

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 16th January, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Andrew Harding in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Ciaran Brown,
Andy Meakin and Phil Rostance.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Sarah Madigan.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy, Nicky Moss and Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Councillor John Wilmott.

OS.15 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.16 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 25th September, 2019, be received and approved as a correct record.

OS.17 Scrutiny Review: Impact of Universal Credit

The Scrutiny Research Officer introduced the report and reminded Committee that the review had commenced in June 2019 with an initial objective of gaining an understanding of the impact of the rollout of Universal Credit from both the Council and claimants' perspective.

Members endeavoured to understand the requirements of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 including how the new Universal Credit regime would replace the existing system. The fundamental changes were understood to enable the benefits system to be simplified with an overarching drive to reduce non-working households and cut welfare expenditure.

Members also considered how Universal Credit had affected Ashfield claimants following its phased introduction from June to November 2018. The Council had been proactive in preparing for the changes and a Welfare Reform Board was established to enable officers to develop an action plan for managing the introduction of Universal Credit in Ashfield.

The Housing Management & Tenancy Team established a working relationship with the Department of Work and Pensions Team (DWP) to enable information to be shared and staff were trained to offer money management advice and support to new claimants during their transition. A couple of roadshows were held which focussed on fuel and food poverty and again offered money management advice to visitors as necessary.

Committee Members acknowledged that the Council's Housing Management & Tenancy Team had undertaken extensive preparation work in readiness for the introduction of Universal Credit and had continued to explore new and innovative ways to offer ongoing assistance to new claimants. Members took the opportunity to commend officers for their hard work and ongoing commitment to the process.

An informal working group meeting had been held and this offered the opportunity for Members and officers to meet with a DWP representative and discuss their working relationship and the payment and support mechanisms currently in place including managed and advance payments and third party deductions.

The key review findings had emerged as follows:-

- financial issues for claimants during the first payment waiting period;
- minimal statutory support available to assist claimants with the transition process;
- communication gaps for Councillors regarding their knowledge and understanding of Universal Credit;
- the escalating financial impact to Ashfield District Council in relation to rent arrears;
- social impact and hardships being experienced by claimants undertaking the transition process.

To inform Members further, the Service Manager for Scrutiny and Democratic Services circulated a list of testimonials to the Committee outlining real life experiences from claimants transitioning onto the Universal Credit regime.

The document evidenced that many different issues were being experienced by claimants and the Housing Team were always endeavouring to resolve them to ensure the transition process for the Council's residents was as unproblematic as possible.

The Service Manager for Housing Management & Tenancy Services advised Members that current data revealed that there were currently 996 Universal Credit claimants at Ashfield with 472 now showing arrears. The Universal Credit element of rent arrears for the Authority stood at around £192,000. The figure had been higher but some excellent work undertaken by the Rent Arrears Team had brought the amount down from £270,000 at its peak.

Members acknowledged the current Housing Management & Tenancy Team staff structure and accepted that although the establishment costs were currently low, some of the temporary employee contracts would be terminating in 2020 and would need to be replaced with appropriate officers at that time.

Having acknowledged the myriad of problems often being experienced by vulnerable people needing support from Universal Credit, Members discussed the following:-

- difficulties managing money on a monthly basis;
- spending benefit money on drugs or other addictions rather than rent;
- experiencing food or fuel poverty and not being able to care for children or vulnerable relatives;
- the success of the Housing Sustainability Unit in supporting vulnerable tenants to maintain their tenancies in the longer term;
- the use of loan sharks by claimants to supplement income;
- access to small funding streams to enable staff to source white goods/beds/kitchen utensils etc. and collect food parcels to assist vulnerable families with furnishing and running their homes;
- the Council ongoing need to be vigilant to safeguarding issues from tenants.

It was anticipated following recent profiling and extrapolation of Benefits data, that the Council could potentially be supporting the migration of up to 3,500 applicants in the near future. Staff would need to be prepared to deal with this level of new applications and having asked the question, the Service Manager for Housing Management & Tenancy Services advised that future administration of the service could be enhanced with the introduction of a 'Dialler' telephony system and a 'RentSense' software package. These systems would assist greatly with contacting claimants and anticipating rent arrears at an earlier stage.

Having discussed all the elements of the review in detail, the Service Manager for Scrutiny and Democratic Services summarised the findings and outlined some suggested recommendations for submission to Cabinet in February 2020. Members concurred with the content of the recommendations and made some further suggestions as appropriate.

All present at the meeting took the opportunity to thank the Service Manager for Housing Management & Tenancy Services for attending the meetings and contributing towards the review.

RESOLVED that

a) the following recommendations be submitted to the next available meeting of the Cabinet for consideration:-

1. Cabinet should note the hardship being experienced by Ashfield residents, and the current and anticipated financial impact to the Council, as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit welfare scheme;
2. A mandatory seminar be organised for all Councillors to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to support residents raising issues concerning Universal Credit;
3. A letter be sent to local MPs, and the relevant ministerial department, outlining the difficulties claimants in Ashfield have experienced following the introduction of Universal Credit;

4. Joint working with partners such as the Department of Work and Pensions and the Citizens Advice Bureau be enhanced to ensure important information is efficiently shared;
 5. The Housing Management and Tenancy Services Team be recognised and commended for the extensive work undertaken in supporting Universal Credit claimants and responding to welfare reforms;
 6. The Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan be reviewed, taking into consideration the impact the introduction of Universal Credit will have on Council services;
 7. The Welfare Reform Reserve Fund be reviewed to ensure sufficient funding remains available to support claimants and maintain adequate staffing levels;
 8. All publically displayed information regarding Universal Credit and wider welfare reforms be reviewed to ensure maximum visibility and relevancy;
 9. Consideration be given to software and hardware requirements that could assist in improving the Council's efficiency and effectiveness in managing Universal Credit cases and supporting claimants;
- b) the Scrutiny Research Officer be requested to circulate the draft Cabinet report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members for information prior to consideration at the meeting.

OS.18 Scrutiny Workplan 2019/20

The Scrutiny Research Officer presented an update in relation to Workplan as follows:-

Universal Credit Review

As per the previous agenda item, the review had now been complete with a robust set of recommendations being presented to Cabinet in February 2020.

Wildlife Protection Review

The review was due to be progressed further at the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for February 2020.

Crime and Disorder Meeting

The annual Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting was due to take place in March 2020 and would be considering the Community Safety Team's partnership priorities.

Scrutiny Panel A

The Panel were due to commence a review into local bus provision and its impact on isolated groups and vulnerable people, at its next meeting.

Commercialisation Review

Members were requested to remove the Commercialisation and Income Generation Item from the Workplan as the initiative was currently being monitored by the Council's Audit Committee and any further consideration by Members would result in an unnecessary duplication of work.

Scrutiny Panel B

The Panel had commenced the 'Town Centre Regeneration' review and early discussions had been encouraging with agreement to include a Scrutiny Member on the Discover Ashfield Board. The review would now remain on hold for a short time whilst the Panel commenced the 'Community Protection Officer Service' review at its next meeting.

RESOLVED

that the update regarding the work of the Scrutiny Panels and Committee and progress against the Scrutiny Workplan, be received and noted.

The meeting closed at 8.10 pm

Chairman.