**Mansfield District Council**

**Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Communities and Services) Minutes**

**Date: Tuesday 16 March 2021 Time: 6:00 PM Place: Virtual Meeting**

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| **Present:**  | **Councillor Barry Answer, Councillor Bill Drewett, Councillor Stephen N. Garner, Councillor Daniel Redfern, Councillor John Smart, Councillor Sue Swinscoe, Councillor Sidney Walker, Councillor Stuart Wallace, Councillor Sonya Ward** |
| **In Attendance:**  | **David Evans, Jill Finnesey, Marie Clay, Neil Turton, Gabriella Wright** |

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|  | **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** |
|  | None. |
| **21/06** | **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST** |
|  | None. |
| **21/07** | **ADVANCE QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC** |
|  | None. |
| **21/08** | **MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** |
|  | The Minutes of the last meeting were accepted as a true record of the meeting. Proposed by Councillor Walker and seconded by Councillor Answer.RESOLVED:Minutes are a true record. |
| **21/09** | **LEISURE CENTRE ACCESSIBILITY UPDATE** |
|  | The Leisure Manager presented a summary of the Leisure Centre Accessibility Report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.It was highlighted to the committee that the Covid 19 pandemic had impacted on the progress of the Water Meadows Lift Project, however the planning application for the lift had now been approved, building control had been consulted and the designs had been developed copies in Appendix 1. The Committee were advised that £70K remained to fund the external lift works. The Committee was advised that the tendering process was in progress and the closure date of the tender process was the beginning of April 2021.The work was anticipated to commence in summer 2021.Councillor Answer expressed his regret that the required works had not been completed during the lockdown to avoid disruption to the Leisure Centre once it re-opened. The Member asked if the Trust would be contributing to worksThe Leisure Manager responded the required works were the duty of the Council, however, repair and maintenance works were the responsibility of the Trust.In response to the comments regarding the delay to the works caused by the pandemic that there had been a 2 month delay caused by Covid, that the process to progress the works included, the tender process and the award of the contract and also the process to procure a structural engineer, then award the contract, Also the structural assessments to take place following this and then the outcome of the structural reports.The ground was also cleared of planting to allow the surveys to take place.All this had to be completed as this work informed the technical specification of the lift installation tender packCouncillor Wallace queried the ongoing servicing costs for the lift and if this would be a Council cost.The Officer responded that the servicing of the lift would be the responsibility of the Trust.Councillor Ward thanked the Officers and commented that it was understandable that during the pandemic the process could not be accelerated. There was a Members discussion where it was agreed that it would have been better to have achieved this sooner however, it was accepted that the circumstances had not made that possible.Councillor Smart asked the Officer if it would be possible to ensure that the access to Water Meadows would remain open during the works.The Officer commented that the Council had a commitment to ensure that there was as little disruption as possible.The Member further queried the security of the lift.The Officer responded that security of the lift had been a priority as part of the planning project and fencing and lockable lift doors had been incorporated to prevent issues. The report was for noting and was accepted by the Committee with a unanimous show of hands.RESOLVED:Report accepted for noting. |
| **21/10** | **TENANCY SERVICES UPDATE** |
|  | The Tenancy Services Manager presented the Tenancy Services Update to the Committee.The Officer provided the Committee with the background of Universal Credit and the theory behind the use of UC.The Committee was updated on the number of claimants receiving Universal Credit. The Committee was advised about the issues related to rent arrears.Of the 1491 tenants in receipt of Universal Credit the Committee was advised that there were 792 direct payment to the Council (managed payments) which equated to 53% of the tenants receiving UC. The Committee was advised that there were 15 to 20 new cases every week, this was higher than pre Covid. The usual weekly average was between 8 and 12 a week.Where there was a history of rent arrears or there are issues of vulnerability such as drug and alcohol dependency, the Council are able to claim payment direct from the Universal Credit payment. Around 22% of the council’s UC claimants pay arrears direct to the Council. This method was only used in exceptional circumstances. The Officer referred the Committee to the arrears breakdown within the reportThe total outstanding rent arrears for the 1,491 Universal Credit Claimants was advised as £575,344.The Officer advised that this amount of rent arrears was not totally attributed to Universal Credit as many of the tenants were in rent arrears prior to transferring onto Universal Credit. It was estimated that this figure was £545,164A simple estimate of the direct impact of UC on rent arrears would therefore be to subtract the estimated figure of £545,164 from the 5 March 2021 figure of £575,344 which would suggest increased UC arrears of £30,180. A caveat being that a proportion of the tenants would not have been on full housing benefit and would not have paid their rent arrears even if they had stayed on legacy benefits. This figure has been obtained from the Housing Management System. The Officer advised that the support that had been offered to tenants prior to the implementation of UC, had contributed to the low number of increased UC arrears.Councillor Smart asked the Officer if a decrease had been noticed since the implementation of the Bonus of £80 a month. The Member further queried if this had assisted in the arrears being paid off.The Officer stated the decrease in rent arrears would support that conclusion. The Officer felt that also changes to the frequency of when payments were made and access to a new portal as a Trusted Partner have also contributed to the decrease in rent arrears as the Council now received payment from the DWP at the same time the tenant got paid, as opposed to the one monthly schedule. The Member congratulated the Housing Services Team on their service. The Member queried if the structure of the Housing Services Team as it was at present worked efficiently i.e. Officers dealing with housing matters, and other officers dealing with financial matters.The Officer responded that this did work efficiently, and that this was supported by the figures. It would be difficult to revert back to the previous ways of working, this was due to the Income Team being a specialist role that requires detailed knowledge on the welfare benefit system.Councillor Answer – commented that he was very pleased with the report as the UC credit rent arrears had increased by just £30K, which the Member felt the team should be congratulated on. Councillor Ward – Stated that increasingly tenants had been in contact regarding concerns of how they were going to pay their bills. The Member stated that sometimes communications that the Council sent out were not always as clear.The Member recognised that the Financial Inclusion Officers were providing a good service and asked if there were sufficient numbers of Income and Financial Inclusion Officers to be able to support the needs of the tenants?The Officer responded that the letters that were sent out by Benefits may be quite lengthy. However, the correspondence sent out by Tenancy Services were easy to read.During the pandemic virtually all enforcement work had ceased and letters were designed to be more supportive during this time, in an attempt to engage the tenants as quickly as possible. The Officer then advised that the Tenancy Services operate with one Financial Inclusion Officer, and that there were two more Financial Inclusion Officers working within Housing Needs. This was managed by weekly meetings with the Income Manager. Support was always available via the Citizens Advice Bureau and Step Change if required. The Council have not had the need to contact these Agencies as the service was coping well. Councillor Wallace asked the Officer at the end of the Furlough Schemes if it was anticipated that there would be an increase in rent arears.The Officer responded that there was potential for this to happen and that it would be naïve not to expect rent arrears not to increase and the reduction in the UC by £20 per week. The challenge would be to manage this with the tenants. The Council always would seek to engage with tenants to support them by evaluating their income and expenditure and offering advice to help support the tenant. The Officer referred the Committee onto the level of current tenant rent arrears and advised that this was closely linked to the Universal Credit information that had already been discussed. The Officer informed the Committee that the same levels of support offered to the tenants receiving Universal Credit was offered to all tenants. The Officer presented the figures within the report to the Committee.The Officer stated that outstanding rent arrears as of 5 March 2021 was £1,027,169 including the debt associated with Universal Credit, this was a 1% increase compared with the period 6 March 2020.The Officer updated the Committee on the eviction processes available to the Council and explained the complicated process of serving a notice.The Committee was advised that the serving of notices had recommenced in September 2020 and since that date 96 notices had been served seeking possession. The Officer informed the Committee that 36 one month notices had been served and the remainder were 6 months notices. This was despite the Councils efforts to support these tenants before finally having to resort to this course of action.The Officer informed the Committee of the Court processes.Councillor Swinscoe – asked for clarification on the Chart as to which line represented 19/20 and 20/21The Officer advised that the top line was 20/21 therefore it illustrated a reduction in the last week.The Member queried if the dips in the chart were related to the 4 weekly Universal Credit or where tenants were catching up with their arrears.The Officer responded that the dip down to the line were related to the receipt of the monthly direct debits and monthly payment from DWP and also a delay on one of the payments being processed and being held over to the following week. This would have normally been illustrated as a two stage drop instead of the one large drop on the graph.The Officer then updated the Committee on the levels of Anti- Social Behaviour, the report contained details of the number of ongoing cases of Anti-Social Behaviour and highlighted, to the Committee a number of cases with redacted addresses illustrating some of the complaints that the department was currently dealing with and actions taken.The Committee was informed that there were currently 548 cases of Anti-Social Behaviour that were being investigated by Tenancy Services. 304 cases had been closed down, within this financial year, with a 90% success rate. The definition of success being the achievement of the desired outcome. This was not based on what a tenant stated that they wanted the outcome to be.The Committee was advised that Anti-Social Behaviour was resolved in two ways, lower level ASB was dealt with by the Housing Management Officers, when there was a need to escalate due to the complexity of the issue i.e. a neighbourhood was affected, this would be passed to the specialist ASB and Tenancy Enforcement Officers.In severe cases of ASB evictions can still take place. The Officer advised that the introduction of Introductory Tenancies had resulted in it being easier for the Council to regain possession caused by rent arrears or anti-social behaviour. Introductory Tenancies commenced in June 2020 and they were initially for a 12 month period, but the tenancy could be extended if the tenant had not abided by the rules of tenancy and could result in eviction where necessary. If there were no problems with the tenancy during the probationary 12 month period they automatically become a secure tenant.Councillor Wallace commented that he was pleased that the Introductory Tenancies had been introduced. The Member queried what happened to the tenants after eviction, as the Council have a duty to the homeless?The Officer stated that the Council do have a duty of care and that duty would be for 56 days. The evicted tenant would be placed in a hostel and the Homeless Prevention Officer would assist them to secure alternative accommodation. However, this accommodation would not be within Council stock unless there were exceptional circumstances.Councillor Smart – stated that there were two types of Anti-Social Behaviour Officers, which were the Housing ASB Enforcement Officers and the Neighbourhood Warden and he felt that for clarity purposes it was important to state that. The Member queried if as a result in the reduction of Neighbourhood Wardens and the Police presence had, had an impact on the Housing ASB Enforcement Officers?The Officer responded that the Council worked closely with a Police Liaison Officer, that there was a nominated Officer to seek information from when required. If something happened within a Council Property that was of a serious nature the Council were informed. There was a shared system called Flare that was used by a multitude of Agencies. There were lots of joint meetings that occurred, which would include targeted meetings for specific reasons with the appropriate agency.The Officer advised that there were two ASB and Tenancy Enforcement Officers that work within Tenancy Services and would take action against Council tenants. If an Owner Occupier complained about a Council Tenant they would take appropriate action, also if a tenant complained about another tenant. If however, a Council tenant complained about an Owner Occupier or someone in private rented accommodation the housing department have no powers under the Housing Act to take any action against them. The Community Safety Team would then become involved.Councillor Answer – queried if there had been an increase in the numbers of Anti-Social Behaviour since the lockdown in comparison with previous years?The Member queried if evictions for anti-social behaviour had still taken place during the pandemic.The Member queried as per the report an eviction in Abbott Ward set for 9th March 2021 and asked the Officer if he was aware of the outcome?The Officer confirmed that evictions for ASB happen during lockdown, and also confirmed that the eviction in Abbott Ward had taken place.The number of ASB issues reported remains the same however, the type of ASB has changed during the lockdown. More domestic cases and complaints about child related activity as a result of them being at home more and not at school. Councillor Ward raised concerns regarding the eviction of families and queried the extent that the Council work with other services, specifically children services, mental health services and substance abuse services in order to intervene earlier to prevent eviction. The Officer advised that it was extremely rare for families to be evicted, most of the evictions for ASB tend to be single people or couples. In terms of the partnership working the Council have case partnership meetings, social care meetings, MASH meetings, based on the individual circumstances. The Council do not want to evict any tenant it remains the last resort of the Council. The Council work to try to resolve issues wherever possible. The Council has extra external support from many agencies. However, unfortunately, there were still some people who would not engage with the Council. It is important to note that there was a wider impact caused by ASB the Council would support the individual as much as possible. However, the Council also had a duty of care to other tenants to ensure that they are not affected by anti-social behaviour.The report was accepted for noting by a unanimous show of hands.RESOLVED:The report was accepted for noting. |
| **21/11** | **WORK PROGRAMME** |
|  | The Chair presented a summary of the Work Programme Report to the Committee, and then asked the Committee if they had any further suggestions to be added to the list of items within the report.The Head of Health and Wellbeing referred the Committee to the specification of the role and remit of the ASB Officers and suggested that this should be broadened to include other roles within the Council that are involved with ASB. The Chair stated that this would be added to the list.Councillor Smart asked if there were any plans to increase the numbers of Neighbourhood Wardens. If there were indeed sufficient numbers of Wardens in the Districts?The Officer responded that the purpose of the piece of work would be to help inform decisions that may be made about services that dealt with anti-social behaviour. It was important to understand that this was not necessarily about Community Safety Neighbourhood Wardens or Case Management ASB Officers within the Community Safety Team. It was the Officer’s understanding that following the meeting with Councillor Shields that it was broadly around anti-social behaviour and as a consequence all of the services in the Council that may have a role to play in addressing anti-social behaviour. It was to provide the opportunity for scrutiny to undertake a piece of work to review some of the issues raised by Councillor Smart. It was the opportunity for the Committee to inform some decisions that may need to be made. The group would scope out the works to be covered by the Working Group, Officers would support the Members in that process to put together a programme of meetings around a specific theme.Councillor Walker stated that there should be a specific ASB Officer Team to deal with ASBO’s.The Head of Health and Wellbeing responded that there was a team called the Community Safety Team, who dealt with ASB reports to the authority, and the Council also had Officers within Housing, as well as a number of other roles within services across the Council that were involved with ASB within authority. The Officer suggested that scrutiny of the many roles involved in dealing with ASB across the Council should be highlighted to inform a better understanding of the processes involved. That the statement that there were no ASB Officers was incorrect. A Member’s discussion followed regarding the number of ASB Officers that the Council had and the numbers of neighbourhood wardens.Councillor Smart stated that in the past there had been a total of 14 Wardens and asked how many Neighbourhood Wardens including their Supervisors that there were now?The Officer responded that the maximum number had been s 12 plus 2 team leaders. Currently in there were 7 plus a team leader. The Officer stated that comments that had been made emphasise the reasons for the piece of work.Councillor Answer stated that this was an opportunity to do some Scrutiny work to review practices that were happening now. To review the processes from the start to the finish. This was what scrutiny was about. The Member stated that It could also include what the Wardens duties and responsibilities were. This was an opportunity to look at where we are now and where we want to be in the future.The Member also stated that he would like to add Housing Voids as an additional topic for the Work Programme, as there were a lot of voids due to the pandemic which has resulted in a reduction in the repairs being made due to Covid secure practices. This needed to be reviewed and resolved.The Chair asked the Committee if there were any Members who wanted to join this Working Group. The Group were advised that Councillor Shields, Councillor Hopewell from Overview and Scrutiny (Place) would form part of the Working Group.Councillor Walker and Councillor Redfern volunteered to be Members of the Working Group.The Chair advised that following this meeting an email would be sent out to all Members to find Members who want to take part in this ASB Working Group.The Head of Housing stated that the review of Voids was welcomed. It had been a challenging time for turning around Void properties once they had become empty. Due to the initial lockdown preventing any works which resulted in many delays. However, the Officer wanted to reassure the Members that there was an Action Plan in place that was looking at ways of prioritising that work. The Chair proposed that a meeting be arranged with Councillor Shields to scope out the Plan for the Working Group. An email would be sent out to Members outside of the Communities and Place Committees to seek further interest from Members. Councillor Smart seconded this. There was affirmation from the Committee that this was acceptable.RESOLVEDThe report was accepted for noting. |

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