

Report to Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda
Item:

A.2

Meeting Date: 31 July 2014
Portfolio: Economy, Enterprise and Housing
Key Decision: No
Within Policy and
Budget Framework YES
Public / Private Public

Title: RIVERSIDE CUMBRIA
Report of: The Director of Economic Development
Report Number: ED 27/14

Purpose / Summary: This report provides Members of Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel with an update from Riverside Cumbria in respect of a number of issues raised by Members of the Panel, and a response to a question from the Secretary to the Carlisle and Rural Tenants Federation in respect of protecting and catering for tenants interests, raised at the March 2014 Panel.

Recommendations: Members of Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel are invited to ask questions and comment on the contents of the report.

Tracking

Executive:	
Overview and Scrutiny:	
Council:	

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Issues Raised for a Response from Riverside Cumbria at 27 March 2014 Panel

At the 27 March Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel Mr Barker, Secretary of the Carlisle and Rural Tenants Federation, asked the following question of the Panel: "Concerns have been raised that Riverside tenants' interests are not sufficiently protected and catered for. Could the Panel ensure that this is an issue that is raised with Riverside representatives when they next meet with Members for their bi-annual scrutiny?" The Panel agreed that this was acceptable and ask that the update report covers this issue.

Members at the 13 February Scrutiny Panel had also requested that Riverside provide an update on the impacts of Welfare Reform, including the spare room subsidy, homelessness, and the impact of Choice Based Lettings (CBL).

1.2 Riverside Cumbria's Response to the Question from the Carlisle and Rural Tenants' Federation Regarding Protecting Tenants Interests

Private Registered Providers of social housing, such as Riverside, are required to meet the standards set out in the Regulatory Framework for Social Housing in England (April 2012). The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard is detailed in *Appendix 1*.

Riverside Cumbria's Community Engagement Team Leader has provided the following list of groups and projects currently operating involving Riverside tenants:-

- *Scrutiny Group - a panel of 14 tenants representing all Riverside neighbourhoods. This is our accountable body and our Co-regulator. The panel decide which aspects of our services they would like to scrutinise, they do an evidence based report and offer recommendations for improvement. The panel has joint meetings with our Divisional Board. The panel have delivered a grounds maintenance scrutiny and are currently working on customer satisfaction.*
- *Tenant Inspectors - a group of 6 inspectors this year have delivered a transparency inspection, service charge, Anti Social Behaviour and patch walks and void properties.*
- *Riverside Tenant and Residents Federation - we have 2 representatives who are currently attending our residents groups to inform them of the work the Federation is doing and to allow the groups to feed into that process.*
- *Support provided to Longtown, Morton and Brampton tenants groups.*
- *Tenants Resource Centre - run by tenant volunteers, allowing the use of up to date computer facilities for tenants to job search and use the Choice Based Lettings system, also used for consultation events.*
- *Working with Belah Residents on recreational provision, Greystone Community Centre delivering a youth club; Petteril Bank Community Centre on a fun day; and Longtown Community Centre on refurbishing the main hall.*

Riverside Cumbria provide an annual report 'Working for you' and a newsletter three times a year to keep tenants informed and up to date. Riverside will make copies of these documents available for Members of Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 31 July 2014.

1.3 Heating Systems in Longtown

The following information has been provided by Riverside's Director for Cumbria:-

"The Longtown heating issue continues to generate the majority of negative publicity Riverside currently receives. The Carlisle Tenants and Residents Federation are working with some tenants at Longtown to campaign against the perceived high running costs of the heating systems installed at Longtown in 2012. This campaign has included a press and media strategy as well as contacting the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to state that Riverside are in breach of the Homes Standard of the HCA's Regulatory Framework. The HCA have subsequently confirmed that Riverside were not in breach of the Homes Standard and were satisfied with our course of action taken to resolve the issues.

An independent report by BRE into the heating systems is due to be finalised in August and outcomes and recommendations will be shared with the affected tenants of Longtown. Riverside will comply with the recommendations within the report. Riverside are more than happy to attend any meeting regarding this issue and will also arrange a series of local briefings on the publication of the BRE report. Riverside will share the findings of the BRE report with Carlisle City Council and other stakeholders demonstrating our commitment to resolve this issue.

However, while the report is being finalised Riverside have commissioned CAfS (Cumbria Action for Sustainability) to provide individual support and advice for those residents of Longtown who have had their heating systems replaced with renewable energy technology. CAfS are a Penrith-based charity who are the leading provider in Cumbria in promoting low-carbon living, energy saving, and reduced use of fossil fuels. CAfS will work closely with Longtown residents, providing in-depth impartial support and advice to help people get the most out of their new heating systems, making their homes warmer while reducing their fuel bills."

1.4 Impact of Welfare Reform and the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy

Riverside's Tenancy Services Manager has provided the following information in respect of the strategies being employed by Riverside to manage the impact of Welfare Reform, including assisting those tenants affected by the Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (or 'Bedroom Tax'):-

"During 2013/14 we made 316 Direct Housing Payment (DHP) applications with around 185 granted. From April 2014 we have made 24 DHP claims and 17 have been awarded. The reason for the decrease is that Carlisle City Council decided to automatically renew the vast majority of DHP claims that were in payment in March 2014 for at least the first 13 weeks of this financial year, so whilst we are not making fresh DHP claims we are still getting DHP for our tenants.

We were able to assist 80 tenants with their request to move into smaller properties last year and from April 2014 we have moved a further 7. We are still working with tenants who want to downsize and we award a £400 incentive to help the tenants with moving costs. In cases where arrears have accrued as a result of under occupancy we use this money to clear their rent accounts.

We anticipate that around 10% of our general needs stock is still impacted as a result of the under occupancy changes, and our records show that over 90% of those affected by under occupancy are making some form of payment to their rent accounts. We have not experienced a huge increase in rent arrears; in fact our year end rent arrears figure was slightly down at 2.72% for general needs although when you combined it with the leasehold figures we were just over 3.05%.

Thinking forward The Riverside Group are currently working to develop a toolkit/ 'Big Changes' campaign to raise awareness amongst our tenants about the changes Universal Credit will bring. This is still in the early stages but it is anticipated that we will be sending literature to tenants, carrying out home visits to promote digital inclusion and advise on setting up bank accounts and possibly running awareness sessions.

We are also locally going to be used as a pilot to provide intensive floating support to tenants between the ages of 16-30 where tenancy failure rates can be high. The aim of the project is to ensure this age group receive welfare benefit/money advice, employment and training opportunities and life

skills in order for them to sustain their tenancies and increase their aspirations. It is likely this project will be in place for October 2014 and we will be engaging with our partners to make them aware of the service."

1.5 Homelessness and Choice Based Lettings

Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel had asked how Choice Based Lettings (CBL) had been working in Carlisle following the 13 February 2014 Panel, and had also requested an update on homelessness. Carlisle City Council's Homeless Services Manager has confirmed that the 'Cumbria Choice' CBL system, whereby applicants are assessed according to their housing need and banded accordingly - with those in the greatest housing need awarded the highest priority, has been a successful policy in accommodating homeless households. From a customer perspective the response has been mostly positive, mainly due to the fact that there is now only one application form to complete for all of the Housing Associations, but also because the allocation process is more transparent, as applicants can now see their queue position once they have bid for a property.

Since the introduction of Cumbria Choice in May 2011, CBL has made a positive impact in the prevention of homelessness. This is borne out in the statistics for the previous three years:-

Carlisle Annual CBL Lets	Total Statutory Homelessness Acceptances	Statutory Homeless Households Re-housed via CBL	Average days until Re-housed	Non-Statutory Homeless Lettings
2011-12*	171	124	82.35	63
2012-13	78	47	70.70	101
2013-14	49	25	58.68	130

(*From introduction of CBL in May 2011)

The length of time for homeless households to be re-housed through Cumbria Choice has fallen each year since the introduction of CBL. The above figures also demonstrate a direct correlation between the fall in the number of homelessness acceptances and the increase in homeless prevention cases (via the homeless prevention option on CBL). This is due to the significant annual increase in the number of non-statutory homeless households accommodated through CBL. In some cases this could be due to an applicant with a valid notice to vacate their current home being placed in Band C, then being accommodated through CBL prior to a full homeless acceptance being required.

The shortfall between the total number of homelessness acceptances and those households being re-housed through CBL relates to people being re-housed through the private sector or in supported accommodation.

The number of homeless nominations to Housing Associations and the length of time until these people were re-housed in the three years prior to the implementation of Cumbria Choice is shown in the table below as a comparison.

Pre CBL	Statutory Homelessness Nominations	Average days until Nominated Households Re-housed
2008-09	103	86.13
2009-10	68	58.59
2010-11	96	88.76

2. PROPOSALS

2.1 N/A

3. CONSULTATION

3.1 N/A

4. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 N/A

5. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

5.1 The joint working between Carlisle City Council and Riverside Cumbria contributes to the Carlisle Plan priorities of developing effective partnerships and addressing Carlisle's housing needs.

Contact Officer: Jane Meek

Ext: 7190

Appendices Yes
attached to report:

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:

- None

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS/RISKS:

Chief Executive's -

Deputy Chief Executive –

Economic Development –

Governance –

Local Environment –

Resources -

***Appendix 1: Homes and Communities Agency's
Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard (from April 2012)***

Required outcomes

1 Customer service, choice and complaints

Registered providers shall:

- provide choices, information and communication that is appropriate to the diverse needs of their tenants in the delivery of all standards
- have an approach to complaints that is clear, simple and accessible that ensures that complaints are resolved promptly, politely and fairly

2 Involvement and empowerment

Registered providers shall ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in:

- the formulation of their landlord's housing related policies and strategic priorities
- the making of decisions about how housing related services are delivered, including the setting of service standards
- the scrutiny of their landlord's performance and the making of recommendations to their landlord about how performance might be improved
- the management of their homes, where applicable
- the management of repair and maintenance services, such as commissioning and undertaking a range of repair tasks, as agreed with landlords, and the sharing in savings made, and
- agreeing local offers for service delivery

3 Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of tenants

Registered providers shall:

- treat all tenants with fairness and respect
- demonstrate that they understand the different needs of their tenants, including in relation to the equality strands and tenants with additional support needs

Specific expectations

1 Customer service, choice and complaints

- 1.1 Registered providers shall provide tenants with accessible, relevant and timely information about:

- how tenants can access services
- the standards of housing services their tenants can expect
- how they are performing against those standards
- the service choices available to tenants, including any additional costs that are relevant to specific choices
- progress of any repairs work
- how tenants can communicate with them and provide feedback
- the responsibilities of the tenant and provider
- arrangements for tenant involvement and scrutiny

1.2 Providers shall offer a range of ways for tenants to express a complaint and set out clear service standards for responding to complaints, including complaints about performance against the standards, and details of what to do if they are unhappy with the outcome of a complaint. Providers shall inform tenants how they use complaints to improve their services. Registered providers shall publish information about complaints each year, including their number and nature, and the outcome of the complaints. Providers shall accept complaints made by advocates authorised to act on a tenant's/tenants' behalf.

2 Involvement and empowerment

2.1 Registered providers shall support their tenants to develop and implement opportunities for involvement and empowerment, including by:

- supporting their tenants to exercise their Right to Manage or otherwise exercise housing management functions, where appropriate
- supporting the formation and activities of tenant panels or equivalent groups and responding in a constructive and timely manner to them
- the provision of timely and relevant performance information to support effective scrutiny by tenants of their landlord's performance in a form which registered providers seek to agree with their tenants. Such provision must include the publication of an annual report which should include information on repair and maintenance budgets, and
- providing support to tenants to build their capacity to be more effectively involved

2.2 Registered providers shall consult with tenants on the scope of local offers for service delivery. This shall include how performance will be monitored, reported to and scrutinised by tenants and arrangements for reviewing these on a periodic basis.

2.3 Registered providers shall consult with tenants, setting out clearly the costs and benefits of relevant options, if they are proposing to change their landlord or when proposing a significant change in their management arrangements.

2.4 Registered providers shall consult tenants at least once every three years on the best way of involving tenants in the governance and scrutiny of the organisation's housing management service.

3 Understanding and responding to diverse needs

- 3.1 Registered providers shall demonstrate how they respond to tenants' needs in the way they provide services and communicate with tenants.