

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

on Wednesday, 25th September, 2019 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Andrew Harding in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Ciaran Brown,
Dale Grounds and Andy Meakin.

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Sarah Madigan, Phil Rostance and
Caroline Wilkinson.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy, Christine Sarris and
Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Cathy Mason and Doreen Savage.

OS.10 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.11 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 18th July, 2019, be
received and approved as a correct record.

OS.12 Petition Received - S106 Agreement Local Infrastructure Funding

In accordance with the procedures set out in the Council's Petition Scheme,
the petition regarding "S106 Agreement Local Infrastructure Funding" having
received in excess of 500 signatures was presented to the Committee for
consideration.

The petition organiser, Cathy Mason, was in attendance to discuss
the details of the Petition and put forward two questions for discussion. The
Assistant Director, Planning and Regulatory Services, attended the meeting to
respond to the petition and questions.

Question 1

Is there any available Section 106 money available to support public transport
and car parking schemes for Carsic Lane?

Question 2

Can the Council work with Bus companies and County Council to improve transport provision?

Response

The Council's Assistant Director, Planning and Regulatory Services advised Committee Members that a Section 106 agreement between the Council and a Developer was legally binding and once entered into, couldn't be varied.

The Council prioritises schemes within the District and as part of the S106 agreement negotiations, schemes within the vicinity of the application site are selected and submitted as part of the negotiations with the Developer. Once the earmarked improvements are agreed and finalised, a formal S106 agreement is signed by all parties and implemented accordingly.

In relation to the Carsic Lane area, the S106 development agreement had allocated £32,000 for public realm improvements which enables environmental works to be undertaken to the spaces between the buildings/estates. The funding could therefore not be used for highways improvements and in any event, the County Council had been consulted as part of the planning application and had not flagged up any highways issues within that particular area.

In relation to the question surrounding bus provision, the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services advised Committee Members that there was an item already on the Scrutiny Workplan in relation to local bus provision and that issues raised throughout the review could also take into account the Carsic Lane area, amongst others, as part of the wider considerations. Members considered the suggestion and agreed that as part of the review process, it would be beneficial for local residents from the Carsic Lane area to be consulted accordingly.

To conclude, the Assistant Director, Planning and Regulatory Services added that the list of projects for potential S106 funding was always changing and it was a possibility that highways improvements to Carsic Lane might come forward in the future.

RESOLVED that

- a) the petition, questions and responses be received and duly noted by the Committee;
- b) the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services be requested to include the Carsic Lane area as part of the wider considerations of the review of Local Bus Provision.

OS.13 Scrutiny Review: Impact of Universal Credit

The Council's Scrutiny Research Officer took the opportunity to update Members in relation to the 'Impact of Universal Credit' review.

Further information had been requested at both the last formal meeting of the Committee on 18th July and the informal working group meeting held on 7th August in relation to Universal Credit payment methods, support services on offer and current food and fuel poverty issues.

A variety of officers with a range of areas of expertise were in attendance at the Informal Working Group meeting and these included the following:-

Nicky Moss, Service Manager – Housing Management & Tenancy Services
Peter Curry, Housing Management Advisor
Craig Scott, Service Manager – Revenues and Benefits
Sue Fielding, Senior Employment & Partnership Leader – Department for Work and Pensions.

The current working arrangements and relationship between the Council and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was discussed including the types of support payments in place.

At present, through the Universal Credit process, advanced payments were available should claimants need help to pay their bills or cover other expenses whilst the payment application process was being administered (usually with a six week waiting time). This advance payment would then be paid back through future Universal Credit payments at a level acceptable to the claimant and their current commitments or obligations.

A 'Help to Claim' service was also currently provided through Citizen's Advice which was aimed at assisting claimants to prepare for the application process and to offer advice and support for jobcentre appointments as necessary.

Members had also raised concerns in relation to food and fuel poverty and since the introduction of Universal Credit, England was experiencing the second highest rates of fuel poverty in Europe. Universal Credit was leaving households without payment for up to six weeks which was leaving claimants vulnerable and facing the 'heat or eat' dilemma.

In relation to food poverty, a charity called The Trussell Trust was a national anti-poverty organisation which supported a network of food banks nationwide. A recent report released by the charity had shown that when Universal Credit was introduced into an area, demand on food banks immediately increased and was still showing an increase of up to 52% even after a 12 month roll out programme had been completed.

Key findings within the report had also shown that:

1. Waiting for a first payment had immediate consequences with 70% of survey respondents finding themselves in debt, 57% experiencing issues with their mental or physical health and 56% experiencing housing issues.
2. There was little statutory support available during this waiting period with 63% of respondents being offered no help or just a food bank voucher.

3. Only 8% of people surveyed by the Trussell Trust said their full Universal Credit payment covered their cost of living with this being even less for disabled people or people with ill-health.
4. Poor administration of the Universal Credit process was a persistent concern with 35% having waited longer than six weeks for their first payment.

A lengthy discussion followed whereby Members took the opportunity to consider the following:-

- The impact that Universal Credit was having on usage of local food banks within Ashfield and how they were coping with the increased demand;
- the lengthy waiting times for the processing of Universal Credit and its detrimental impact on the welfare and wellbeing of Ashfield's residents;
- the urgent need for money to be made available to residents to bridge the gap whilst waiting for their claims to be processed;
- an acknowledgement of the Council's commitment to its residents and the dedicated team of officers already in place offering support and assistance to claimants as required;
- the difficulties being experienced by claimants whilst using the digital portals and insufficient guidance and support being offered by the designated 'work coaches' to overcome the issues being faced;
- some potential solutions for increasing support for claimants during the six-week administration/processing period;
- acknowledgment that the Universal Credit regime would remain in its current form for the time being, notwithstanding the consistent lobbying of central Government to bring about some much needed changes;
- the longer term risk to the Council's financial position due to the impact of Universal Credit on successful rent collection;
- a suggestion to widen the availability of appointment times to process Universal Credit applications (currently 9am to 4pm), to accommodate claimants who have work commitments during the day.

RESOLVED that

a) the following officers be invited to the next meeting of the Committee to further assist Members with the review:-

- Department of Work and Pensions Representative;
- Nicky Moss, Service Manager – Housing Management & Tenancy Services;
- Councillor Keir Barsby – Portfolio Holder for Housing;
- Councillor Samantha Deakin – Portfolio Holder for Customer Services and IT;

- b) the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services be requested to arrange a Welfare Reform/Universal Credit training session to ensure all Members are kept abreast of the current welfare reform legislative requirements, the Universal Credit application process and its ongoing impact on the Council and the residents of Ashfield.

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Dale Grounds left the room at 7.47pm and returned to the meeting at 7.50pm.)

OS.14 Scrutiny Review: Wildlife Protection

The Council's Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services advised Members that 'Wildlife Protection' had been added to the Scrutiny Workplan in June 2019 following consultation with Elected Members. The report contained the draft terms of reference for consideration.

Following contact from residents in relation to reporting incidences of wildlife neglect and possible crimes, it had become apparent that there was currently no Wildlife Protection Officer within the East Midlands and often residents had been directed to wildlife protection organisations as far away as Birmingham.

Members queried how incidences are reported, how the Police work with the RSPCA and the role voluntary wildlife sanctuary's and protection organisations have within the local area.

There did not seem to be any one point of contact for recording any requests for wildlife assistance and Members were therefore keen to establish what services were currently available within the District. In turn, the review would hopefully ascertain how the Council could potentially forge better working relationships with key partners, gain an understanding of the demand for wildlife assistance and identify the partners involved.

RESOLVED

that the draft terms of reference for the 'Wildlife Protection' review, as appended to the report, be received and approved.

The meeting closed at 8.02 pm

Chairman.