

PRINCIPAL SELECT COMMITTEE

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

on Wednesday, 15th November, 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Julie Gregory in the Chair;

Councillors Jamie Bell, Jodine Cronshaw,
Warren Nuttall, Phil Rostance and
John Smallridge.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Kier Barsby.

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

In Attendance: Councillors Samantha Deakin, Andy Meakin and
John Wilmott.

PS.10 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

PS.11 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28 September 2023,
be received and approved as a correct record.

PS.12 Executive Lead Member Update - Universal Credit

Councillor Andy Meakin, Executive Lead Member for Social Housing and
Assets commenced his update by reminding Committee Members that the
impact of Universal Credit had originally been reviewed by the Overview and
Scrutiny Committee back in 2019/20.

Universal Credit had initially been rolled out in June 2015 to all new claimants
and single households and by August 2017, there were 96 tenants set up and
claiming Universal Credit. As of 6 November 2023, there were now estimated
to be 2368 Council tenants claiming Universal Credit towards their housing
costs which equated to 36.22% of all Council tenants.

The latest data captured in May 2023 showed that within the District as a
whole, the rollout of Universal Credit from legacy benefits was now 68%
complete. The deadline for completion of the full Universal Credit roll out was
the end of 2024, except for those claiming Employment Support Allowance,
and tenants could still currently apply for advanced payments if required.

Universal Credit processing was now firmly embedded into the Housing Income Team's day to day income recovery work, similar to dealing with Housing Benefit cases. To assist officers within the Team, access was available to the Department of Work and Pension's Universal Credit Landlord Portal where rent charges, requests for direct payments and Universal Credit payments dates, could be sourced and verified.

Of the 2368 Council tenants claiming Universal Credit, 1277 tenants currently had rent arrears. These arrears equated to 72.69% of the Council's total rent arrears debt or £465,000 in value. The Council was presently receiving direct payments for 490 of the 1277 tenants in receipt of Universal Credit.

In respect of care for Council tenants, support was offered and provided at the pre-tenancy stage and throughout the life of their tenancy. Two Money Management Advisors were on hand to support tenants in rent arrears, undertaking financial assessments, providing budgeting support and assist tenants with maximising their income. This also included supporting tenants with applications for benefits.

The Housing Management Team also employed two Tenancy Sustainment Officers who offered support to tenants at risk of losing their homes. In the last financial year, between April 2022 and March 2023, 955 tenants had been supported with welfare and money management advice and in the same year the Team had collectively secured around £108,000 in backdated benefits, additional benefits and charitable donations. For April to September 2023, 507 tenants had already been provided with support and guidance as required.

To conclude and in respect of the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), the Council's Assistant Director for Housing Management had contacted the CAB Manager the previous week to ask for feedback regarding the roll out of Universal Credit. Ashfield CAB currently provided a Help to Claim service via phone which was aimed at supporting claimants in the early stages of their Universal Credit claims. This service was funded by the DWP, but this financial support had unfortunately been reduced in 2022.

The CAB Manager did confirm however that between April and September of 2023, they had helped 166 clients with 639 Universal Credit related problems and in most cases clients who switched over were better off financially. In respect of those showing an indication of being worse off financially, advice was being given to wait until they received the managed migration invitation as there was going to be transitional protection available to ensure the switch over wouldn't leave claimants in financial difficulties.

On conclusion of the update, the Chairman thanked Councillor Meakin for his attendance and presentation to the Committee. Members then debated the issue and considered amongst other things:

- the good relationship the Council had enjoyed with the CAB, built up over years of support and partnership working, including the new arrangement for the organisation to be present in the Council's main reception one day a week to assist tenants and residents of Ashfield

- acknowledgement that the Council had worked hard to implement Universal Credit with all claimants soon to be fully migrated over to the new scheme
- the pros and cons of managed payments which could assist tenants in arrears but with the proviso that a balance was struck to avoid sending claimants into further debt and difficulties
- acknowledgement that current eviction levels were low due to the Council's sustained efforts to keep people in tenancies and in their homes
- the benefits of the Money Management and Tenancy Sustainment leaflets produced and circulated to tenants alongside their annual rent letters
- the Council being one of the best performing authorities in respect of the roll out and administration of Universal Credit being welcomed, and the Team being congratulated for their achievements
- the preparatory work being undertaken in respect of contacting and supporting the remaining 32% of claimants being migrated over to Universal Credit during 2024
- how the Council supports the wellbeing of staff working in the Housing Management Team as they navigate their complex and often stressful roles
- how the Council has learnt from the last few years of Universal Credit migration and the fact that staff are now in an excellent position to offer informed support and guidance wherever needed
- the lengthy stages of the tenant eviction process and how actual eviction is the very last resort following the exhaustion of various intermediary arrangements for paying off debt arrears etc.

RESOLVED that

- a) the update in respect of the Universal Credit Scheme, as presented, be received and noted;
- b) the Scrutiny Research Officer be requested to write to the Department of Work and Pensions and Ashfield Citizens' Advice Bureau to ascertain how both organisations are intending to support the remaining 32% of Ashfield claimants moving over to the Universal Credit scheme during 2024
- c) a further update be presented to the Committee during 2024 once the final migration of claimants over to Universal Credit has been completed.

PS.13 Select Work Programme

The Assistant Director for Democracy updated Members with regard to the current status and progress of the 2023/24 Select Work Programme, as attached to the report.

RESOLVED

that progress of the 2023/24 Select Work Programme, as presented, be received and noted.

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm

Chairman.