

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 22 February 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

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

Officers

Chris Baird - Interim Assistant Director for Education Services
Helen Barnsley – Senior Democratic Services Officers
Matthew Biggs - Education and Early Years Strategy and Commissioning Manager
Ben Brook - Chief Fire Officer
Rebecca Couch - Strategy Policy & Performance Manager
Liz Firmstone - Finance Service Manager - Transformation
Bal Jacob - HROD Strategy and Commissioning Manager
Chris Norton - Strategy and Commissioning Manager
Rob Powell - Strategic Director for Resources
Steve Robbins - Finance Projects Delivery Lead
Kate Sullivan - Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance

Others Present

David Lawrence, Local Democracy Reporter

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Pete Gilbert and Caroline Phillips.

Apologies were also received from Craig Cusack - Assistant Director for Enabling Services and Andy Felton - Assistant Director - Finance (Deputy S151).

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The committee were informed that this meeting would be the last one attended by David Lawrence, Local Democracy Reporter. The Chair thanked David for all his attendance and reporting at council meetings over the years, and everyone wished him well for the future.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 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

Following a question from Councillor Sarah Boad in relation to the proposed industrial action by the Fire Brigade, Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety informed the committee that an offer from the national employers is being considered which is an increase on the offer from London Fire Brigade.

Councillor Crump stated that officers are hopeful that the offer will be accepted and that members of the committee will be informed as soon as possible.

4. School Admissions Review

Rob Powell (Strategic Director, Resources) introduced Chris Baird -Interim Assistant Director for Education Services and Matt Biggs - Education and Early Years Strategy and Commissioning Manager to the committee explaining that they would also be presenting the report to the committee.

Rob Powell reminded the committee that on January 1st, 2023, the admissions service transferred to Education Services to ensure a more integrated approach. The committee was reminded of the activities of the admissions service which can be found in paragraph 1.5 of the report.

The report presented to the committee was completed following a review and conclusion from an independent reviewer following significant problems with the in-year admission process during the summer of 2022. Warwickshire County Council commissioned the review to ensure they were open and transparent and to allow officers to learn from when things don't go according to plan.

Rob Powell gave sincere apologies to children, parents, carers, and elected members that things went wrong stating that it was avoidable stress. The core issue was a poorly introduced change which has now been embedded in and has significantly improved.

It was noted that once problems became apparent, officers were able to move quickly and all issues were resolved by the 16th of September 2022. Rob Powell confirmed that by January 2023 the service was 100% compliant and this reflects the stabilisation of the process.

The report identified six related factors which caused the issues over the summer of 2022 –

1. high demand for in-year applications, caused in some part by increasing demographic movement into the County including children arriving through the Homes for Ukraine scheme;
2. the decision to deploy an untested automated process for in-year admissions;
3. a lack of consistent and appropriate communication with families and schools;
4. the Council and schools not sharing timely data and school place availability;
5. a lack of live data and management information to enable effective oversight of service performance
6. unclear responsibilities and accountabilities for the admissions process

The committee noted that there are 7 recommendations highlighted in the report that will be part of the improvement plan. The new assistant director for Education, Johnny Kyriacou, starts at Warwickshire County Council on 1st March 2023 and has been tasked with the implementation of the improvement plan, to be completed by the end of March 2024.

Chris Baird asked the committee to note that the current actions and work that is still underway, started before the service moved to Education Services. In addition, the service is receiving fewer complaints now which is a sign that things are improving. Work is continuing to build up the confidence and skills of the team; including the response to correspondence such as emails and letters. The backlog of communication issues has been cleared. Everything will be captured in the action plan which is to be completed by the end of March 2023.

The Chair stated that the committee would like their apologies to be noted in the minutes. Warwickshire County Council has learnt a lot of lessons and has worked hard to put it right. It is commendable how the service responded in recognising the errors made; the committee members appreciate and recognise this.

Councillor Robert Tromans added that that the committee appreciated the summary of what had happened and is glad to see that it has put on record. Councillor Tromans then asked what has been done to repair the poor relations with schools. Rob Powell confirmed that the admissions team had not been used to building relationships with schools, but this has since changed. Matt Biggs added that the relationship between the admissions team and parents and schools is fundamental. Face to face meeting have been arranged with schools who raised concerns about the service and there is now a growing network of support.

Councillor Sarah Boad thanked Rob Powell for bringing the report to the committee, adding that it can't have been an easy report for officers to write. Councillor Boad asked why the schools were not sending back the information needed by the admissions team in a timely manner? Rob Powell confirmed that information had been requested but that officers had not given a reason or clarification for the request and the request was not chased in timely fashion. When the schools were asked for it again and with clear reasoning, it was provided in a matter of days.

Matt Biggs confirmed that Warwickshire County Council takes full responsibility for the communication errors, adding that there is now a new portal in place; a data exchange platform. The schools add the data to the platform and officers can see it straight away. Some schools are experiencing issues with the new portal and are being supported by officers.

The Chair requested that feedback from the committee, noted in the minutes, be reported back to officers. The committee accepts that mistakes were made but that the candour of the staff in resolving these issues should be noted. The committee appreciated the way the problems were handled and wished their thanks to Rob to be noted, for coming to the committee and being so honest.

Resolved

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. considers and comments on the Review of the in-year school admissions process (Appendix
2. asks the Chair to share the Review with the Chair of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
3. notes the position in respect of legal powers in respect of school admissions (Appendix 2);
4. notes and comments on progress with the systems review of the Admissions Service.

5. Treasury Management Strategy

Chris Norton (Strategy and Commissioning Manager – Treasury, Pensions, Audit, Insurance and Risk) provided an overview of the report and gave clarification of what the report included.

The committee noted the following highlights –

- Warwickshire County Council is in a strong financial position at the moment with strong reserves. A key aspect of the strategy is borrowing more than is needed to but this allows the council to be more efficient.
- Rates of return are rising naturally due to interest rates.
- The rate of return on long term investments are strong.
- There is an option to potentially pre-pay financial investments on pension plans for the next three financial years

Councillor Robert Tromans stated that he was pleased to hear that treasury management is taking a prudent and low risk approach; more about safety than squeezing out a slightly higher percentage with a higher risk. Following a question from Councillor Tromans in relation to the total capital expenditure showing as different figures on two tables in the report, Chris Norton confirmed that he would look into it and get back to the committee.

Chris Norton continued and confirmed that the security risk is about making sure the council doesn't lose money. The strategy approves rules that officers have to stick too and sets out certain standards must be met; diversifying portfolios to ensure that the money is there when it is needed at the right time.

The committee noted the challenges set out in the report and that council tax revenues are not a material issue for the council's cash flows. It was noted that there is a significant risk on the treasury side; what will happen with interest rates is an uncertainty at the moment. Making judgements can be a small or high risks.

Following a question from Councillor Sarah Boad in relation to whether the council had over-borrowed and if it was worth it, Chris Norton confirmed that over-borrowing is done due to fixed term debts with fixed interest rates and the compensation that would have to be paid if the debt was repaid early. Officers can then use the funds from over-borrowing to top up portfolios

Resolved

The Committee notes and comments on the 2023/24 Treasury Management Strategy approved by Council on 7 February 2023.

6. Q3 Integrated Performance Report

The report was introduced by Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) who provided an overview in relation to Quarter 3 organisational performance. It was noted that the information has been taken from the performance report presented to Cabinet on 16th February and which is relevant to this committee.

The committee noted that there are still significant challenges in relation to the performance relevant to the committee.

The following highlights were presented to the committee -

There are 31 Key business measures and 25 available for reporting. Of the 31 measures, 14 are on track, 11 not on track (shown in Appendix one).

In relation to the Integrated Development Plan; 67% of measures are on track and 4% are complete. It was noted that 7% of the measures are yet to start

Councillor Sue Markham asked a question in relation to the performance data that was marked in the report as "not applicable"? Steve Smith, Assistant Director - Commissioning Support Unit confirmed that there is no target for the year yet but that they are in the process of being set.

Councillor Martin Watson asked for clarity on the figures that are showing as not on track; it seems that some of them will never be on track. It was confirmed that performance measures such as fire related deaths is something that officers are reviewing at the moment. Officers agreed that targets such as those for fire deaths don't make sense as it is. The Chair added that this topic has come up before and really does need to be reviewed.

Rob Powell continued by adding that there are small number of measures in the new performance framework that do need to be reviewed, they don't quite fit/make sense as they are. There is a new process that can be presented to members as a better way of measuring progress.

Councillor Tromans added that the report shows 31 key business measures but that there is only data for 29 there is only data for 29. While it is understood that some are reported annually or every six months but the committee should have a complete list in report.

Councillor Boad added that the report doesn't show if things are getting better or worse and that there is no comparison in the report. Rob Powell confirmed that it is a work in progress but the Power BI tools will allow members to look back and make comparisons. It is hard to add it to a flat report. Members were encouraged to make use of the Power BI system.

Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety confirmed that the Key Performance measures are currently being reviewed to see if they are fit for purpose and the fire death measures currently do not seem fit for purpose. These measures could be presented with a clear narrative given to the committee as to what happened and why.

Resolved

The Committee considers and comments on Quarter 3 organisational performance, progress against the Integrated Delivery Plan, management of finances and risk.

7. Update on Capital Financial Management project

Steve Robbins (Finance Projects Delivery Lead) and Liz Firmstone (Service Manager – Transformation) presented the report to the committee, starting with the background and then the findings.

Liz Firmstone confirmed the review included looking at the way the capital programme was managed. The committee noted that there had been an increase in borrowing costs and an increase in material costs. There were a number of challenges and concerns about slippage. This project was concerned with what officers could do internally to ensure the best value for money for the council.

The project started in 2021 and areas for improvement identified. In 2022 work started that included stakeholder engagement with 100 individual across Warwickshire County Council and Councillors. The project also reviewed best practice across other authorities and recommendations from the national audit office, identifying strengths and areas for improvements.

Steve Robbins confirmed that the majority of projects were delivered on time and had very low risks. The committee noted that there are still areas to improve and a need for a more accurate costings at the project point of approval. In relation to new investigation funding, it was confirmed that more investigation would be needed for greater certainty that the project would be delivered within budget

The committee received an update on financial systems including budgeting and financial software. There also needs to be a greater understanding of what stakeholders need to get the best out of each project. New key business measures have been introduced.

It was confirmed that there will be an annual report to key stakeholders which will include information in relation to the benefits accrued

The Chair thanked the officers for bringing the report to the committee adding that it was an innovative report.

Councillor Robert Tromans echoed the comments made by the Chair and added that he was pleased to see that there is more rigor around capital projects. Councillor Tromans added that there are some things out of our control and asked how cost slippage is managed? Liz Firmstone confirmed that very often government grants are match funded so the risk is to the council and not the governments. In addition, this risk is considered and an appropriate level of contingency is put in place. The committee noted that part of the culture change is being very up front about the potential risks, not all of which will materialise but there will be a contingency budget in place and it is there to manage risk.

Councillor Peter Butlin, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property added that over the last 12 months, inflation has driven costs up and that the more officers know before a project is started, the better. Councillor Butlin continued, adding that many issues that have arisen in the past are things that officers should have known before the project started. This new project will be embedded into the service and how it works. It is a rolling project and will not eradicate slippage but it will improve it.

The Chair finished by stating that the report was welcomed and the committee looks forward to updates.

Resolved

The Committee:

1. Considers and comments upon the progress made to date in delivering the Capital Financial Management project and the plans to offer a Member briefing session on updated capital financial management.
2. Considers and comments upon any specific areas it would like to see covered in the briefing session.

8. Energy Strategy

The report was introduced by Rebecca Couch -Lead Commissioner – Strategic Policy and Performance who confirmed that the report sets out the development of the energy strategy which is a significant update on the strategy from 2015. The committee noted that the energy strategy is aligned with sustainable future strategy as well as the corporate waste and environment strategies.

The key themes proposed for the strategy were highlighted as follows -

- Targets and Standards
- Property Construction and Maintenance Standards
- Renewable Energy
- Finance
- Environmental Impact
- Community Engagement

It was confirmed that once the strategy has been developed there will be an action plan put in place which will set the council's current construction standards and make recommendations in relation to how these may need to change.

The Energy Strategy will also identify how the Council will support the responsible management of energy and utilities in all estate operations and net zero emissions for the County by 2050 by working with public sector and other partners and community groups.

Following a question from Councillor Sarah Boad it was confirmed that both financial and environmental implications are key drivers in the strategy's development.

Resolved

That the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers and comments on the approach to the development of the Energy Strategy, including specifically the scope, the framework and the proposals for stakeholder engagement.

9. Our People Strategy Annual review

The report was introduced by Kate Sullivan - Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance and Bal Jacob - HROD Strategy and Commissioning Manager.

The annual review of the Our People Strategy was first launched in 2020 and reviews what the council has achieved and proposals for the following year. The report highlights the activity for the last 12 months against agreed priorities.

The 17 key priorities for 2023/2024 can be found at point 1.5 of the report. Point 1.6 of the report lists the measures of success and performance against the key business measures.

The committee noted that the report will be presented to the Staff and Pensions Committee on the 6th of March following this committee's thoughts and comments.

The Chair stated that there is nothing more important than the people at the council and that members would be nothing without them. The Chair thanked the officers for the report.

Following a question from Councillor Sarah Boad in relation to the collection of statistics that could be used to inform the development of the strategy, Kate Sullivan confirmed that, for the most part, people are willing to share information that could help. The information that is collected includes social economical information. It was confirmed that this information would be attached to someone's HR record but would always be anonymous when it is used for performance information or in the development of a strategy.

Resolved

The Committee notes the activity as set out in the 2022/23 Annual Review of Our People Strategy and considers and comments upon the proposed delivery priorities to inform the development of the Our People Strategy Delivery Plan for 2023/24

10. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

Following a question from Councillor Robert Tromans, it was agreed that Rob Powell - Strategic Director for Resources would provide an update to the committee in relation to the inflation contingency fund.

11. Any Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters to discuss.

12. Reports Containing Exempt or Confidential Information

13. School Admissions Review

The Committee noted the contents of the report.

The meeting rose at 3.38pm

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Chair