

Riverside South and Central Division

Tenant Scrutiny of Estates Services

Final draft report

6 September 2015

1. Introduction

This scrutiny examined the estates services delivered to tenants living in Riverside South and Central Division. This service was chosen because:

- the cleaning and gardening contracts are due to be retendered in 2016 and the findings of this review will be used to inform that process
- the members of the scrutiny team had anecdotal evidence that some residents are very dissatisfied with the service.

The scrutiny review began in June 2015 and the final report is to be presented to the Board meeting on 22 September 2015.

2. Scope of the review

The scrutiny focused on the gardening and communal cleaning services which are provided to tenants and for which they pay a service charge. It excluded other aspects of divisional estate service provision such as window cleaning and CCTV.

The team was mainly concerned with the two major contractors (Pinnacle for cleaning and Mitie for gardening) and Riverside's four caretakers who provide cleaning services to some estates in the Midlands and South. They also looked briefly at the work of the Your Place Team in the Midlands.

The South and Central Division covers a very large area and the scrutiny team concentrated their evidence gathering on Stoke, Leicester and Beckenham, although also visited some estates in London.

The scrutiny team set out to answer the following questions:

1. How the work of the cleaning and gardening contractors is monitored by Riverside
2. How the contractors' operatives are managed and standards are checked
3. What is specified in the communal cleaning and gardening contracts for each of the areas being scrutinised and how service charges are calculated
4. How residents are told what standard of service is specified for their area and how they know what is actually being delivered
5. If Riverside should consider bringing the gardening service in-house rather than renew the contract

We also wanted to find out if Riverside is meeting the requirements and expectations of the Regulator, as set out in the Neighbourhood and Community Standard. In summary these are:

Riverside is expected to keep the neighbourhood and communal areas around their homes clean and safe. They should work in partnership with their tenants and other providers and public bodies where it is effective to do so.

They must consult tenants about their (published) policy for maintaining and improving the neighbourhoods.

3. Summary of findings

The scrutiny team knew that we were doing this review at a time of change in Riverside, with a new estates services structure and new people settling into their roles. We were pleased to find that that Riverside seems to be moving in the right direction by paying more attention to the quality of cleaning and gardening services that tenants pay for.

We were impressed by the caretakers we met because they took such pride in their estates, interacted with residents and delivered higher standards of cleaning than we saw elsewhere.

We were also impressed with the positive attitude of the Mitie and Pinnacle managers we met; we felt they were committed to working with Riverside to improve services and wanted to have more involvement with tenants.

We found that there is room for improvement in a number of areas, in particular:

- Monitoring performance and standards consistently and reporting back to tenants
- Giving tenants more useful information on what their service charge covers and what level of service they can expect
- Collecting feedback from tenants on cleaning and gardening services; there are no satisfaction surveys, there is no evidence of complaints being analysed and used to improve the service and Tenant Inspectors are not being used effectively.

Overall, we have concluded that Riverside is not fully compliant with the Neighbourhood and Community standard at present because there is not enough involvement of tenants in the cleaning and gardening service.

In the next section we set out our detailed findings in relation to the five scrutiny questions and in section five we have made recommendations for improvement that we hope Riverside will consider.

4. Detailed findings

4.1 How the work of the cleaning and gardening contractors is monitored by Riverside

The scrutiny team began work by asking for a list of documents, including the relevant policy documents. We were given a document called “Communal Area Management Regime”. It was marked as a draft and it was not complete, although the front sheet said it had been approved in March 2014. We did not see any other policy documents.

Cleaning

Pinnacle Group holds the cleaning contract for communal areas of estates in the south of England. The contract has been in place since 2012 and has just been extended by two years until 2017. There are also four caretakers in place who are directly employed by Riverside, two are based on estates in the south (Bromley) and two in the midlands (Stoke).

We were told by both Riverside and Pinnacle that until recently there had been inconsistent, “arms-length”, monitoring of the cleaning service delivery. Pinnacle has a new Contracts Manager in place since March 2015 and we heard about Pinnacle’s intention to establish more joined up working with Riverside to improve standards.

We found it difficult to get a clear picture of how the performance of the cleaning contractors is being monitored by Riverside, with problems identified quickly and corrected. We understand that Riverside is in a period of change with new staff in post and new working arrangements but our impression is that checking and reporting is still a disjointed process. There does not seem to be an up to date policy, procedure or any other document that all staff can understand and follow, although we accept that it is possible there are processes on the system that we did not see.

There is Divisional Contracts Manager (in post for less than a year), a new Communal Area Team Leader (in post since July 2015) and four Communal Area Officers (CAOs), one in the midlands and three in the south.

We were told that the CAO posts were originally created to check on health and safety standards and that fire safety is still their priority but their role has since been expanded to include checking on the standards of communal cleaning and gardening. We asked for a job description and noted that it was headed Communal Areas Inspector and was dated September 2012 so we are not sure if it is current but it did include as the first key task under service delivery: “Carry out inspections of communal stairwells, communal grounds and play areas to ensure their standard is maintained and fly tipping etc does not occur liaising with local Your Place/housing management teams to deliver Your Place and neighbourhood management initiatives”.

The work of the CAOs still seems to be heavily weighted towards health and safety rather than checking on cleaning and gardening standards. For example, we were told they carry out weekly or monthly estate inspections and the frequency is set according to the fire risk assessment on each estate.

The CAOs submit reports back logging issues requiring action. The scrutiny team was shown the logs completed by each CAO and noted that they were very detailed and also showed who was responsible for dealing with the issues. We also noted that there were very few comments on cleaning, we do not know if that is because the CAOs considered the cleaning to be up to standard or because checking on the work of the caretakers and contractors it is not a priority for them.

We also asked how the CAOs and Housing Officers (HOs) worked together to check on standards as most tenants will go first to their HO with any problems. We were told that HOs know what is in the contract for their areas and that HOs and CAOs are expected to do quarterly joint neighbourhood inspections/estate walkabouts with tenants. They should log any issues with cleaning or gardening and ensure that follow-up action is taken. We were shown one report completed by a Housing Officer in May 2015 but apparently without a CAO (or any tenants) in attendance. There is a list of estate walkabout dates on the website; the ones listed for the Midlands are apparently being done by a HO and are monthly and the ones in the south are shown as being done quarterly by a CAO. We are not clear how HOs and CAOs liaise about any issues with cleaning contractors and consider that a joint approach would help to improve the service overall.

Monthly contractor performance meetings are now being held and are attended by Pinnacle managers, Riversides' Divisional Contracts Manager and now the CA Team Leader. (We were told that there was no meeting in July because the Pinnacle representatives were unable to attend.)

In some places the communal cleaning is done by caretakers who are directly employed by Riverside. They report to the CAOs and one caretaker in the south told us that he met the CAO on his estate once a week. We have no further information about how the work of the caretakers is monitored.

One of things the scrutiny team was interested in was how Riverside made sure that tenants in the midlands and in the south received a consistent standard of service. We were told that the midlands CAO is managed by the Your Place Team Manager but the other CAOs report to the Communal Area Team Leader. We are concerned that this split might lead to some inconsistency in standards between the two areas.

Gardening

There are several different methods of delivering the gardening services to Riverside's communal areas. Mitie have had the contract for estates in the south (including London) since 2009 and the contract has simply rolled forward from year

to year. In the midlands, the Your Place team cuts grass and do other gardening work on some estates and there are also smaller contractors. The scrutiny team concentrated on the work of Mitie.

Both Mitie and Riverside told us that there had been problems with the way the contract was being delivered, particularly in the south east. Mitie has a new Operations Manager who has been in place since May 2015 and there are three Mitie Contracts Managers. Monthly contractor performance meetings are being held and are attended by Mitie, Riversides' Divisional Contracts Manager and now the CA Team Leader.

The minutes of a contract performance review meeting on 15 June 2015 attended by managers from Riverside and Mitie (but not CAOs) included an agreement to carry out ten quality inspections a month, six would be done jointly by the CAO and Mitie managers. The larger estates and where there had been a high number of complaints would be prioritised. There was no mention of giving feedback to tenants.

The Your Place team of three men has a Manager who monitors their performance; the CAOs and HOs are also supposed to check on standards of work.

Tenant involvement

According to the Riverside website, "tenants are invited to get involved in estate walkabouts in their areas to ensure that any problems are being dealt with and that standards are set, achieved and maintained". We found that it is not easy for tenants to find out when walkabouts are due to take place. There are schedules on the website, although no times are given for the ones in the south and a caretaker told us that although there were walkabouts on his estate, they were not scheduled. There does not seem to be any other way of finding out; they are not consistently listed in the newsletter, we saw no schedules on noticeboards and although we were told that Housing Officers sent out flyers, we have seen no evidence that this happens routinely; we were told that it had not been happening in Stoke.

Tenant Inspectors do an estate inspection when they are asked. We requested a recent report and were provided with an individual report rather than an analysis of a series of reports and a related action plan which dealt with the Inspectors' findings. Nobody we interviewed during the scrutiny review mentioned tenant inspections and we have seen no evidence that the information collected by the Tenant Inspectors is used to monitor the quality of estates services and make improvements where they are needed.

4.2 How the contractors' operatives are managed and the standards checked

Cleaning

We were told that Pinnacle has Performance Managers who supervise teams and they have an internal, web-based system of performance monitoring with the operatives using smartphones and bar codes. The operatives report any problems to the Performance Managers who pass the information on to Riverside. We were told that the Pinnacle Contracts Manager does spot-checks.

We saw an example of a Pinnacle workbook for the week commencing 17 October 2014 which recorded the duties in each scheme completed daily by the operatives. The operatives were able to add comments. There did not seem to be any more recent examples.

We asked how long the cleaning contractors were supposed to be on site, what they were meant to do and how this was checked. We were given a list of the estates receiving services and the time allocated to each part of the estate. We were told that the cleaners are required to sign in and sign out on an attendance sheet displayed on noticeboards to prove they have been on site for the required amount of time. Not all the estates we saw had attendance sheets and those we saw did not have a column for signing out.

At Bryanston House the last record of cleaners having attended was dated November 2013. (The stairs and walkway were clean; we are not sure if the tenants were cleaning the external area themselves or if the cleaners were actually attending.)

Gardening

The scrutiny team was told that Mitie had put in place its own system of site reporting, although nothing had been required of them in the Grounds Maintenance contract specification. We were not able to check the reporting requirements in the contract.

There are three Mitie Contract Managers, one in each of Mitie's regions. They are expected to check 10% of the sites they are responsible for each month and we were told that the site reports recorded problems and were sent to Riverside's Environmental Services Assistant. We saw some recent site reports and noted that they only listed items that needed attention and for which Mitie could provide a costing. We also saw a record of visits in June and July that reported on estates attended with the date and time and the service scheduled but did not note any problems that had been dealt with.

It was agreed in June 2015 that the Mitie Contract Managers and CAOs are to visit sites together for audit purposes and will complete a report. It was too early for us to see any reports.

The gardening contractors do not sign attendance sheets on the estates but we were told they Mitie used tracking devices.

4.3 What is specified in the communal cleaning and gardening contracts for each of the areas being scrutinised and how service charges are calculated

We asked at the start of our scrutiny review for contract specifications for communal cleaning and gardening.

Cleaning

No contract specification was provided except a Pinnacle poster that sets out the cleaning tasks that Pinnacle are contracted to deliver. From our observations on our site visits, this specification is not being met and we are not confident that operatives know exactly what is required. We were told that the poster was meant for display on noticeboards but we did not see it on the estates we visited in Peckham and Lambeth.

We were given a schedule of work followed by one of the caretakers and noted that it was displayed on the noticeboards of that estate. On our visits, we judged that the Riverside caretakers provided a higher standard of cleaning than contractors. None the less, on one of the estates we noticed that the bin stores were very smelly and a tenant approached us to complain that the smell made it impossible for her to open her windows in the summer. There was also glass from a broken corridor window on the grass below the window.

The caretaker's schedule included sweeping and disinfecting the floors but did not include deep cleaning of the bins themselves or the bin stores. According to the Landscape and Car Park Maintenance Specification (see below), contractors are only required to sweep out external bin areas. We were told that tenants were not prepared to pay for this service but we do not know when they were asked.

Gardening

We were given a document called Landscape and Car Park Maintenance Specification which included a detailed Schedule of Works.

We were also given a sheet headed 'Grounds maintenance - summary of contract specification for residents information'. It was detailed about what was to be done but we did not see it displayed on any of the estates we visited nor on the website so we are not sure if it is in use. From our observations on our site visits to Calverley Close, Beckenham and several estates in Peckham, this specification is not being met and we are not confident that operatives know the high standards that are expected. (See photographs.) The best examples of gardening we saw were in Moss Green village and at Dalehead in Stoke-on-Trent.

We saw two properties in Queniborough Road where the Your Place team have the contract to maintain the communal garden and the standard was good. We also

visited a property in Beaumanor Road where Your Place were responsible for grounds maintenance and were very disappointed to find rubbish, graffiti and an air of neglect.

There is no information available on performance standards and there are no performance indicators for these services; we were told that the aim is just to get contractors to perform to the contract specification.

Service charges

Service charges are calculated on the basis of the time spent and the cost is divided between the tenants. There are two additional charges, a 10% 'management' fee and a 5% 'administration' fee. The service charge is variable and tenants are sent a statement annually and a consultation letter setting out the next year's charges.

We asked about tenants being refunded when the contractors fails to deliver a service and were told that there is a refund and it is shown in service charge statements as a surplus. We considered that that is not made sufficiently clear to tenants. We are not confident that the monitoring of the cleaning and gardening contractors is good enough at present for the service failures always to be detected.

The minutes of a Contract Performance Review meeting 15 June 2015 attended by Riverside and Pinnacle Managers include:

- Andrew Wells (BR1 3TD) – non-attendance. Alleged that this has been removed from contact. This should not be the case as Riverside is making payments
- 14 Bourdon Road SE20 7SR – communal staircase not being cleaned. Need to check why not being done as Riverside still making payments

The scrutiny team was pleased that these issues are being picked up but very disappointed that there still seem to be discrepancies in delivering a contract which has been in place since 2012.

The explanation given to tenants about the administration charge says, "This is a 5% charge added to your weekly service charge (excluding any cost of provision charges) and contributes towards the process of administering the services provided at your scheme". When we asked what that actually meant and how it differed from the 10% management fee which was also charged, we were told that the 5% administration charge was actually an amount the Providers are allowed to add as their 'profit' or surplus. Although we understand that Riverside is legally allowed to do this and believe that most tenants would think it was reasonable, we consider that the explanation given to tenants is misleading.

The service charge letters to tenants are not clearly expressed and do not give enough details for people to understand exactly what they are paying for. The

proposed service charge letter lists the services that will be charged but does not explain what the services consist of. For example, gardening is listed but does not state exactly what gardening services contractors are required to deliver to their estate. Then, the end of year statements do not make it clear whether the totals are actually surpluses to be credited back to the tenant's account or an amount that the tenant owes.

4.4 How residents are told what standard of service is specified for their area and how they know what is actually being delivered

It is not easy for tenants to find out what standard of service they should expect or to check what standard of service is being delivered. The tenancy agreement states the service charge amount but gives no breakdown. There is no detailed information sent out with the service charge statement telling them what they are paying for in terms of time or service standards. Information on noticeboards is patchy and there is nothing in the service pledge leaflet or on the website.

We saw no evidence that any reports on quality checks are made available to tenants. We were told that quarterly estate inspection reports were on the website but we could not find any.

We do not believe that tenants know what standard of cleaning or gardening they should expect.

Getting tenant feedback on the service

We had anecdotal information that tenants are generally dissatisfied with their cleaning and gardening services, especially in the south of the division and we asked for the customer feedback information that Riverside collected.

We were shown a spreadsheet of all formal complaints but it appears that it is not possible for Riverside to analyse the complaints to see how many concerned cleaning or gardening. We were also told that Riverside does not carry out any satisfaction surveys on these services routinely. This summer (2015) there has been a "Chips and Chat" consultation across the Division which we were told engaged 170+ tenants over eight weeks. Tenants were asked about their cleaning and gardening services and the feedback was still being analysed as we completed our scrutiny review. In any case, the information collected would be difficult to use for the purposes of this scrutiny, for example, the questions did not distinguish between services provided by contractors, caretakers or the Your Place team.

4.5 If Riverside should consider bringing the gardening service in-house rather than renew the contract

In the south, gardening services are mainly delivered by Mitie whereas in the midlands there are five small contractors providing the services, plus the Your Place team which operates on some estates. During our scrutiny we were not able to analyse all the costs of the service and there was very little information available on the quality. We do wonder if a service delivered by so many different providers is cost effective and it is hard to see how Riverside can ensure that tenants receive a consistent standard across the Division.

There are arguments for bringing the gardening service in house if it will improve the service but we do not have enough information to come to a conclusion.

5. Recommendations

The scrutiny team would like to make the following recommendations to Riverside for improving the cleaning and gardening services that are provided to tenants.

5.1 Check service quality regularly. Continue to tighten up on performance monitoring, with regular inspections of cleaning and gardening. Report back to tenants on the inspection results and action plans using the website, Tenant News and estate newsletters. Include the services provided by the caretakers and Your Place team.

5.2 Involve tenants in monitoring service delivery standards. Make better use of Tenant Inspectors, publicise Walkabouts better and actively encourage attendance, invite tenants to join the estate audit visits that the contractors and CAOs are now doing.

5.3 Estate monitors. Consider having volunteer 'estate monitors' or tenant representatives who are familiar with the specification and who will check that the contractors and caretakers have delivered services as scheduled to their areas, reporting back to Riverside and to tenants.

5.4 Publicise estate cleaning and gardening schedules. Make sure information on when cleaning and/or gardening is due to be done on that estate, what tasks are to be done and how long operatives should be spending. Make sure it is posted on every noticeboard and include information on how tenants can report any problems.

5.5 Ask tenants their opinion. Gather tenant feedback on the cleaning and gardening services on a regular basis and use the feedback to drive service improvements. Publicise results, for example in regular "You said, We did" newsletter articles.

5.6 Tell tenants what their service charge covers. Give tenants information in plain English about the cleaning and gardening specifications for their estate. Include the information in the tenancy agreement, in the annual proposed service charge letters, on the website and estate noticeboards.

5.7 Improve the service charge letters and statements. Explain the 5% charge more accurately and clarify the surplus and recovery totals so people can see immediately when they have overpaid and what they have still to pay.

5.8 Consider all options for delivering cleaning and gardening services. We know that Riverside is considering extending the Your Place team into other areas but we suggest that they should also look at employing more caretakers and at the options for inviting tenants to manage services in their own areas. Tenants should be informed and properly consulted before any decision is made.

6. Acknowledgements

The scrutiny team would like to thank all the Riverside staff and contractors for their assistance during this scrutiny review. Everybody we met was very open and willing to help.

7. Team members

Pam Bradbury
Susan Marshall
Janet Mitchell
Christine Nightingale
Colin Nuttman

The team worked under the guidance of Sue Farrant, HQN Associate.

Appendix: photographs taken by the scrutiny team

Site Visit: Leicester

Date: 30 June 2015

The Panel meet with the Your Place Team



The Panel view the communal garden in Queniborough Road



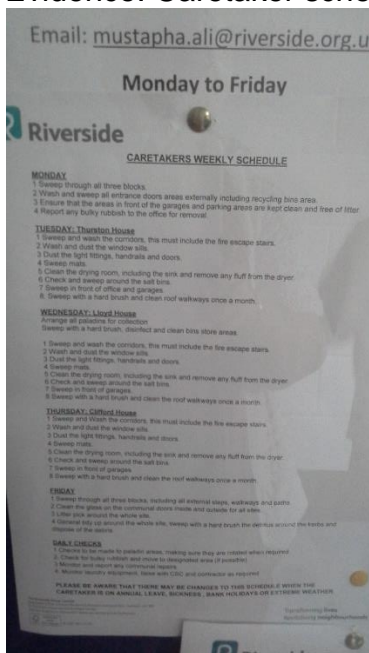
Beaumanor Road, Leicester. Poor cleaning and maintenance of drying area behind the block of flats.



The Panel meets in the Calverley Close office to prepare for the next two days



Evidence: Caretaker schedule displayed on notice board in Calverley Close



Evidence: Grounds not cleared of broken glass outside Lloyd House, Calverley Close



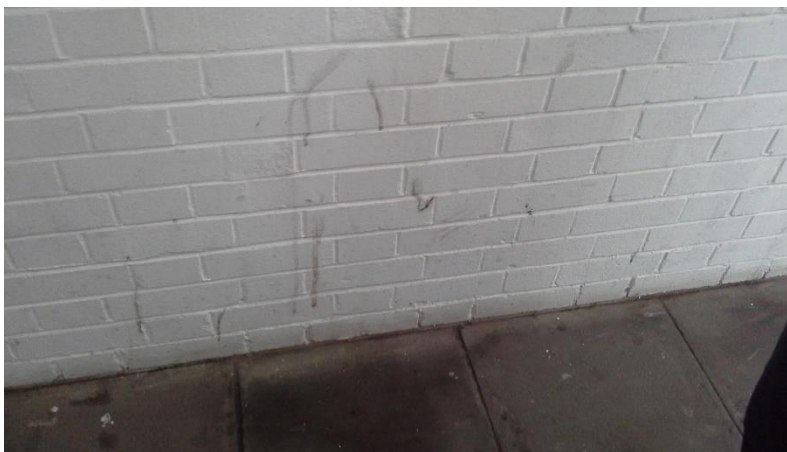
Evidence: Dirty Bin Store at Calverley Close



Evidence: fly-tip in Lilford Road, Lambeth



Evidence: poor cleaning at Geoffrey Close, Lambeth



Evidence: Dog fouling and weeds in Lambeth



Evidence: weeds across the estate in Lambeth



Evidence: neglected plant bed and moss outside Marcus House in Peckham



Evidence: footpath leading Sheffield House to Marcus and Bryanston House



Site Visit: Stoke

Date: 5 August 2015

Evidence: Well-kept grounds at Dalehead Court

