

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 14 July 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Piers Daniell
Councillor Sue Markham
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Will Roberts
Councillor Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans
Councillor Martin Watson

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 Economy and Place

Officers

Charles Barlow, Delivery Lead – Localities
Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director, Finance
Isabelle Moorhouse, Democratic Services Officer
Rob Powell, Strategic Director, Resources
Steve Smith, Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit
Nichola Vine, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Legal and Democratic

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Andy Jenns (Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation), Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer) and Sarah Duxbury (Assistant Director, Governance & Policy).

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

In respect of agenda item 6; as committee members of Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC), the Chair and Councillor Boad declared a personal interest.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair drew members' attention to the imminent retirement of Kieran Amos (Chief Fire Officer). He praised the contribution Kieran Amos had made to Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) and the wider Council, stating that he was knowledgeable, approachable, and highly respected.

Councillor Crump stated that under the leadership of Kieran Amos, WFRS had developed strong links across communities. The success of initiatives such as Hospital to Home demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. Kieran Amos had enabled WFRS to combine effectively with other blue light services; Safer Warwickshire initiatives had strengthened community engagement. He praised the Chief Fire Officer's focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion. He was a valued colleague and highly respected across WFRS, WCC, and in the wider community.

The Chair moved that the Committee formally record its thanks to Kieran Amos for his service to WFRS and the communities of Warwickshire.

Councillor Boad seconded the motion.

The Chair called a vote on the motion, it was unanimously supported.

Resolved:

That the Committee formally records its thanks to Kieran Amos for his service to WFRS and the communities of Warwickshire.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 25 May 2021 and 27 May 2021 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

There were none.

4. Work Programme

Resolved:

That the Committee agrees the updated 2021/22 Work Programme, as set out in the report, and notes the scheduled future meeting dates.

5. Year End Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report (April 2020 to March 2021)

Steve Smith (Assistant Director, Commissioning Support Unit) introduced the report, stating that it drew upon information provided to Cabinet on 17 June 2021 in respect of performance against key business measures (KBMs). He drew attention to the commentaries attached to each of the performance measures outlined within the report. A consolidated performance report on financial outturn had been provided following the presentation of accounts to Cabinet.

In response to Councillor Phillips, Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) advised that WCC was among the few local authorities which continued to offer a local welfare scheme. Several tranches of government funding had been utilised, including the recent £1.3 million 'Local Support Scheme' grant enabling provision of free school meal vouchers to eligible households during the school summer holidays. It also provided scope to introduce measures to address fuel poverty. He stated that plans to phase out the £20-per week boost to universal credit in October 2021 could result in increased demand for the Local Welfare Scheme. The longer-term impact of these changes depended upon future provision of government funding. The measures currently in place would support residents experiencing financial hardship for the duration of the school holidays.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) stated that Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) would not set a target of anything other than zero in relation to the number of fire-related injuries; anything above that could be construed as a commitment to allowing people to be injured. He advised that some Fire & Rescue Services benchmarked performance against a three-year average, which offered a means to view data in context.

Councillor Crump advised that the recently formed cross-party Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Assurance Panel had agreed to examine WFRS targets to consider whether they were practical and proportionate. The Panel provided a good forum to hold this discussion.

In response to Councillor Boad, Councillor Crump stated that in many instances response time targets had been met but WFRS was unable to save the individuals concerned. This underlined the importance of the prevention agenda.

Councillor Boad suggested that the scope for members to fully utilise the full capability of Microsoft Power BI would be improved by bespoke training sessions orientated towards individual scrutiny committees.

The Chair stated that he had liaised with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) officers to examine how Power BI data could be presented in an accessible way to support scrutiny. He praised the App version of the software which provided an interactive platform to view information.

The Chair praised the performance of the ICT service which had enabled a robust and resilient response to the pressures brought about by COVID-19 across the organisation.

In response to Councillor Tromans, Rob Powell advised that the section of the report outlining the percentage of leaders and managers driving a high-performance culture drew upon information derived from staff surveys. An average of between 45% to 50% of staff had responded to the surveys.

To sum up, Steve Smith stated that an updated performance framework would be established alongside plans to refresh the Council Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy. A member working group would be set up to review performance targets and benchmarking processes. He stated that efforts would be made to promote the use of Power BI, including members' interaction with the software. He advised that consideration would be given to how performance information was provided to scrutiny committees, including increased visual presentation of data.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress of the delivery of the Council Plan 2020 - 2025 for the period covered by the report.

6. Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-25 Progress Report

Charles Barlow (Delivery Lead – Localities) introduced the report which provided an update on delivery of the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy alongside a summary of the significant and fundamental changes affecting the sector during the past two years.

Charles Barlow reported that the Strategy had been approved by Cabinet on 12 September 2019. It aimed to create a thriving, sustainable and dynamic voluntary and community sector which improved the lives of individuals and communities in Warwickshire. He advised that the response to the Pandemic had provided further evidence of the wealth of skills and resources within Warwickshire's communities. The report outlined the significant challenges faced by the sector, which had changed fundamentally since March 2020. He praised the quality of the response of community organisations to COVID-19.

Charles Barlow stated that, despite the transformation brought about by the Pandemic, the vision and purpose of the Strategy was unchanged. The key objectives remained to support Council Plan outcomes. He advised that a crucial link was present between the Strategy and the COVID-19 Recovery Plan, which sought "to harness the power of our communities to tackle inequality and social exclusion".

Charles Barlow stated that, in addition to the emphasis on social value and digital inclusion outlined within the Strategy, a focus on climate change, mental wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, and financial exclusion was required.

Charles Barlow directed members' attention to the tables within the appendix of the report which provided details of progress made against the six core priorities of the Strategy. He stated that greater uncertainty could be anticipated over the coming 12 months. The Council would need to maintain a dynamic approach, act upon the knowledge and experience acquired during the Pandemic, invest wisely, and continue to recognise the strengths of the sector.

In response to Councillor Phillips, Charles Barlow advised that the Food Forum had been established in response to the challenges related to food supply and sustainability observed at the outset of the Pandemic. He stated that the issue of food supply could not be considered in isolation, a broader view encompassing debt, money management, housing and employment was required. The Food Forum would adopt an inclusive approach to supporting communities. In respect of the Family Hardship Strategy, he suggested that advice be sought from Kate Sahota (Lead Commissioner, Family Wellbeing).

Councillor Phillips praised the work undertaken by the Localities Team during the Pandemic. They had provided valuable support for individuals who were shielding.

Councillor Boad praised the quality of the report. She highlighted the work undertaken by town and parish councils during the Pandemic. Funding from WCC to Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC) had enabled town and parish councils to better support communities and strengthened relationships between organisations.

The Chair strongly agreed, stating that the response of town and parish councils had been very impressive. He praised the exceptional contribution made by the Localities Team in coordinating arrangements.

Councillor Kaur highlighted the importance of digital inclusion, stating that connectivity was good across Warwickshire; however, a shortage of devices could limit development of skills. She suggested that the proposed Digital Inclusion Task and Finish Group consider inequalities affecting access to equipment.

Charles Barlow highlighted the advantages conferred to households with ready access to devices during the Pandemic. This underlined the importance of work to promote digital inclusion.

To sum up, Charles Barlow thanked the Committee for its endorsement of the approach taken by the Strategy. He stated that it would be necessary to review the 'golden threads' of social value, digital inclusion, climate change, mental wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, and financial exclusion. This would inform delivery of the Strategy's six core priorities, taking account of the considerable impact of COVID-19.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the progress made against the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-25.

7. 2020-21 Performance Report of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service Activity

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) introduced the report which covered the period between April 2020 and March 2021. He stated that COVID-19 was present throughout this period. The report showed a reduction in operational activity due to lockdown; a reduction in face-to-face engagement with the public was also discernible for the same reason.

Barnaby Briggs stated that at the time of publication of the report, a coroner's verdict was anticipated; he confirmed that there had been no fire-related deaths during the period of the report.

Barnaby Briggs advised that 86% of accidental dwelling fires had been confined to the room of origin. He commented that this represented an insightful indicator of Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service's (WFRS) performance.

Barnaby Briggs advised that response times had been affected by the Pandemic. Early on, WFRS had taken the decision to create protective 'bubbles' to limit transmission of the virus. This had restricted scope to move personnel between stations. He stated that, overall, it had been possible to maintain response availability. However, the Pandemic had impacted upon individual stations where minor outbreaks had been experienced.

Barnaby Briggs reported that the Pandemic had impacted upon training programmes. Delays had been experienced due to the requirement to hold training in a covid-safe environment.

Barnaby Briggs reported that the Hospital to Home initiative had proved to be a success with a significant increase in collections throughout the Pandemic. WFRS was considering increasing capacity in this area.

In response to Councillor Phillips, Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) advised that the Authority did not have reason to anticipate cancellation of the government's Better Care Fund, which funded the Hospital to Home scheme.

The Hospital to Home scheme was widely praised; it provided valuable support for elderly and vulnerable individuals and relieved pressure on the health service. The initiative provided a means to undertake safe and well checks, enabling support from other agencies to be made available to individuals who may be reluctant to seek help and could otherwise be overlooked.

In response to Councillor Boad, Barnaby Briggs advised that there had been a decline in community safety contacts due to COVID-19. Opportunities for prevention and protection work were becoming available; a return to pre-pandemic levels was anticipated soon.

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the contents of the report.

8. Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Assurance Panel - Update

Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer) provided an update regarding the recently established cross-party Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) Assurance Panel. Terms of reference for the Group had been agreed at the inaugural meeting. It would aim to act as a 'critical friend' to challenge and monitor the delivery of the IRMP; provide independent scrutiny of the IRMP and its workstreams; performance manage Warwickshire Fire & Rescue Service (WFRS) against the objectives set within annual IRMP action plans; act as an enabler to address any barriers to achieving objectives; champion the IRMP and the work supporting it; and assist WFRS to link-in with corporate strategic documents with common aims.

Barnaby Briggs advised that the Panel had discussed the recent inspection of WFRS by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) at its recent

meeting. Progress against action plans would be reported at the Panel's next meeting in September 2021.

The meeting rose at 14:55

A. D. Wan
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Chair