

Warwickshire Police and Crime Panel

Wednesday, 28 August 2019

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor David Reilly (Chair)
Councillor Derek Poole (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Nicola Davies
Andy Davis
Bob Malloy
Councillor Sarah Whalley-Hoggins
Councillor Christopher Watkins
Councillor Andrew Wright

Officers

Tom McColgan, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Jane Pollard, Legal Services Manager

Others Present

Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner

Sara Ansell	Preferred Candidate for Chief Finance Officer
Neil Hewison	Chief Executive
Philip Seccombe	Police and Crime Commissioner

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Fradgley and Davison.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Watkins declared that he knew the candidate as she had previously worked at Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council.

2. Appointment of Chief Finance Officer

The Warwickshire Police and Crime Commissioner introduced the report. He stated that the role of Chief Finance Officer was vital as he needed expert advice on budgeting so that he was able to ask the right questions of the Chief Constable and ensure that Warwickshire Police were delivering an efficient service. He stated that Sara Ansell, his preferred candidate, had previously acted as the Section 151 Officer for Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council before serving as the Deputy Chief Finance Officer for the Warwickshire and West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioners for the last 2 years. The Commissioner felt this experience of working within the strategic alliance would be invaluable in the coming months as the separation of the Forces was finalised and Warwickshire was reconstituted as an independent force.

The Chair thanked the Commissioner for his report and asked him and the Chief Executive to leave the room so that the Panel could question Sara Ansell.

Councillor Whalley-Hoggins asked what strengths and experience Sara Ansell had that made her the right person for the job.

Sara Ansell responded that she had worked in a number of local councils in Warwickshire serving as deputy Section 151 Officer in Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council for 5 years including acting as Section 151 Officer for a year. She had helped steer the Council through budget setting at a challenging time as local government budgets reduced as demand increased and had helped to find innovative ways to drive efficiency and savings. She had also worked for two and a half years for the Police and Crime Commissioner and she had learned a lot about policing in general and the Strategic Alliance in particular. She felt that she was a good communicator and able to build new relationships effectively, skills that would be essential in the coming months as Warwickshire established its self as an independent force and forged new partnerships.

Councillor Whalley-Hoggins asked how Sara Ansell would act if she witnessed unethical or unbecoming behaviour in her role as the Section 151 officer.

Sara Ansell responded that in the first instance she would try and address issues with an upfront conversation with the individual involved. If the inappropriate behaviour involved finances she would have a statutory duty to deal with it and could do this through raising issues with internal and external audit. She would also raise any ethical concerns with the Monitoring Officer.

Councillor Poole stated that the break-up of the Alliance brought with it new challenges and uncertainties. He asked Sara Ansell what she envisaged would be the biggest challenges facing her in her new role and how she planned to approach these challenges.

Sara Ansell responded that the most immediate challenge was to ensure a smooth transition out of the alliance which she had been working towards over the last 12 months. It was vital that front line services were able to stand up from October and then gradually build up back office services including new internal audit arrangements which had previously been an alliance function. She had also been looking closely at cost liability and ensuring that there was a mechanism in place to calculate and record costs incurred as a result of the termination of the alliance that could not be mitigated. The uncertainty of the post alliance force structure had also caused difficulties when setting the budget and she had to ensure that robust assumptions were made so that the budget and medium term financial strategy would stand up to scrutiny both from audit and the public. The longer-term challenges would be around monitoring and controls for large scale projects including the much needed IT improvement works.

Andy Davis asked how Sara Ansell would seek to work with the Panel and other partners.

Sara Ansell responded that she had considerable experience working with elected members especially in a scrutiny environment. She was keen to engage with the Panel to understand what information members wanted and to build on the work of the budget working group through greater discussion of the medium term financial plan, investment information, the estates strategy and the reserves and capital strategy.

Bob Malloy stated that it was a complex task to unpick the alliance and there was still a lot to do. He asked how Sara Ansell would ensure that Warwickshire held their own in negotiations and if she saw any difficulties given how closely she had worked with Elizabeth Hall who would be advising West Mercia.

Sara Ansell responded that she had maintained a transparent approach representing Warwickshire through the process of terminating the alliance which had allowed her to avoid conflicts of interest which could have otherwise affected her ability to represent Warwickshire. She stated that being involved in the process from the very start and understanding the detail of the transition put her in a good position to be able work with the Force's Change Team and to effectively advise decision makers. Sara Ansell emphasised that she was committed to the process of rebuilding Warwickshire Police as an independent force and had a vested interest not just from a professional point of view but also as a long time resident of the county.

Councillor Poole asked how Sara Ansell would act if she believed a decision maker was taking an unwise financial decision.

Sara Ansell responded that she would have a statutory duty to act and would look to provide advice in the first instance and evidence why she did not believe it was the best course of action. She would also take advice from CIPFA and raise the issue with the Monitoring Officer. She could also escalate to audit or seek financial advice from an outside body. She stated that she would not be afraid to be assertive as the statutory officer and would take her role and responsibilities seriously.

The Chair thanked Sara Ansell for her response and asked if there was anything she would like to say in summary.

Sara Ansell stated that she was keen to build a strong working relationship with the panel to work openly and transparently and to make full use of the experience and ideas of members.

The Panel moved into closed session to consider the Commissioner's report and the Candidates responses.

The Panel unanimously agreed to endorse the Commissioner's selection of Sara Ansell as the preferred candidate and the Chair confirmed the Panel's decision in writing (appendix A).