

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 14 December 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Piers Daniell
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Bill Gifford

Officers

Rob Powell, Strategic Director for Resources
Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Louise Church, Customer Relations Team Lead
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director - Finance
Spencer Payne, Service Manager (Business Intelligence)
Steve Smith, Assistant Director - Commissioning Support Unit
Nichola Vine, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Legal and Democratic)

Others Present

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder)
Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Sarah Boad, Andy Jenns, Sue Markham and Will Roberts. Councillor Bill Gifford was attending as a substitute for Councillor Boad. Apologies were also received from Ben Brook.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair said members of the panel sent their best wishes to Councillor Wallace Redford, who had been taken ill during the meeting of Full Council the previous day.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022 were 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.

4. School Admissions Update

The verbal update was given by Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources), who explained there had been difficulties with in-year school admissions at the start of the new school year. The situation had since stabilised and work to improve the long-term position was well underway. Rob Powell said however that the issues that had arisen were unacceptable and he issued an apology to all those who had been negatively impacted by the difficulties encountered at the start of the term.

Rob Powell said Warwickshire was a county with good schools and good levels of educational attainment, and outlined the entirety of the work undertaken by the admissions service, which was much wider than the in-year admissions (8,260 in 2021/22, an increase from the 5,200 in 2020/21), which had been the subject of the challenges at the start of the Autumn term. This included the main transfer round for primary and secondary schools, and those moving from infant to junior school (17,500 applications for the 2023 school year). The team also oversaw 2,500 11+ tests for grammar school places. He explained that although the majority of parents were able to get the offer of a place at one of their top three preferences (90% of primary parents got their first choice, 97% one of their top three; 82% got their first choice secondary place and 94% one of their top three), strict entry criteria meant that unfortunately not everyone's preference could be accommodated. There was an appeals process available, of which 8 per cent and 11 per cent had been successful in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

As a result of problems with the way the service had previously been delivered, the service introduced some fundamental and important changes to the in-year process ahead of the summer holidays, but this was not planned or executed effectively and led to some significant problems at the start of the school term. The challenge was exacerbated by very high volumes of applications, in part due to people moving into Warwickshire, and issues obtaining data on school places from schools which was not planned effectively. Rob Powell said the Chief Executive had commissioned a review of what had happened, to ensure the lessons were fully learned. This report was scheduled to be completed by February. He said communication had not been clear enough and responses had not been quick enough because of the volume of contacts, and he reiterated his earlier apology for the poor service. He reassured the Committee that once the

issues were identified additional resources were put in place and the backlog of cases was able to be cleared relatively swiftly.

Members were told a new batch processing system had been implemented, which used auto-allocation, and would make the process faster, fairer and more transparent. This new approach relied upon receiving information from all schools about available places in a timely manner, with data from 99 schools missing in late August. Rob Powell said this had not happened in sufficient time. Once the issue was identified in late August, schools had been helpful in rapidly providing the data by 5 September. There was a backlog of 1,657 children who had not been allocated a school place by the start of term; the team worked incredibly hard to process these applications at pace and all secondary school allocations had been cleared by September 9 and those for primary schools were completed by September 16. Most significantly, there was a poor decision to 'hold back' until September applications received in the latter part of the summer term, which should have been escalated.

The new process had now bedded down and was starting to show positive effects, although there was further work to do. The team had made over 2,700 offers this term. Problems with the response to calls and emails had been addressed by recruiting additional call handlers through the Customer Service Centre and training them to deal effectively with incoming calls about admissions, creating more capacity for the Council's specialist admissions officers to deal with the more complex activity working with families, carers and schools.

Systemic factors were the main driver for the decision to move the service back into Education Services from the Resources Directorate, with effect from 1 January 2023. This would provide further improvements through closer alignment with other relevant and inter-dependent services, including commissioning, sufficiency, school transport, fair access and other key dependencies. This change would also underpin ongoing implementation of the Council's longer-term change work.

Rob Powell then explained the longer-term changes being introduced to improve the admissions transfer process. This has involved work with parents, carers, schools, early years settings and professionals. An improvement plan, involving organisational development support for the team, would help further develop the team's skills, knowledge and culture, and improve the data available to support the process. This identified that over 90% of families apply relatively easily and get one of their top three choices, but 10% often need additional support to overcome challenges. Parents often lacked the information they needed to make good choices, often leading to unrealistic expectations, conflict and resource challenges. The application portal on the website had been redesigned to provide better information on schools and provide access to support parental choices. Rob Powell said schools often set their own admissions criteria and it was important parents understood the relevant criteria for each school and the likelihood of being offered a place. Often school places would be determined by distance to the school from the child's home address. Webinars explaining the application process and giving advice to parents had taken place during the transfer window, and these had been attended by around 1,500 parents. Videos had been produced to help parents navigate the applications process for primary and secondary applications, and had received over 3,600 views since their launch in August. Early data on the transfer process suggested parents and carers had found the experience of choosing a school easy (with a score of 3.86 out of 5), and felt well informed about their school choices when submitting their applications (3.91 out of 5).

Councillor Pete Gilbert said he hoped lessons would be learned, not just to cover the short-term issues but also to address longer-term concerns. He said children should have the option to travel across the county to attend better performing schools if possible to improve their educational attainment, but also other options should be opened to those who were less academically gifted. Rob Powell said that gaps in educational attainment were a key priority in the recently approved countywide approach to levelling up.

Responding to points made by Councillor Bill Gifford, Rob Powell said that during the summer specific cases had been expedited wherever possible. By the time of the school census day, the service had cleared the backlog of applications. Rob Powell said communication and engagement with schools had improved as a result of the issues over the summer.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Robert Tromans, Rob Powell said parents would be able to find a school's admissions criteria on the revamped website. He reiterated that entry criteria often varied from school to school. Councillor Peter Butlin said there had been an almost unprecedented number of in-year applications. This had led to an increased demand for home to school transport, which put constraints on resources and finances. Councillor Butlin stated his belief that parents would sometimes select a school without taking into account the transport implications.

In response to a question from Councillor Rik Spencer regarding school admission appeals, Rob Powell said some parents would only put down one preference on their application and this could potentially put them in a difficult situation if they were unsuccessful. It was important to make parents aware of making more than one preference to minimise potential frustration. Rob Powell said he was unaware how many parents who submitted an appeal had been allocated their second preference school, but would endeavour to include this in the February paper on admissions.

In discussions following a question raised by Councillor Caroline Phillips, members were told that Warwickshire was a net importer of pupils. Distance from the school was one of the admissions criteria which could sometimes mean that children from outside Warwickshire would be given a place over a child living inside the county if they lived closer to the school. Councillor Phillips stated her belief that this was unfair on children living in Warwickshire. Rob Powell emphasised the strict legal requirement to apply the admissions criteria fairly to all children who have applied for a place in a particular school.

Responding to a question from Councillor Gilbert, Rob Powell said there had not been any issues with people being unable to access the Council's admissions portal and said he was confident this would continue to be the case.

5. Council Plan 2022-2027 - Quarter 2 Performance Progress Report

The item was introduced by Andy Felton (Assistant Director, Finance), who explained the report focused on four main areas: key business measures; the integrated delivery plan; finances; and organisational risk. He said various factors had created a lot of volatility, meaning there was currently a lot of uncertainty relating to areas that fell under the remit of the Committee. Among these were issues relating to cost of living, and this was reflected in the report. Despite this, performance was good and the majority of key business measures were on track to be delivered. Andy Felton highlighted the sections of the report where performance levels had been good, and where there were areas of challenge.

Members were told there were 55 actions relating to the integrated delivery plan. Of these, two per cent had been completed, five per cent had not yet been started, and 17 per cent showed levels of risk or compromise. These were highlighted in the report, and the reasons why they presented a risk were included.

Andy Felton said there was an underspend of £1.8million in the finance areas relating to the remit of the Committee. Most of the underspend related to the Enabling service, and this would be carried forward to the next financial year. Overall however the Council had an overspend, although capital spending was broadly on track. Two key strategic risks had been identified; these were the slowdown in the economy and increased inflation, and the associated impacts of cost of living; and service risks associated with the Fire and Rescue Service, relating to availability of on-call firefighters and capacity to deliver the protection plan.

Responding to a question raised by Councillor Phillips relating to schools going into deficit, Andy Felton said there had been a high level of overspend in relation to the schools' high needs block. A number of schools had reported having deficit issues. However the Chancellor had recently announced additional resources of £2.3billion for the next financial year and the same amount for the following year, and it was anticipated that this would address the financial problems schools were having.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Resources and F&R OSC Customer Feedback Report 2021/22

The item was introduced by Louise Church (Delivery Lead, Admissions). She explained that customer feedback was broken down into complaints, comments, questions and compliments. During 2021/22, 75 per cent of cases were closed within the appropriate service level agreement. This was ahead of the target of 70 per cent. A higher proportion of complaints were being made digitally. Louise Church said that 82 per cent of complaints were in relation to communication, physical environment issues, and protection of users. Louise Church said there had been an overall 21 per cent increase in complaints. Although the Communities directorate had seen a 12 per cent decrease, the Resources directorate had had a 56 per cent increase and People had had a 44 per cent increase. Better staff training and planning had been implemented to improve the timescales associated with dealing with complaints. Louise Church said there had also been an increase in the number of compliments that had been received. She said 69 per cent of the compliments received related to the People directorate.

Councillor Tromans said an increased number of complaints was a reflection that the Council was engaging better with people, rather than brushing their complaints to one side. He noted there were around 1,100 complaints that did not appear to have had an outcome yet, and asked for more information on this. It was agreed that a further analytical breakdown of complaints would be provided at a future meeting.

Councillor Gilbert said he had an issue with residents being referred to as customers, as they did not have a choice other than to use the Council's services. He asked if the way the data was managed would be looked at. Louise Church said work was being done on making information more accessible to people.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. WFRS Performance Benchmarking 2021/2022

The item was introduced by Barnaby Briggs (Assistant Chief Fire Officer). He stated that although the report was collated and compiled by Warwickshire County Council's business information team, it was also reliant on nationally-obtained data from other sources and the quality of the data could not be verified by the team. Barnaby Briggs said the report reinforced the value of the prevention strategy, and this was reflected in the relatively low number of incidents the Fire and Rescue Service was called to. The prevention strategy applied to service control, where callers would be challenged to see if a fire crew needed to be dispatched. Warwickshire was the best performing fire service per capita in relation to accidental house fires.

It was noted there had been a rise in the number of fire-related deaths, which was attributed to an increase in the number of people using this method to commit suicide. Barnaby Briggs said the Fire and Rescue Service was working with other agencies to identify at-risk people; however there was little preventative work that could be done if someone came from outside the county with the intention of committing suicide. The highest level of risk came from road traffic collisions. Barnaby Briggs said this was the most significant outlier, and reasons for this were contained within the report. The Chair noted there would be a disproportionately high number of road traffic collisions in the county because of the amount of motorway.

Councillor Gilbert said WFRS was a resilient service that faced many challenges, and was a fantastic resource. Councillor Daniell noted that WFRS had been the first emergency service to respond when Councillor Redford had been taken ill the previous day.

Councillor Daniell asked what work was being undertaken in relation to reviews of business premises. Barnaby Briggs said a previous government had undertaken to reduce fire protection inspections of business premises being carried out by Fire and Rescue Services. When this decision was reversed, there were limited numbers of trained inspection officers. The situation was compounded by Covid delaying officer training. However the situation had now improved and officers had been suitably well trained that they were able to make a solo inspection; until now inspections had been carried out by more than one officer. This was helping to clear the backlog of required inspections.

Members noted the contents of the report, and stated they had full confidence in WFRS to protect residents.

8. Voice of Warwickshire residents' panel - Project Update

The item was introduced by Spencer Payne (Service Manager, Business Intelligence). He reminded members the panel had been set up to engage residents over policy matters, and a request had been made to provide an update after the panel had been running for 12 months. Spencer Payne said the work the panel had been undertaking over the past year was outlined in the appendix to the main report. It was felt that good intelligence had been provided by the panel and they had provided a positive contribution that had helped to influence policy making, particularly in relation to the sustainable futures strategy and the approach to levelling up.

Responding to a question from the Chair, Spencer Payne said officers would track who had contributed to each of the four surveys. If people had not been contributing then they would be contacted to see if they wished to continue.

Members noted the contents of the report.

9. Work Programme

Members agreed that an update on the Customer Feedback Report would be added to the work programme. The timing would be agreed at the next Chair and Spokespersons' meeting.

It was noted that the approach to the School Admissions update in February would be agreed in due course.

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

10. Any Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters to discuss.

The Chair thanked all the officers and members involved with the Committee and wished them all a happy Christmas and New Year.

The meeting rose at 3.26pm

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Chair