

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Virtual Meeting held on Thursday, 18th February, 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Dave Shaw in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Trevor Locke,
Lauren Mitchell, Warren Nuttall, David Walters
and Caroline Wilkinson.

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

In Attendance: Councillor Dale Grounds.

SA.23 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

Councillors Jim Blagden and David Walters declared Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests due to their former service within the Armed Forces.

SA.24 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 19 November 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

SA.25 Scrutiny Review: Veterans and Service Personnel

The Scrutiny Research Officer presented the final report in relation to the scrutiny review of Veterans and Service Personnel and took the Panel Members through each of the draft Cabinet recommendations, as outlined in the report.

Members considered each recommendation in turn and on conclusion, both the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services and the Scrutiny Research Officer placed on record the Panel's appreciation to Mark Leek (founder of the Veterans Breakfast Club in Kirkby) and Gillian Welch (the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer) for their valuable contributions towards the review and attendance at previous meetings.

RESOLVED

that the following recommendations be approved and presented to the Cabinet meeting in March 2021:

- a) to further explore the possibility of expanding the e-training modules regarding the Armed Forces Covenant, Housing and Homelessness for frontline staff, across all sections of the Council;

- b) to commend the work undertaken so far by the Council's Senior Community Engagement Officer in supporting the Ashfield Armed Forces community;
- c) to explore the potential to designate an Armed Forces representative in each section of the Council;
- d) to support and continue to commit to achieving the MoD Gold Employer Recognition Award through the Defence Employee Recognition Scheme;
- e) to continue to develop a robust and purposeful Reservist Policy to assist and support employees as required;
- f) to commit to increasing awareness across the Council and embedding ongoing support for the local Armed Forces Community within the Council's Corporate Plan;
- g) to develop an Armed Forces Welcome Pack designed to support the Armed Forces Community with the transition to civilian life in Ashfield.

SA.26 Scrutiny Review: Tenancy Support

The Chairman introduced the new Tenancy Support review topic to the Panel and extended a warm welcome to the Council's Service Manager, Housing Management & Tenancy Services, Nicky Moss and the Service Manager, Strategic Housing & Lettings, Phil Warrington.

Both officers were in attendance at the meeting to offer their particular insights into the support being offered to tenants, both public and private, to ensure their tenancies remained viable and to avoid any possible evictions or homelessness issues due to rent arrears, anti-social behaviour (ASB) or unscrupulous landlords.

The Service Manager, Housing Management & Tenancy Services gave an overview of her role in supporting Council tenants and managing rent arrears and income recovery, including general tenancy estate management once properties had been let through the Strategic Housing & Lettings Team.

From 2014, the process for seeking and determining evictions had been shared between the Housing Management and Tenancy Service Team and the Community Safety Team. The Community Safety Team predominately took charge of any evictions as a result of ASB with the Housing Management and Tenancy Service Team focussing on evictions due to rent arrears.

However, eviction was always seen as a last result and the Council offered a variety of support measures to assist tenants with maintaining their tenancies.

Money Management Service

Money management advice and supports for tenants was invaluable in helping them maximise their income, budgeting and assisting with additional benefit claim applications as required. This role also included a welfare element which saw officers assist tenants with applying and accessing charities and grant funding if applicable.

Tenancy Sustainment

Tenant support always commenced pre tenancy, with officers helping residents with affordability issues and initial set up of the property to make it habitable for moving in. Many new tenants did not possess furniture and officers regularly sourced furniture and white goods to enable people to settle into their new homes.

Officers also supported tenants to access the following:

- adequate fuel services
- foodbanks
- support through the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), British Legion and local charities
- grant funding opportunities and welfare support funds
- mental health services.

Prevention of Eviction

Part of the tenancy sustainment role was also to mitigate against any possible eviction risks as many tenants suffered mental health issues and struggled to cope with everyday life. Currently officers were assisting many tenants with booking their appointments for the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine alongside other supportive measures to protect health and wellbeing wherever possible.

A current Performance Indicator (PI) for the Tenancy Sustainment Team was to ensure that 95% of new tenants remain in their tenancies past the 6 month introductory milestone and so far this target had always been met.

However, there were many reasons why persons were evicted from properties and many of their needs could be complex and difficult to address. Over the previous 12 months, 20 people had been evicted from Council properties as a result of rent arrears. From a tenancy list of over 6, 500, this figure was extremely low and it was to be welcomed that the figure continued to fall year on year (24 evictions in 2019 and 37 in 2018).

Members however, were asked to acknowledge that there was a big difference between tenants who couldn't pay and tenants who wouldn't pay and that there would always be a small element of people who would endeavour to abuse the system and avoid paying rent.

A question and answer session ensued, and Members considered the following:

- the impact on the Council, due to the current ban on evictions as a result of the pandemic and acknowledgement that there were some preliminary cases for seeking possession which had commenced prior to Covid-19, that were now on hold with rent arrears continuing to escalate
- the impact of the pandemic on many households with tenants continuing to lose valuable jobs and their ability to pay rent
- the situation regarding rent arrears within Ashfield and how the Council was currently managing to keep it stable with the majority of cases being as a result of Universal Credit (UC) debt
- the excellent work undertaken by the Council's Housing Officers to support tenants within Ashfield and the important role of Councillors in developing relationships with their local residents and being able to raise issues of concerns with officers as they arose
- the effectiveness of the Council's 'Money Advisers' and the achievement of preventing 73 people from being evicted during 2020, ensuring 52 tenants got access to adequate fuel services and many more tenants being successful in accessing grant and charity funding to increase their income
- disappointment that the Government were not currently assisting local authorities with their levels of rent arrears and the fact that the Council were currently mapping the data and impact on a weekly basis to inform discussion in the future
- the upsetting realisation that the situation was most probably going to worsen post Covid-19, with many further job losses to come due to the impact of the pandemic on national and local economies
- acknowledgment that the Council still offered two 'rent free catch up' weeks, during any 12-month period, to all tenants including those managing previous rent arrears.

The Service Manager, Strategic Housing & Lettings then gave an overview of his role which included the day to day management of lettings to new tenants, homelessness and private sector enforcement.

From his perspective, it had been a particularly tough year for everyone. Rough sleepers had the added threat of contracting the virus alongside the other challenging issues they were having to face on a daily basis and incidences of domestic violence and parental evictions had also increased over the course of the pandemic.

Many private sector tenants were struggling to pay rent and were having to face the increased threat of receiving S8 and S21 eviction notices including the additional fear of becoming homeless as a result of their financial difficulties. Members were advised that these problems were escalating as the pandemic continued and officers would soon be seeing the effects of this distressing situation once the temporary ban on evictions was lifted.

Homelessness

With regards to the prevention of homelessness, it was imperative that intervention came in the early stages rather than officers only becoming involved when tenants reached crisis point. It was always better to start offering support and guidance to tenants who were £500 in arrears rather than trying to salvage a level of arrears in excess of £2,000.

The Council offered support in the following ways:

- encouraging people to join the Council's Housing Register as soon as possible to ensure all their needs and difficulties were recorded and acted upon at an early stage
- provision of an online triage process for homelessness enquiries
- provision of urgent advice and support to tenants as required
- access to funding to pay rent arrears to landlords in certain circumstances.

Many private sector tenants have been struggling over the past 12 months and had contacted the Council for advice. On the whole, most landlords were reasonable and acknowledged that even the best tenants could have difficulties at certain times in their lives. As a result of this, many landlords did try and assist their tenants wherever possible to keep them in their tenancies and avoid eviction if at all possible.

At the start of the pandemic the Government realised quickly that lockdown would make rough sleepers particularly vulnerable and did provide funding to enable local authorities to get people off the streets and into temporary accommodation. This had worked well within Ashfield and the Council were currently in the process of recruiting an Outreach Officer to provide assertive outreach in order to try and engage or re-engage the homeless population into finding suitable accommodation, work and accessing services for any medical or mental health needs as required.

The Council were also endeavouring to recruit a Landlord Liaison Officer. Unfortunately, the Council did not have enough housing stock to provide accommodation for all, so the officer would be responsible for tapping into the private sector to find suitable homes for all persons seeking housing assistance through the Council. It would also enable the Council to catch people earlier in the system and meet their housing needs more quickly.

A question and answer session again ensued, and Members considered the following:

- acknowledgement that rents were higher in the Hucknall area
- provision of the former 'housing bond scheme' and how the Council now accessed funding through a Prevention Scheme to assist private tenants with a cash deposit and/or rent in advance or by assisting them with applications for discretionary housing payment (DHP) as part of their Housing Benefit or Universal Credit claims

- the process for dealing with any persons presenting themselves to the Council as homeless including an initial assessment and then a series of tests to enable the Council to establish the person's (or family's) immediate needs
- acknowledgement that it was more challenging to provide suitable accommodation for single person's rather than families and in some situations only shared accommodation could be offered
- how the Council's Private Sector Enforcement Team carried out checks to establish if private sector rental properties on offer were up to an acceptable standard and acknowledgement that the Housing Liaison Officers were also trained to undertake checks to Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) standards.

To conclude the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services thanked both Nicky Moss and Phil Warrington for attending the meeting and providing their expertise in relation to the Council's provision of tenancy support. Having heard all the information, Members were asked to consider how best the topic could be reviewed and to agree the most appropriate terms of reference.

RESOLVED

that the terms of reference for the 'Tenancy Support' review be considered and agreed at an informal meeting of the Scrutiny Panel in March 2021.

The meeting closed at 8.09 pm

Chairman.