

Scrutiny Report on Allocations and Voids 2015

27th November 2015

Index

1) Introduction	3
2) Scope and Methodology	3
3) Main Body and Findings	3
a) Interview with Lesley Bethwaite and Gillian Brough	3
b) Voids Visits	4
c) Cumbria Choice allocations policy (desktop review)	4
d) Cumbria Choice mystery shopping	4
e) Zoopla	5
f) Shadowing allocation team	5
g) Paper trail (6 voids)	5
h) Joint Board meeting 13 th August	5-6
i) Lettable standard	6
j) Discussion with Jimmy Brunskill	6
k) Shadowing Asset Officers	7
l) Discussion with Angela Kneale allocations team leader	7
m) Sign ups phone surveys	8
n) Refusals phone surveys	8
o) Skipping report	8
p) Private lettings agent mystery shopping	8-9
q) Benchmarking	9
r) Discussion with Paula Davidson Asset Standards	9-10
4) Recommendations	10-11-12
5) Conclusions	12
6) Reference List	12-13
7) Acknowledgements	13

1.0 Introduction

We have 11 members on the Scrutiny Panel. Keith Harkness (Chair) Andy Trappe (Vice Chair), James Osler (Secretary), Margaret Boothman, Jen Trappe, Paddy Dargue, Billy Hogarty, Maureen Brown, Arnie Heard, Irene Gilmour, Peter Armstrong

The Panel began this Scrutiny in January 2015 by interviewing 3 Team Leaders from Allocations, Voids, and Repairs. During this meeting it became clear from Lesley Bethwaite that as the allocations team leader she was responsible for the re-let times Key Performance Indicator. We found that the re-let times in Cumbria appeared to be significantly higher than in other divisions across Riverside. After this interview it was decided the Scrutiny Panel would like to hold a further meeting with Lesley Bethwaite and Gillian Brough to talk about allocations. At this point we also realised that we would need to have other meetings with Jimmy Brunskill from the voids team as void repairs appeared to be a factor in the days taken to re-let properties. A key reason for wanting to scrutinise this area was the revenue being lost to the business through taking a long time to let properties after they became empty.

2.0 Scope & Methodology

The Scrutiny Panel used a variety of methods. Methods used included interviews, shadowing, site visits, telephone surveys, desktop reviews of reports and information.

3.0 Main body / findings

a) Interview with Lesley Bethwaite & Gillian Brough

From the interview the panel discovered that Cumbria Choice is the primary system for Riverside to allocate properties. Typically under Cumbria Choice applicants can make 3 bids on properties per week. However some weeks it would be beneficial if there was more flexibility than this so that applicants could make up to 6 or even 9 bids.

It was asked what would happen in a scenario where there are more terminations in a week than the number of properties that were advertised on Cumbria Choice, would this not create an imbalance? The panel found other methods are used to stop this happening such as Zoopla.

Other reasons were cited for the re-let days being close to 39. For example competition from private landlords, time wasters, quality of product, bedroom tax and low demand.

b) Voids visits

Over two separate days 9 properties were visited in Raffles, Morton, Wigton Road, Brampton, Botcherby, Petteril Bank and Longtown. This included 3 bedroom houses, 1 Bedroom flats, 2 bedroom houses, and a 1 bedroom bungalow.

Of the 9 visited 5 were given a rating of 5/5. 2 were give 4/4 and 2 were given 3/5.

It was noted in a number of houses that downstairs decoration was of a very good standard. Upstairs decoration was not of such a good standard. In some cases where carpets were left in the properties this made a big difference to the appeal of these properties. In other properties where the floor tiling had been removed this looked very untidy and detracted from the property. It was noted in general that a number of small remedial jobs had not been finished.

In one or two properties the gardens let the appearance of the property down badly. This was also applicable to gardens surrounding these properties and the general kerb side appeal was poor in some estates.

c) Cumbria Choice allocations policy (Desktop review)

The document is overly complicated. It is too complex for the average person to understand. The banding is totally inflexible. This results in properties that have been on Cumbria Choice for a long time being unavailable to people who might want to rent them. For example people who are in Band D & E who are adequately housed and might be able to afford to rent a larger property but they can't as they are housed on housing need.

d) Cumbria Choice Mystery shopping

3 members of the panel registered with Cumbria Choice. All registered online and all found the following problems:

It was complicated, it took 21 days to actually register and have access on the system. It was intolerant of mistakes meaning that the process had to be restarted. Two members of the Scrutiny Panel also volunteer in the Tenants Resource Centre and find similar problems showing people how to use and access Cumbria Choice.

After registration and choosing a housing provider the system does not filter down to properties available for the applicants chosen provider. For example one mystery shopper found that there were 90 properties and these were in different parts of the county like Millom and West Cumbria.

The time allowed for bidding for a property is effectively only 2 days for people who don't have access to a computer or a tablet. For example it's uploaded on a Thursday and this only allows Friday and Monday to bid before the deadline closes on a Tuesday. Any property advertised that was bid on but subsequently refused would then be unavailable for re-advertising until a fortnight later.

e) Zoopla

A number of panel members found Zoopla very easy to register with. It was much quicker to complete registration with Zoopla than Cumbria Choice and panel members were up and running on Zoopla within 24 hours. However once registered nothing appeared to happen from Riverside.

When contacted by Riverside a property was offered in Stanwix. When he stated his area of choice was Harraby they advised him that it would be better to go to Cumbrian Choice.

f) Shadowing allocations team

2 members of the panel shadowed allocations to see how the process works. They found that when properties went on Cumbria Choice, they were available to be bid on until the following Tuesday. When bids are checked to see if potential Tenants are suitable, they are contacted and called in for an initial interview, to go through an affordability check. After that they can be called to go for a viewing and if acceptable, they will be called in for a sign up. This can be time consuming for both staff and potential tenants because it could take up to 21 days to finalise. Also time is added for various reasons eg: potential tenant cannot afford the property. This can lead to further delays for up to 14 days before the property can be re-advertised. Some properties can be harder to let for various reasons eg: area or décor. 48 properties were refused in one month by potential tenants. All had to go back on the Cumbria Choice system which is time consuming, which meant no income for all the empty properties. There is a new service called Fasttrack, which is advertised in the main reception area. If any potential tenant is interested they can apply at reception and go through the process, this is mainly for properties that are hard to let. There is also a decorating allowance available from between £50-£200, but not all tenants are aware of it.

g) Paper trail (6 voids)

The Scrutiny Panel asked for a paper trail from notification of tenancy ending until date of re-let for 6 properties.

It was found that some files had papers missing which were available in others. It was also found that there appeared to be no way of one department checking with another department about the current status of a property.

h) Joint Board Meeting 13th August

A number of important points were noted. The first was a 10 page action plan within the organisation, to help improve the situation. A senior staff member said although there were items in the plan to improve voids, the Scrutiny Panel would pick up

points not in the action plan. The Board is looking forward to reading the Scrutiny report, and look forward to the recommendations that are within it.

Dean Butterworth said that Cumbria Choice Based Lettings is the best way of advertising properties available to rent from Riverside.

The general election has presented Riverside with serious financial challenges, which is leaving the organisation with probable budget cuts. For example at the time of the meeting it was shown that a reasonable spend on a void was £2600. In future the target would be to get this figure down to £1500-£1000. There is a balance to be struck between the product and what could be afforded.

New Asset Officers have been recruited and are being trained to a higher standard. £60,000 is available in the division to offer incentives to prospective tenants.

i) Lettable Standard

Some members of the Panel were given a copy of the 2010 version of the Lettable Standard. They were advised that the current standard was under review with asset standards. It was hoped that the shortcomings would be rectified in the new standard. It is understood that common sense is being applied in certain areas.

j) Discussion with Jimmy Brunskill

4 panel members had a meeting with Jimmy, and found out there are 33 members in the voids team. This includes 5 supervisors. Outside contractors are also used on occasion, mainly decorating. They are used on an as and when basis. When they do use outside contractors they have to have permission to use them. We asked a question about small holes that were showing after certain items had been removed e.g. careline cords. We asked who was responsible to fill in the holes, and were told it was the electricians. However this was not always happening and should be up to the supervisor to pick up on and report. It was noted that the average spend on voids was £2600, which was mainly on decorating. We also asked if future constraints on the budget affected the standards of work. We were told that yes it would affect the standards. We also asked how long they had to turn a property around to become lettable, we were told 9 days (including weekends), unless major work is needed e.g. new kitchen or bathroom, it could take 28 days. We inquired how information was passed on by the inspectors. The inspector fills in a form and passes it to voids manager. The timescale was variable, depending on the workload. It was noted that further budget constraints would make work very difficult to complete to the same standard.

k) Shadowing Asset Officers pre termination inspections

It was agreed for the panel to shadow asset officers at 3 properties. The idea was that they would be shadowed from notification of termination being given through to the re-letting of the property.

The initial inspections found different things. One property at Meadow View was found to be in need to major works. It needed central heating installed and a new bathroom, and the brick fire place removed in the living room.

Another at Ellesmere Way was found to be in very good condition, carpets were being left, tiles were being left in the bathroom and the kitchen. The decoration was exceptionally clean. The tenant signed an agreement when the photographs were taken that nothing else would be removed. This property became a back to back let.

A third property was looked at on Botcherby Avenue. This was in similar condition to the one on Ellesmere Way. The Scrutiny Panel member who visited said it was ready to move straight into and was one of the nicest Riverside properties he had visited.

l) Discussion with Angela Kneale allocations team leader

Not all properties were advertised immediately when tenancy is terminated. A number of applicants can be pre-selected, which means that they are earmarked for a property while repairs are being completed. In the first instance, properties are always advertised on Cumbria choice. Properties can also be advertised on the window of the Riverside office, these are usually the hard to let properties, and have already been through Cumbria Choice at least once or twice. This seems to be having a positive effect. There are other means being used to advertise hard to let properties, for example Twitter, Facebook Homeless section and Zoopla. The person who is top of the bidding list is contacted within 4 days, the tenant is given 2 days to reply. If there is no reply within the timescale the property goes back onto Cumbria Choice, which means further time loss and revenue lost.

During the process, the tenant will book a viewing, and will decide if they would like it. If the answer is no this is also time lost and it could be up to 2 weeks before the property goes back on Cumbria Choice.

We were informed that as soon as a tenant gives notification of termination, the property is automatically advertised by Riverside. However another source indicated the property would not be advertised until all the repairs are completed.

m) Sign ups phone survey

3 members of the panel undertook a telephone survey to interview tenants who had signed up for a property, between May and August 2015. Information was provided by Cumbria Choice about Riverside properties. Of all the tenants whose information we were given, we found that not all their details were up to date. Of all the Tenants who responded, there were a variety of reasons why they picked that property. For example some people had always been with Riverside, some liked the area or property, close to family and schools. Also suitable for medical needs. Less bills than private rent. Not happy with private landlord. Even though tenants signed up for properties, they said there were some areas they would not accept properties due to poor reputation of the neighbourhood.

n) Refusals phone survey

This survey was done using the information given by Riverside, over the period from June to August 2015. Not all details of customers were up to date.

Only 1 panel member carried out the phone survey of reasons for refusal. There were a variety of reasons eg: some properties were described as dirty, unfit to live in, wrong area, bedroom tax, drug related areas. One reformed addict refused a property because there were known dealers in the area. Of those that went into the private sector, there was an incentive to take the property, eg: white goods, carpets and decorated to a reasonable standard. Even though there were refusals, all people interviewed were happy to stay with Riverside and agreed the rent was value for money.

It was noted that potential customers brought up in a modern properties, preferred modern properties themselves.

o) Skipping report

1 member of the panel looked a skipping report which contained reasons between 31st May and 31st August. In total there were 538 people who were skipped. This was for a wide number of reasons, such as efficient management of stock, failure to meet accommodation criteria. No local connection, offered on another shortlist, unable to contact, unable to proceed. Unsuitable due to arrears or debts. As you can see from these reasons and the numbers, it all adds time to the process.

p) Private lettings mystery shopping

1 member of the Panel went into Bulmans Letting Agent. You can view a property free of charge but it will cost £125 to apply for a property once viewed. The deposit is the same as the first months rent, both of which must be paid up front. The letting process could be completed within 3 days. Comparing rents for similar properties in Sunnymeade Upperby, it was found that the cost of a private rent was £425 per

month. The property was a first floor flat which had double glazing, shower room, gas central heating and garden to rear. Conditions for rental included no smoking, no pets and no DSS. In comparison a Riverside property of similar standard, the rent is worked on a 48 week cycle of £89.28, which equals £357 per month. There are no restrictions that we know of with Riverside.

1 panel member went into Allans Letting Agent, to inquire about the timescale for lettings. Was informed that from viewing to completion could be done within 5 days for most properties. As with Bulmans the same applied regarding deposit and rent.

The private agents seem to let the properties much quicker. There are advantages for both systems. With the private sector, in most cases they are equipped with white goods and carpeted. The disadvantage is that it is a short term let of six months. With Riverside the tenancy is much longer, there is no deposit, and there is a repair service which is part of the tenancy agreement.

q) Benchmarking

All members of the Scrutiny Panel looked at 2 documents. The first was a briefing from the National Housing Federation called *Re-imagining Regeneration: Empty and Difficult to Let Homes*.

The second document was from the Chartered Institute of Housing and was called *How to Increase Demand for Hard to Let Properties*.

The Panel looked at both of these documents to look at practices in the Social Housing sector, to see if any could be applied to this Scrutiny.

These were both interesting and were useful in making recommendations. Some of these will follow in a later section.

r) Discussion with Paula Davidson Asset Standards

As part of Think Forward, Paula has been working around sustainability of tenancies and Lettable Standard. A lot of her work focused on psychological approach as opposed to technical.

1. Cleanliness
2. Smell
3. Appearance

Paula was putting together a clean and valet tick list.

Enhancements make a real difference to the appeal of the property. Blinds, curtains, flooring, or offering a shower over a bath.

Kerbside appeal is also a big factor. Overgrown gardens and the appearance of neighbouring properties make a real difference to the appeal of properties. Riverside need to be better at resolving patch problems.

The scrutiny panel learnt of two pilot Schemes: Mersey North and Manchester

In Mersey North the tenant is offered £100 as an incentive to allow repairs to be carried out prior to tenant moving out.

In Manchester the prospective tenant would be able to set a shopping list to the value of £1000 which includes labour, for decorating and colour choice. This is being trialled in 10 Riverside properties.

4.0 Recommendations

1. In older properties for example pre 1960, more thought should be given to the number of rooms decorated.
2. Tighter controls of workmanship standards and of inspectors. Operatives be made aware of standards expected and spot checks to take place on a regular basis. Final inspections to be more comprehensive.
3. Take a wider view of empty homes including addressing public realm, kerbside appeal issues, including improving the desirability of some areas by taking action to improve the appearance of estates as place to live. For example gardens and fences are in very poor condition in some areas and this detracts from the appeal of neighbouring properties.
4. An electronic timeline to show the progress of a property from the date of notification of termination through to what repairs are being done and the status of these repairs. For example if someone walked in from the street into the front counter and asked about a particular property they would be able to get all of the information, as would all staff.

Advertising: Riverside does not promote themselves well as a housing provider. Recommendations 5-10 relate specifically to advertising.

5. The signage at the front of the building is poor. There are other businesses in Carlisle operating under the Riverside name. Signage should reflect the fact there are homes for rent. Make clear that Riverside is a housing provider. This is the main sign at the front of the building.
6. Better and more professional internal and external photos made up into an information pack for difficult to let properties, similar to those you would obtain from a private lettings agent. This should also include a list of local amenities. These should be distributed on Cumbria Choice, Zoopla, and on the Riverside website. TV screens at the front counters and the front window could also advertise available properties.
7. Signage at empty properties. One member of the panel visited three private lettings agents about signage at vacant properties. Homesearch, Northwood, and the Cumberland all put signs outside of homes to let. They advised that this did not cause an increase in vandalism and it had a big impact on increasing demand for lettings. Riverside should consider putting 'to let' signs outside of homes.
8. Host open house events to view a property without an appointment. These events could be advertised at local community centres and in the front window at Riverside.

9. Riverside should emphasise the benefits of social rented sector. More needs to be made of there being no deposit, longer more secure tenancies and a reliable repairs service.
10. Make more of advertising through platforms such as the webpage, social media through Twitter and Facebook. It is noted that Zoopla has been trialled but what about Right Move as well?
11. In a case where a property has been refused twice, a joint visit is arranged immediately between a letting officer, an asset officer AND a tenant inspector to determine why and to see if any steps can be taken to improve the situation.
12. Riverside should offer evening and weekend viewings to improve their competitive edge in line with the private rented sector. This should apply to sign ups by appointment away from the office. Opening the front counter until a Saturday lunchtime should also be considered.
13. Another recommendation that the Scrutiny Panel would like to make in regard to Cumbria Choice is that if there was more flexibility within the current system then this would also help to improve matters. For example applicants should be able to make more than 3 bids in a week. From talking to staff it is felt that if the number of bids was increased to 6 per week this would be a better system. The Panel recommends that at a senior management level that this is negotiated with the other partners in the agreement.
14. Registration for Cumbria Choice takes too long (3 weeks in some cases) and it is a difficult process. In most online sites registration is almost instant. Riverside need to work with Cumbria Choice to make registration immediate. For example if you were required first of all to register on the Cumbria Choice website for a user name and password. Then applicants would fill in the form which might allow them to do this in several stages.
15. Review restrictions on bedrooms. There could be a greater degree of flexibility for families who can afford to rent larger properties to allow a young family an extra bedroom to grow into.
16. Allow home owners who may have some equity to qualify for housing. For example older people who may be looking to downsize.
17. There has been a pilot scheme run in Mersey North. When the outgoing tenant gives notice they are offered £100 as an incentive to let Riverside come in and do any repairs while they are still living in the property. This can encourage back to back lets thus reducing the overall re-let times. Riverside should consider piloting this in Carlisle to see what impact it may have. Also viewings should be allowed by prospective tenants as soon as the 4 week termination notification is given.
18. Cumbria Choice website is unable to filter by location accurately. The new Riverside website should advertise all properties area by area and have a FastTrack application form available on the website.

19. Riverside could explore different tenancy options. E.g larger flats could be let to adult siblings on a joint tenancy as a way of relieving overcrowding in their family property. By altering the composition of the application from two single persons applications with one bed need each to a joint application with a two bed need, the applicants would be housed sooner into available stock than if they remained on the waiting list for one bedroomed accommodation.
20. In houses the hall, stairs and landing should all be decorated and this should be part of the void standard even though this is costly at approx. £700.
21. Even if it is very basic there should be a floor covering in rooms on the ground floor. It is noted that at some voids where the tiles have been taken out this seriously reduces the appeal of the property. Asset standards have pointed out the first 3 minutes inside a property are psychologically the most important therefore floor covering plays a big part. The same should apply in older properties where the floor condition may have deteriorated.

5.0 Conclusions

The panel have observed that there still appears to be a lot of difficulty with inter departmental communications. This undoubtedly has an impact on times for relets. It is hoped the new electronic App will improve this.

Although the Scrutiny Panel have been advised Cumbria Choice is the best way to advertise a large amount of properties at any given time, there seems to be serious shortcomings with many aspects of this system.

The panel have observed that incentives are offered to seal the deal in some cases. Riverside need to be careful about this. Although it is a good thing that they are offered if someone is undecided about taking a property and this helps them to take it, some tenants may be very disgruntled if they later find out that someone else down the road received some extras and they did not.

The panel appreciates that Riverside do a lot of very good work within the community but it should focus on the fact it is primarily a social housing provider.

6.0 Reference list

- 1 Chartered Institute of Housing (2014), how to increase demand for Hard to let properties
- 2 Cumbria Choice: choice based lettings household Application Form (2014)
- 3 Cumbria Choice: choice based lettings,” Your Guide to choosing a property with Cumbria Choice”
- 4 Cumbria choice: Choice based lettings Allocation policy with revisions effective from 1st August 2013

- 5 National Housing Federation (2014) Briefing: Re-imagining regeneration: Empty and difficult homes to let.
- 6 Riverside Starter Tenancy Agreement (2015)
- 7 Riverside Pre- Tenancy Declaration

7.0 Acknowledgments

Angela Kneale

Allocation Team

Asset officers

Deborah Earl

Gerald Warwick

Gillian Brough

Kim Watson

Jamie Hendry

Jimmy Brunskill

Lesley Bethwaite

Paula Davidson (Asset Standards)

Sean Crossley

Tenant Inspectors

In case we have missed anyone out, The Scrutiny Panel would like to extend our appreciation to all that we have been in contact with and helped us with this project.

A big THANK YOU