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**EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE  
COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL  
HELD ON 13 FEBRUARY 2014**

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**COSP.12/14 RIVERSIDE CARLISLE**

The Housing and Health Manager presented Report ED.09/14 that provided the Panel with an update on joint working between Riverside Carlisle, now known as Riverside Cumbria, and Carlisle City Council. The report updated Members of the Panel on the Affordable Homes programme 2014-17, land assets, homelessness and Choice Based lettings, Welfare Reform, Affordability, the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) and Riverside Cumbria.

The Chairman welcomed Mr Butterworth, Divisional Director of Riverside Cumbria, Mr Taylor and the Council's Housing Development Officer to the meeting.

Mr Butterworth explained that he had taken up his post in October 2013 and was taking time to understand the challenges faced by Riverside Cumbria and the City Council. There had been considerable change at Riverside which now extended to Eden and it was hoped that in future it would take in Allerdale and South Lakes. The prime focus for Riverside Cumbria was Carlisle.

Mr Butterworth informed Members of his background and how it related to his work at Riverside.

With regard to the Affordable Housing Programme 2014-17 Mr Butterworth explained that Riverside had a good working relationship with colleagues in the City Council. The Affordable Housing Programme would ensure that there were suitable properties in place for the longer term, to meet customer needs. Riverside currently had several empty properties and it was important that Riverside understood the changing demographics of the City and acknowledged that Carlisle had an aging population. Riverside would need to ensure that future housing met the needs of all generations. The existing programme had been detailed within the report.

Mr Butterworth had confidence that the present demand for housing would ensure that every house would be allocated and Riverside would work to ensure that tenants contributed positively to their location. Riverside needed to be mindful of the changing expectations and lifestyle of tenants and ensure cohesion among age demographics and lifestyle and allocate properties accordingly.

In response to a query from a Member Mr Butterworth explained that tenants of particular lifestyles and ages were not grouped and Riverside tried to maintain a balance to minimise the impacts on tenants.

Mr Taylor advised that, across the Riverside group, the majority of complaints were in respect of noise, which may not be the fault of the tenant but could be due to poor insulation. Riverside was building a number of flats in Carlisle and Mr Taylor confirmed that they would be built with a better standard of insulation.

In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions:

- *Would home in the future be built to Lifetime standards?*

Mr Butterworth confirmed that future housing would be built to that standard but Riverside also looked at existing houses that had already been adapted and offered those to people who required adaptations made to their homes. Mr Taylor confirmed that there was a register of homes that had been adapted and added that, due to the current financial situation, Riverside would consider whether to move to putting more priority on adapting homes but that a balance would need to be maintained.

Mr Butterworth explained that the aim of the Affordable Housing Programme was to meet local housing needs working with the Council in the future. Due to the current general financial situation there were a number of 20-45 year olds who still lived with parents. Riverside would work to ensure the flow of properties in the affordable rent programme.

- *There was a scheme to assist younger people run by Riverside and the County Council called Launch Pad but that had ended. Was Riverside considering something similar in the future and what had been the benefits of the programme?*

Mr Taylor informed Members that since the scheme ended three tenants remained with Riverside. The main challenge had been in engaging with the young people regarding filling in forms in relation to benefits and conducting their tenancy satisfactorily. Some led to anti social behaviour problems and rent arrears. Such tenants were a high risk for housing providers and as a landlord it was essential that support was put in place to reduce the risks. The Care Leaving Team had generally become involved towards the end of a tenancy which was disappointing. Young people often had chaotic lifestyles which required a lot of support.

In future it was anticipated that more self contained properties would be made available to create a cluster scheme and there would be support on site.

Mr Butterworth added that Riverside Groups three year Corporate Plan would include focus on training and employment skills for young people and would look at developing a more holistic package to maximise opportunities for young people.

- *There were several pieces of amenity land in which Riverside had expressed an interest. Was Riverside intending to turn that land, and their amenity land, into housing land?*

Mr Butterworth advised that Riverside had not gone into that level of detail but that they would look at existing land use and the housing needs in a particular location to ensure that value would be added to the community in that area. Riverside, working with Officers from the City Council, regularly looked at maps to determine what could be delivered and ensure that it would be a feasible site.

- *How did Welfare Reform impact on tenants?*

Financially Riverside had not experienced as many rent arrears as expected but there had been a considerable cost to Riverside in terms of support. Mr Butterworth explained that Riverside had been proactive in identifying which tenants would be most affected and had offered positive dialogue and advice. Riverside had seen an increase in the levels of vacant properties. At present it was not easy to find a tenant for every vacant property and Riverside had competition from a vibrant private rented sector.

- *In July 2013 Riverside had advised that they were to undertake a review of their rental arrears policy. Had that taken place?*

Mr Taylor explained that the aim of the Big Changes campaign was to educate tenants about Welfare Reform. Riverside was aware that some tenants were struggling due to income cut backs. However, he reiterated that the increase in rent arrears had not been as bad as anticipated which was due to good management and being proactive and making people aware of their options. Only one tenant had been evicted in respect of under occupancy. Riverside promoted downsizing and to date 75 tenants had downsized supported by Officers from Riverside. There were a number of issues regarding vacant stock and it was important that Riverside invested wisely in stock to ensure there was high quality stock to meet the needs of client groups.

- *Had there been any impact on the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund?*

The Housing and Health Manager provided information that compared the current number of applications to those before the under occupancy charge. The Council were on target in the current financial year to spend all of their allocation of the Fund. The number of applications had almost trebled from 107 last year to 284 applications approved this year. The Fund was ongoing and the Government had given £165,000 for 2014/15 for the Fund. The Housing and Health Manager explained that more people were applying for grants from the Fund and more were being approved.

- *How was Riverside addressing the number of empty properties that had been vacant for many months?*

Mr Butterworth explained that Riverside was focussing on two main issues – a better marketing strategy and a better Choice Based Letting system. The marketing strategy would look at how better to attract self paying tenants who were less welfare dependent.

With regard to Choice Based Letting that system worked well when demand exceeded than supply. Currently supply exceeds demand which created new challenges. Discussions were ongoing with the City Council about those challenges.

- *Was there flexibility within Choice based Lettings for Housing Associations to run schemes that were different to other Housing Authorities?*

Mr Taylor advised that Riverside was obliged to abide by the Choice Based Letting system which was based on housing needs and allowed properties to be allocated on a fair basis. People in employment who were in need of accommodation were not always aware that they

could apply to Riverside for housing. Riverside wished to work with other partners to work swiftly and provide more flexibility when allocating properties. The focus in future would be on different ways to promote available properties.

Mr Butterworth added that if a property was advertised three times and was not let Officers would actively look to find tenants for those properties. Such tenants may already be on the register but in a lower category

- *Private landlords with three bedroom properties had different constraints to housing Associations. That allowed private sector landlords to provide properties superior to what Riverside could offer.*

Mr Butterworth agreed with the comments from the Member and had personal experience of looking for accommodation within Carlisle. He queried what sort of things new tenants expected such as broadband/white goods/carpets or good neighbours/good repair services. Some of the challenges related to peoples' perception of areas which were often historical. There were currently a lot of privately rented properties on the market but if the financial situation changed people may sell properties rather than let them which would change that position and reduce the competition for Riverside.

Riverside also had to look at the affordability of their product and acknowledged that they were at the lower end of the market. Rents were due to increase in 2014/15 and Mr Butterworth outlined those increases. The proposed rent increases were less than others across the Local Authority stock in other Local Authority areas. He informed Members that Riverside had spent £3million improving fire safety in their properties.

- *The year to date figure for the number of people accepted by the Council to secure settled accommodation was 46. How did that compare to the previous year?*

The Housing and Health Manager advised that the figure would be lower than the previous year as Officers were working with other agencies to prevent people becoming homeless. The Cumbria Choice Based Letting system was a useful tool to prevent people from becoming homeless.

- *The figure for the number of tenants who were affected by the changes within Welfare Reform and would not have made any contribution to the rent shortfall had fallen from 50% to 9%. What was the reason for that decrease?*

Mr Butterworth explained that initially there was some misunderstanding of the guidance and Riverside had been proactive in how they engaged with tenants. The aim was to reduce the figure to 5%. Riverside wanted to reduce the turnover for unsuccessful reasons of tenancy and support those tenants most in need.

- *The number of homeless people was a third lower than a decade ago. Was that figure reflected in Carlisle?*

The Housing and Health Manager explained that the key indicator relating to homelessness had been improved and that accurate figures for Carlisle could be provided if required. Carlisle was currently within the context of regional and national figures.

- *A number of Riverside properties had been fitted with solar panels as part of their energy and efficiency measures. Was it right that Riverside received revenue from those solar panels and tenants received some of their electricity free of charge?*

Mr Butterworth advised that tenants received a payment for usage and Riverside were using assets to draw down the additional costs. The scheme would not be as successful as anticipated due to the reduced feed-in tariff. It was expected that Riverside would not break even on the scheme for 25 years.

With regard to energy efficiency in general, Riverside were looking at properties where heating was leaking from lofts and windows and were investigating measures such as external cladding. However such schemes would take time to invest the necessary resources and relevant properties would have to be identified.

- *Claims had been made that properties in Longtown where solar panels had been installed had not been improved and that energy efficiency was poor in terms of insulation. There had been allegations that there had been threats of evictions as a result of subsequent high energy bills that prevented tenants from paying their rent. How was Riverside addressing those issues?*

Mr Butterworth refuted the allegations and challenged peoples' perception of the heating systems installed. One to one sessions had been arranged in respect of tenants' concerns and of 160 tenants only four attended a session. If any properties were identified where there were problems they would be looked at part of the new asset management programme.

With regard to allegations that energy bills had increased by 400% Mr Butterworth stated that if a tenant provided bills to evidence that claim and assessment of electricity usage would be carried out and compensation could result. Of the 160 new heating systems that had been installed only four tenants had raised concerns and Riverside would deal with those. However Mr Butterworth did not believe that the situation was as it had been circulated.

The Chairman thanked Mr Butterworth and Mr Taylor for their attendance at the meeting. Mr Butterworth, Mr Taylor, the Housing and Health Manager and the Housing Development Officer left the meeting.

Members discussed the suitability of Choice Based Letting to the Council in terms of accessibility, location and affordability and requested that the Executive look at those issues and ensure that all aspects of housing needs were encompassed within the Housing Strategy and Action Plan. Members acknowledged that the position was more positive than the previous year.

The Communities and Housing Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Executive could look at the development of panel choice.

It was suggested that the Council's relationship with Riverside could be included in the work programme for the coming year and that a ½ day meeting be arranged to focus on the issues. The Portfolio agreed with that suggestion and along with representatives from Riverside could look at the impacts of Welfare Reform, homelessness and the spare room subsidy.

RESOLVED: 1) That report ED.09/14 – Riverside Carlisle be noted.

2) That a further report be submitted to the Panel in six months.

3) That the Panel request that the Executive examine the Choice based letting scheme with regard to suitability for the people of Carlisle.