

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Wallace Redford
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Mejar Singh
Councillor Richard Spencer

Officers

Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Director of Enabling Services
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Nichola Vine, Head of Legal and Governance

Others Present

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder, Finance and Property)
Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder, Fire & Rescue and Community Safety)
Councillor Martin Watson (Portfolio Holder, Economy)
Jill Machado (Public)
Scott Haberton (Public)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Roberts and Tromans, and from Sarah Duxbury and Bal Jacob. Councillor Watson had sent apologies as he would miss the start of the meeting but would attend as soon as he was able.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

There were none.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

2. Public Question Time

The Chair said a question had been registered that, while the topic was within the Committee's remit, it was for a decision-making body and not the Committee to determine. However he said he was prepared to allow the question to be asked.

Jill Machado asked about the decision taken by Warwickshire County Council to close the Young Firefighters scheme in 2014. She stated there were many Fire Cadet groups nationally, as a charitable organisation, and there was interest amongst youngsters in setting up a group in Bidford on Avon. However this would not be possible without backing from the Council and/or Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service. She asked if any support could be offered.

Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) said he was happy to discuss this further outside of the meeting. Councillor Crump said the Fire and Rescue Service was valued by members of the public. He stated his belief a scheme for young people could be beneficial for their mental health, in addition to helping with community safety and protection. He said he would be happy to raise this topic with Cabinet.

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

Councillor Boad asked if there was an update on the timescales for consideration to be given to the outcome of the Resourcing to Risk consultation. Ben Brook said the next stage would be for the analysis to be considered by Corporate Board, before going on to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Full Council. It was noted a meeting of the OSC had been convened for 6 June specifically for a report on Resourcing to Risk to be discussed. Councillor Crump said this date was being worked towards, but there was a desire not to rush into any decision making. There had been a higher than expected response to the consultation and it was important all the responses were analysed properly and reflected in the eventual report. Ben Brook said there would need to be engagement with stakeholders, and agreement of terms and conditions, before any proposed actions could be implemented.

4. 2022-23 Performance Report of Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service Activity

The item was introduced by Ben Brook, who reminded members the report looked at performance for 2022/23 but there would be some reference to performance levels for 2023/24. The following statistics were highlighted:

- There had been four fire-related deaths and 30 fire-related injuries during the reporting period. After every fatality or serious injury a serious fire incident review would take place,

involving partner organisations, to establish the circumstances and if there had been more that could have been done to prevent the incident.

- 64.3 per cent of incidents were attended by a crew within ten minutes, which was below the target of 75 per cent.
- Instances of house fires had increased, which reflected a national trend. However, 90 per cent of fires had been contained to the room in which it had started, which demonstrated good prevention and protection work.
- There had been a small increase in the number of road traffic collisions attended.
- Whole time fire appliance availability had been 98.4 per cent. For on-call crews at key times, availability was 52.4 per cent.
- There had been a reduction in calls requesting a crew to take part in the hospital to home initiative.
- 84.5 per cent of 999 calls to fire control had been answered within 90 seconds, below the target of 90 per cent.
- There had been a big increase in the number of fire safety audits, and increased engagement with businesses.

Members noted the number of incidents being attended within the target time, and how this tied in with the Resourcing to Risk consultation. Responding to a point raised by the Chair, Ben Brook said using a statistical analysis of incidents per 100,000 people had some advantages but due to the rural nature of some areas of Warwickshire it was not always the best methodology to use. The Business Intelligence team were looking into ways of providing comparable statistics to show how current figures compared to historical ones.

Responding to questions asked by Councillor Sinclair, Ben Brook said benchmarking in terms of road traffic collision and flood risk response was compared against another county council. However Warwickshire's motorway network was not comparable against another fire and rescue service, due to the high ratio of motorway against the county's rurality. A spike of ten injuries noted in April 2022 was likely to have occurred during a small number of more severe incidents. There was no correlation between seriousness and number of injuries against time of year or day of the week, although vulnerable people were more likely to be adversely affected. National trends in incidents were set out by the annual State of Fire Report produced by the Home Office.

Councillor Boad noted the increase in property fires and suggested this could be due in part to the increase in the number of new homes. An overall increase in incidents compared to previous years could also be attributable to the Covid pandemic, as they were less likely to occur during periods of lockdown. Councillor Boad also stated her belief climate change may have had an impact on the number of incidents; for example, more fires taking place in summer due to higher temperatures, and there had been a notable increase in flooding over the winter. Ben Brook said climate change had been covered during the Resourcing to Risk consultation, and there was an acknowledged need to be better prepared for climate-related incidents. Although there had been a large number of climate-related fires, the majority of these had been low-level grass fires that had started in 2022 when there had been unprecedented high temperatures. Councillor Crump said that floods could be predicted as certain places would be more likely to be affected by them, so resources to combat flooding could be allocated to where they were needed. However, during a recent storm when there were issues with flooding there were only 14 pumps available. Councillor Redford said there had been flooding in areas where historically there had been none previously, which was caused by run-off from saturated ground. He said four houses had been affected by flooding in his ward this winter.

Regarding the increase in the number of incidents, Ben Brook said in some cases there were only a small number of incidents but this represented a large percentage increase. Many of these occurred during the period of extreme heat in 2022 when temperatures were 40 degrees. He said there was no evidence nationally to show new properties presented an increase in the number of house fires. There was however a suggestion fuel poverty could be a factor, with people burning things not suited to fireplaces or failing to properly clean chimneys.

Councillor Redford said having a dedicated station manager at on-call stations was a good initiative, as it could help with availability of firefighters and meeting timescale targets to attend incidents. He asked if members could be given a briefing note on this to improve their understanding.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Butlin, Ben Brook said fire and rescue services had no legislative responsibilities relating to flooding. There was no funding available and no statutory duties. Additionally, when WFRS was asked to respond to planning applications it could comment on access and egress but not flooding. WFRS did have a memorandum of understanding with the Environment Agency however.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Ben Brook said response time targets would be longer for road traffic collisions and incidents occurring where there was no address as these would be more difficult to identify a location for. Regarding fuel poverty being a factor in property fires, Ben Brook said this had been identified as an issue in a piece of work commissioned by the National Fire Chiefs' Council and conducted by independent experts. He said there was no one factor that increased risk, but a combination of risks put together and poverty and deprivation were among those factors. He added there had been a spike in chimney fires recently, and it was hoped additionally prevention and awareness training could assist with tackling the issue.

Members noted the contents of the report.

5. Approach to Artificial Intelligence

The item was introduced by Craig Cusack (Director, Enabling Services), who took members through a presentation slideshow that outlined what artificial intelligence (AI) was and the Council's direction of travel regarding its usage. He explained there were many facets to AI and showed members an example as the technology was able to generate subtitles of what he was saying during the presentation. AI was also able to analyse data and detect fraud, interpret figures, create images and diagrams to summarise key points from a document, and answer questions. Technology had also developed to a point where Chat GPT software was able to identify emotions and summarise how people may feel upon seeing a particular image.

Members were given statistics from people within various industries that predicted the extent to how much AI could be used in their businesses. Craig Cusack explained the Council was looking into ways that AI could be used to benefit residents and users of Council services. There were opportunities to improve productivity, but at the moment these were likely to be small due to the current limitations in AI capabilities. Additionally, costs associated with implementing AI were not insignificant and the technology was not infallible. Members were reminded the Samsung central database had recently been hacked after AI had been tricked into sharing the data. However, the Business Intelligence team were pressing ahead with analysing which service areas would benefit

the most from the implementation of AI and where the most efficiencies could be made. Among the considerations being made were where data would be stored (either a Cloud-based network, or another system) and impact on budgets. Craig Cusack said an AI programme called CoPilot 365 had been implemented into certain areas of the Council.

A set of principles regarding AI use and best value had been published. It was acknowledged there was a digital divide amongst Warwickshire's population, and not all residents would be able to make use of AI systems. Craig Cusack said it had been suggested by Corporate Board that the Council should adopt the 'first follower' approach, and walk with other local authorities who were further progressed with AI use about what had and had not worked well.

Councillor Sinclair noted the Council had traditionally been a risk-averse organisation and asked what steps would be taken to monitor AI use and the risks associated with it. Craig Cusack said any piece of software being used by the Council for the first time had to undergo a data protection impact assessment. Procedures had been updated so any AI applications that could potentially be used by the Council would also undergo this assessment, and they could be withdrawn if necessary. A risk monitoring report was presented to Corporate Board. Regarding being a first follower, Craig Cusack said this enabled the Council to influence the market without being the first risk holder.

Councillor Boad said there were certain circumstances where use of AI and Chat GPT would not be appropriate for transcribing a conversation, for example during a social services enquiry. Craig Cusack said a transcription service was an area that was being investigated, and there were software programmes available that would provide a summary of discussions rather than taking a note of absolutely everything that was said. He said this would make the role of people in the meeting more productive as there would be less reliance on having to review recordings or notes. He accepted a point raised by Councillor Boad that residents should have other means of contacting the Council, such as by telephoning or using online forms, rather than introducing a raft of AI-based software all at once.

Responding to a question from Councillor Spencer, Craig Cusack said Warwickshire was in the minority of councils that were looking to be a first follower and influence AI usage. He said there were a large number of councils that at this stage did not want to have anything to do with implementing AI. However, there were a few others that were looking to embrace it and were actively involved in experimenting its use. Rob Powell (Executive Director, Resources) said the Council had already adopted a Cloud-based data storage system and implemented use of Power BI to assist with analysis work. It was important the Council was ready to adapt to change and took more a sophisticated approach to risk involving setting risk appetites. This had been set out in the Strategic Risk Management Framework that had been presented to Cabinet in January. Rob Powell said this revised strategy demonstrated the Council was not a risk averse organisation.

A report on the digital roadmap of future software use was due to go to Corporate Board in the near future. This would feed into a review and potential refresh of the data and digital strategy.

6. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

7. Any Urgent Matters

The Chair noted this was the last meeting of the municipal year and thanked members, portfolio holders and officers for all their work supporting the Committee over the last year.

The meeting rose at 3.52pm

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Chair