

Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 25 September 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Chair)
Councillor Jo Barker
Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Sarah Feeney
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Mejar Singh
Councillor Richard Spencer
Councillor Robert Tromans

Officers

Ben Brook, Chief Fire Officer
Andy Carswell, Democratic Services Officer
Craig Cusack, Director of Enabling Services
Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources
Charles Barlow, Delivery Lead - Localities
Mandeep Kalsi, Performance Officer
Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance
Chris Norton, Head of Investments, Audit and Risk
Kate Sullivan, Head of Strategic HR
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 Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder, Environment, Climate and Culture)

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Birdi, Redford, Roberts and Watson. Councillor Barker was attending as a substitute. Councillor Timms had sent apologies as she would miss the start of the meeting but would attend as soon as she could.

(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 26 June 2024 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

Councillor Sarah Boad asked if there was an update on the resourcing to risk scheme. Councillor Andy Crump said significant progress had been made, consultations had been going well with registered employer representatives, and talks had begun with affected staff members. The results would start to become known from January 2025 once the changes had had time to become embedded.

The Chair asked if Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service was equipped to deal with battery storage facilities, following concerns that had been raised by members of a parish council. Ben Brook (Chief Fire Officer) said WFRS was aware of any new facilities and would make site visits and would be involved in the planning process. It was acknowledged as a foreseeable risk.

Councillor Sarah Feeney asked how prepared services were in the event of flooding, following discussions regarding the Community Risk Management Plan at Full Council the previous day. Councillor Crump said officers were working with partnership organisations to make the best preparations possible to mitigate flooding, such as by removing blockages. However it was becoming increasingly difficult to predict levels of rainfall. Councillor Crump said flood resilience schemes were available in many areas, but often residents did not come forward to participate in them and take active steps to protect their properties. Responding to a follow-up question from Councillor Feeney, Councillor Crump said natural flood defences were a possible solution but they would not solve the issue alone. Ben Brook said the Local Resilience Forum was very active in Warwickshire at engaging with different agencies in relation to flooding. Additionally, the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Resilience Forum had recently updated its flood plans.

4. Q1 Integrated Performance Report 2024/25

The item was introduced by Craig Cusack (Director, Enabling Services). He reminded members the report was divided into four sections covering areas within the Committee's remit: progress against the Council Delivery Plan; performance measures; financial assessment; and risk. Of the issues relevant to the Committee, 80 per cent of activities relating to the Council Delivery Plan were on track and 61 per cent of performance measures were on track to be met. Four

performance issues had been identified. These included the budget and delivery of savings, due to the current demand and cost pressures facing the Council. Another related to staff sickness rates. Craig Cusack reminded members a briefing note on staff sickness had been circulated prior to the meeting as requested at the Committee's previous meeting. Other identified issues related to WFRS and some delays in site-specific business cases from the Warwickshire Property Development Group.

Responding to a point raised by Councillor Tim Sinclair regarding staff sickness, Kate Sullivan (Head of Strategic HR) said rates had increased and active steps were being taken to address this. However, increases in staff sickness rates reflected a national trend and were not unique to Warwickshire. There were some pockets of longer-term sickness, and tackling these was a key priority. Work had taken place to address this, but the long-term nature of the challenge meant there would be a delay before its impact was seen in the data. Councillor Sinclair noted wellbeing scores recorded in the staff engagement survey had been above target, and this should be viewed as a positive.

Councillor Sinclair proposed an update report on staff sickness to show progress should be presented at a future meeting. This was seconded by the Chair and agreed by all members.

Responding to a question from Councillor Boad, Kate Sullivan said around half of staff had not had any sickness absences in the last year, and there had been a reduction in short-term absences. Some staff working remotely might be more inclined to work while unwell as they did not have to travel or risk infecting colleagues. However, a balance needed to be found as working while unwell may lead to longer-term absences.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney regarding fire protection inspections, Ben Brook said all of the issues relating to the His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) cause for concern regarding protection had been addressed except for the introduction of a risk management IT system. The protection inspections had been paused for three weeks while the new IT system was thoroughly tested to ensure it was fit for purpose. Inspections had now recommenced following the implementation of the new IT system. Ben Brook said although the performance measure relating to inspections had been behind target, this had been done deliberately to allow for the implementation and testing of the IT system. He confirmed the target was for 600 inspections to take place per year.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney regarding the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, Rob Powell (Executive Director for Resources) said in-year spending controls had been implemented as part of a wider financial mitigation strategy. Detailed quarterly financial updates on progress were provided to Cabinet, and Rob Powell stated his belief it would be unnecessary for additional updates to go to any other committee.

Regarding fire appliance response times, Councillor Boad asked when the new performance metric would be implemented and how the information would be presented to the public. Councillor Crump said it would show a mean average that included all response times; currently, no details were made public on response times that had failed to meet the target. Councillor Crump said a crew could fail to meet its target by a matter of seconds and this would be included in the statistics as not meeting the target response time. He added that HMICFRS had not raised any concerns over the recording methodology. Councillor Boad said she would find it useful to know more about the spread of the average (knowing the quickest and longest response times). Ben Brook said that

any incident that was not responded to within ten minutes would be scrutinised and numerous factors would be noted, including time of day, location and type of incident. However he said the Committee could be provided with whatever information they had requested. He said the new metrics would be likely to take effect from the start of the next financial year when the annual performance measures were reset.

Ben Brook said there were no national standards for response times. Research did not suggest any correlation between severity of injury sustained and length of response to the incident. Additionally, the majority of property fires did not extend beyond five square metres and would often be contained to the room where they had broken out.

The Chair suggested further discussions on what information members would like to be included in future reports relating to WFRS performance regarding incident response times could take place outside of the meeting.

Members noted the contents of the report.

5. Treasury Management Update Quarterly Report 2024/25

The item was introduced by Chris Norton (Head of Investments, Audit, Insurance, and Risk). He said investment and borrowing balances had been kept within the limits set out in the Investment Strategy. Base rates were at 5.25 per cent, although it was currently anticipated that rates would drop over the next couple of years. The Council currently had higher rates of return because interest rates were high. However, investments were held in low risk, high credit rated investments so returns would fall as interest rates went down. Going for high risk, high return investments was contrary to treasury management policy which prioritised liquidity and security before yield. The largest proportion of investments were made in other local authorities. Internal borrowing had been lower than expected due to capital slippage and higher than anticipated use of reserves. However, this was preferable to external borrowing and there was currently no requirement for this to be done.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Chris Norton said costs were built into the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. Figures shown in the report outlined what the financial requirements were, but these were covered by the MTFs. Financing would be done internally using the Council's own balance sheets unless there was a requirement for additional funding from external sources. Rob Powell said that when the budget was set, benchmarks relating to borrowing and debt were set against other local authorities. The Council was not an outlier in this respect.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney, Chris Norton said the investment figures included in the report showed those that were made using fixed rate terms. The Council's aim was to operate with £100million of liquid funds. The bank deposits referenced in the report were an example of a liquid asset.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Chris Norton said the liability benchmark was a CIPFA standard that in any case aligned with the Council's treasury management and investment strategies.

Members noted the contents of the report.

6. Community Powered Warwickshire update

The item was introduced by Charles Barlow (Head of Community Partnerships), who reminded members the Council had been looking to embed a community powered approach since 2021 as it was believed communities were better placed to identify their priorities and how to deliver solutions to them. The report before members outlined the progress that had been made over the previous three years, as part of a longer-term strategy that would ultimately lead to cultural and procedural change.

Councillor Rob Tromans said the principle of community power was a good one and he fully supported it. He said he felt the language in the report could be worded more simply in places.

Responding to a question from Councillor Feeney regarding matched funding, Councillor Heather Timms said the Council worked with colleagues at the District and Borough Councils, particularly in areas where there was no town or parish council. Councillor Jo Barker said it was important schemes were not duplicated. She gave the example of a community supermarket potentially being set up in an area where there was already a Foodbank operating. Councillor Timms said checks were in place to make sure this did not happen. Responding to a point raised by Councillor Boad, Rob Powell said the Social Fabric Funding was available and targeted at the 22 most deprived Lower Super Output Areas in the county, which were in the bottom 20 per cent most deprived in England.

Responding to a question from Councillor Sinclair, Charles Barlow confirmed the views of the Voice of Warwickshire residents' panel had been taken into consideration during the decision-making process. He accepted this could be referred to in the report.

In response to a question from Councillor Mejar Singh, Rob Powell said the £1million allocated to the Green Shoots fund had all been distributed to projects. There were no plans to provide additional funding through the scheme in the current financial climate.

Members noted the contents of the report.

7. Social Impact Fund, Outcomes Update

The item was introduced by Charles Barlow, who reminded members the Social Impact Fund had been established in 2021 using money from the Covid Outbreak Management Fund and specifically targeted at geographical areas that had had higher rates of Covid. Funding was given to 16 revenue projects and five capital projects. The report gave updates on all of one of these schemes, as there had been unforeseen delays to one of the projects.

Councillor Tromans said the report was excellent and he was pleased to see the positive impact the Social Impact Fund had had. He highlighted one example which helped people who then did not need to use additional services that may have further cost implications for the Council or other public bodies. Councillor Tromans proposed that the Committee should see a future report on how the outcomes for projects that received money from the Social Impact Fund had demonstrated benefits for other service providers. This was seconded by the Chair and agreed by members.

Councillor Sinclair said it would be helpful if feedback from each of the projects could be more uniform, and outline more clearly what each group had done and what they had achieved, and

what the money had been spent on. The Chair agreed this was a sensible suggestion for officers to consider, although he added this may require a member of Council staff to coordinate. Rob Powell pointed out that resource constraints and demands on the Community Partnerships team would have to be considered before committing to additional monitoring and evaluation.

Members welcomed and noted the contents of the report.

8. Work Programme

Members noted the contents of the work programme.

9. Any Urgent Matters

The Chair informed members that Councillor Birdi had been unable to attend the meeting due to an injured back, and said the Committee would be sending their best wishes to him for a quick recovery.

The meeting rose at 3.30pm

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Chair