2m to 1m+ improved the capacity of the Fire and Rescue Service to maintain operations and react to concerns raised nationally by the Fire Brigades Union.

Kieran Amos reported that the Fire and Rescue Service had succeeded in maintaining all statutory duty functions throughout the period of the COVID-19 crisis. He advised that the Service had enhanced its delivery of prevention work during this period as well as providing support to the community by delivering food parcels and pharmaceuticals. He added that the Service would seek to retain these community connections to reinforce the prevention agenda.

Kieran Amos advised that the Fire and Rescue Service had taken steps to ensure that provisional plans were in place to support mortuary, body recovery and care home testing arrangements as part of a multi-agency response to the COVID-19 outbreak. He advised that it had not been necessary to implement these measures but that the capability was in place should a need arise.

Kieran Amos reported that measures would be enacted to offer advice and guidance to businesses to support the recovery of the local economy.

Barnaby Briggs (Deputy Chief Fire Officer) reported that an increase in the number of on-call firefighters who had been furloughed from their regular employment had improved the resilience of the Service. He praised the support provided by ICT Services throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Councillor Crump observed that the recent warm weather could contribute to an increase in the number of people taking risks by swimming in open water. He praised the efforts made by the organisation to communicate the message of water safety to Warwickshire communities.

In response to Councillor Gilbert, Kieran Amos advised that an administrative error had resulted in a failure to pay wages to some new recruits to the Service. He provided assurance that the issue had been addressed and that future payments would be made on schedule.

The Committee expressed its gratitude to the Fire and Rescue Service for its continued excellent work throughout the coronavirus crisis. The Chair emphasised his thanks on behalf of the Committee for the contribution made by officers across the County Council in response to the pandemic.

In response to Councillor Boad, Councillor Kaur advised that it was proposed to reopen the three main libraries at Rugby, Leamington Spa and Nuneaton subject to a risk assessment. She added

that consideration would need to be given to library personnel who had been offering support to the Shielding Hubs during the pandemic but that plans to resume library and museum services were in progress.

4. Work Programme

The Chair indicated his expectation that the response to the outbreak of COVID-19 was likely to influence the course of the Committee's scrutiny activities for some time. He stated that the direction of the four COVID-19 Recovery Member Working Groups would be of interest.

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. COVID-19 Recovery Report

Rob Powell (Strategic Director for Resources) introduced the Report which presented the work that had been undertaken across the portfolio of the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee in response to the COVID-19 crisis. He also directed members' attention to the 'COVID-19 Recovery and Reform' Report to Cabinet of 11 June 2020 which provided an overview of the framework for recovery across the organisation including the proposed phased recovery programme (Foundation, Consolidation and Acceleration).

Rob Powell praised the Authority's response to the crisis, commenting that the speed and volume of the work undertaken (including development of new ways of working, committee meetings held remotely, support for vulnerable people, delivery of food parcels to those in need, and a remotely operated library service) displayed the Council's capacity to innovate. He observed that a transformation process that would have taken a year in ordinary circumstances had been delivered within the period of a handful of weeks.

Rob Powell observed that the Authority now had an opportunity to draw upon the positive working practices developed during the period of lockdown when re-establishing services. He commented that the organisation would need to balance current requirements with a long-term strategy for recovery. He added that it was likely that the Council would face some difficult financial choices given that the economic implications of the virus were not yet fully apparent.

Rob Powell commented that each of the four COVID-19 Recovery Member Working Groups were likely to cover subjects of interest to the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee but that the Community Group and Organisation Group would be particularly relevant. He advised that it was proposed that the Member Groups would report to Cabinet in September 2020 and that the Change Portfolio would be aligned with the resulting COVID-19 Recovery Plan to enable the organisation to move forward with confidence.

The Chair expressed his gratitude for the effort and commitment demonstrated by the Council's staff. He praised the foresight exhibited by all those instrumental in the rollout of Surface Pro devices which had greatly improved the organisation's resilience during the period of lockdown.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Rob Powell underlined the importance of voluntary and community groups to the recovery process. He suggested that coordination of activities with the

voluntary and community sector would form a core element of the work of the Community Working Group. He added that shielding efforts had been operated in partnership across public bodies, community groups and town and parish councils; he forecast that the voluntary sector would play an important role in recovery strategies. Councillor Crump stated that, as Chair of the Community Working Group, he would be grateful to receive comments from members to enable wider consideration of the role of voluntary groups.

Councillor Boad highlighted the value of the role of town and parish councils in the recovery process. She suggested that liaison with Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC), a body for which she was vice-chair, would offer benefits to coordinate activities. However, she stressed that town and parish councils had not benefitted from the same level of robust ITC provision which had helped to support the County Council's response to the pandemic. The Chair praised the work undertaken by Charles Barlow and his team in working closely with community groups.

In response to Councillor Falp, Rob Powell advised that the welfare scheme to provide free school meals during the summer holidays would be funded by central government. Councillor Kaur added that the free school meal voucher scheme had continued to operate in Warwickshire following school closures and that the government's recent announcement to reinstate funding during the school holiday period had been welcomed by the Authority.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the Report.

6. Ombudsman Outcomes Update

Sarah Duxbury (Assistant Director – Governance and Policy) introduced the Report which presented a summary of the outcomes of Ombudsman, Information Commissioner and Judicial Review claims for the 2019/20 period. She advised that the results for 2019/20 constituted an improvement on the levels of the previous year, with seven adverse decisions recorded compared to 16 in 2018/19.

Sarah Duxbury emphasised that, given the case-specific nature of individual claims, it was difficult to pinpoint the reasons for the reduction. However, she recognised the effort and commitment demonstrated by Kushal Birla and her team in providing quality advice and expertise with a focus on resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity. She added that Legal Services and Customer Services had enacted measures to promote an awareness across the organisation of national good practice, and lessons learned locally, which had contributed to a responsible approach to managing complaints.

Sarah Duxbury stated that, as an outcome of coronavirus, the Ombudsman had paused activity but had recently indicated that new cases would be accepted from the end of June 2020. She advised that Warwickshire County Council was among the authorities to have signalled to the Ombudsman that they would welcome a phased reintroduction of services to avoid a potential surge in the volume of cases which could present challenges. She indicated that it was expected that an increase in cases would be seen in the short-term prior to a return to ordinary levels in the longer-term.

The Chair expressed his thanks for the report and the improved performance levels.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the Report.

7. Impact of the Construction Phase of HS2 on Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service

Barnaby Briggs (Deputy Chief Fire Officer) presented a verbal report regarding enabling work being undertaken for the HS2 rail scheme in anticipation of commencement of construction work in the longer-term. He confirmed that a written report had been scheduled for presentation to the Committee in September 2020 to provide a more detailed overview of the likely impact of the construction phase of the project on the Fire and Rescue Service.

Barnaby Briggs stated that the proposed HS2 route would intersect the County and necessitate highway realignment works, construction of three tunnels and five viaducts as well as installation of two construction compounds. He reported that proposals to establish 'construction villages' (in the form of multi-acre caravan sites) had been ruled out; instead workers would make use of local amenities. This decision prevented the imposition of a potential fire risk and had been welcomed by the Fire and Rescue Service.

Barnaby Briggs reported that, in his capacity as the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) Liaison Officer, he was well placed to oversee the longer-term strategic implications of the HS2 scheme. He added that Mark Styzaker represented the Fire and Rescue Service during operational planning meetings with HS2 Ltd. He provided some examples of the types of planning measures that had been considered including development of electric trolleys to enable emergency access to tunnels and confined areas which were not accessible to fire engines.

Barnaby Briggs advised that implementation of the HS2 scheme would require a significant number of temporary road closures, including some which were remote from construction sites but constituted 'choke points' where increased haulage traffic was anticipated. He advised that traffic modelling had been utilised to anticipate the impact of the scheme on the highway network. The accuracy of the initial modelling exercises would determine the future value of this approach. He commented that an exemption from legislative requirements allowed HS2 Ltd to provide a shorter notice period to the Authority for proposed temporary road closures, which would ordinarily be six weeks.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Barnaby Briggs reported that engagement with district and borough council planning authorities was ongoing which included the Fire and Rescue Service as well as planning officers at Warwickshire County Council. He advised that a confidentiality agreement was in place to enable consideration of issues such as counter-terrorism but that he was confident that he had a complete view of all aspects of the scheme.

Barnaby Briggs acknowledged Councillor Reilly's observation that an increased risk would be posed by the introduction of balancing ponds and open water resulting from construction activities. He stated that the Fire and Rescue Service had acted to anticipate the multiple hazards brought about by the scheme. He added that Fire and Rescue crews were equipped to respond to open water emergencies and that exercises would be undertaken to ensure that crews were primed for risks in specific locations, including confined spaces.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs advised that HS2 would publish a programme of works in due course, but it was anticipated that the major engineering works would be undertaken

prior to track laying activities. He acknowledged that engagement from HS2 had dipped during the period when the future of the project was in doubt, however he advised that there could be an advantage to inviting a representative of HS2 to attend a meeting of the Committee once the construction phase was underway. The Chair concurred that this could be a positive step.

In response to Councillor Reilly, Barnaby Briggs indicated that the Fire and Rescue Service would be prepared to contribute to a strategic safety assessment for the benefit of the Safer Warwickshire Partnership Board. He advised that the construction phase had been delayed but that he would be well placed to share information when plans for the scheme were brought into focus.

8. Any Urgent Items

There were none.

9. 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.

10. Estates Update Report

The Committee received a confidential update.

The meeting rose at 15:35

A. D. Wan
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Chair