

Scrutiny Panel



16 August 2012

Lettings Service Review final report

1. Introduction

This report details the lettings service review undertaken by SLH's Scrutiny Panel. The service review was a response to re-let performance dipping and low demand issues currently experienced by SLH.

The aim of the review was to support SLH to improve re-let time and increase demand for homes as a result of reviewing the product we offer and the way we market homes.

The service review began in April 2012 and was completed in July 2012.



Where this symbol appears in the report an example of a finding is given.

2. Recommendations

As part of the review, Scrutiny Panel make 16 recommendations which are detailed as appendix a. The recommendations are structured under key processes reviewed: application, marketing of homes and empty home standard.

3. Methodology

Due to the size of the Lettings, Allocations & Empty Homes service coupled with the length of time available to complete the review, the Scrutiny Panel concentrated on three distinct areas for review:

- Application process – how do home seekers apply for one of our homes;
- Marketing homes;
- The product – the standard of empty homes.

The review included:

- A visit to SLH empty homes;
- Visits to Cobalt and Liverpool Mutual Homes (LMH) empty homes;

- Review of communication relating to applying for a home and choosing an SLH home – this included looking at the application form, Parklands reception, Property Pool Plus, SLH empty home standard;’
- Discussions with SLH officers - Neighbourhood Manager, Partnership Manager and Property Surveyor;
- A review of how some local estate agents market their homes to let.

4. Detail

Application

Scrutiny Panel feel that the application process and understanding of the banding system could hamper prospective tenants from applying to SLH. Although SLH issue an application form, no accompanying information about how the bands work is provided.

Whilst we understand that there is a drive to send people on line we do feel that this in itself could be a barrier and all applicants’ needs should be considered when they apply for a home.

Information about the types of homes we have available is not readily available and this could be a sticking point for potential applicants.



A Scrutiny Panel member asked at Parklands reception for an application form. The response was “have you got internet access.” The response did not match the question and SLH has to be aware that non traditional methods for application still need to be provided, whilst at the same time pushing the use of online facilities and the service offered to get people on line.

Marketing

On reviewing the way that SLH advertise homes, the Scrutiny Panel feel it does not match the product on offer. Whilst the empty home standard booklet offers a good opportunity to promote the level of works new customers can expect, we feel that the actual marketing of homes before viewing is not to the standard it could be.

On looking at how estate agents market homes to let for private landlords, the panel feel that SLH has a lot to improve by:

- Selling the features of individual homes;
- Selling the neighbourhood and what amenities are available;
- Marketing homes to large local employers.



A three bedroom flat was deemed hard to let, when reviewed by the Scrutiny Panel we found it to be spacious, excellent condition and

well worth viewing. Marketing material did not support the home on offer.

The product

The Scrutiny Panel chose to compare our empty homes with Cobalt as they are operating within a similar context to SLH and appear to have the same demand issues when considering % of applicants to overall stock numbers, LMH were also chosen for this reason. SLH's rents are also on a par with LMH and Cobalt's.

On review of the product offered by all three housing providers, Scrutiny Panel found that:

- The quality of empty homes was high for SLH and LMH but Cobalt's were perceived to be a lesser standard;
- SLH is the only provider to have a clear empty home standard – although this could be improved by making clearer how new tenants can provide feedback where their new home does not meet the standard advertised;
- LMH's communal areas are of a superior standard and support the quality of the product found to be in flats viewed.

Some specific details found from the review include:

SLH

- Kitchens being installed as part of the investment programme in relevant empty homes are of a high standard;
- Empty homes cleaned well;
- The quality of the homes in terms of size are fantastic but marketing of these homes does not reflect what's on offer;
- Finishes need to be improved – an example of this is exposed pipe work in many of our homes – LMH for example box this in showing a much improved result;
- Whilst the panel appreciate that it is not cost effective to decorate every room in every empty home, we do see a benefit of applying neutral colours where vibrant decoration has been used by the outgoing tenant and may be a deterrent to potential home seekers.



On one empty home, we found that both the bath and the sink were chipped. As opposed to replacement, both were filled in, we found this could be a possible deterrent to new tenants as well as posing a possible health & safety issue.



A kitchen in an empty home in Eastern Avenue was painted with bright red paint. We felt that this would be both difficult and costly to

return to a neutral colour for a new tenant therefore we felt the offer of the home would have been enhanced if SLH had completed this work.

LMH

- Communal areas are extremely well maintained and attractive supporting the overall kerb appeal of empty homes;
- Quality of products and standard of works to empty homes extremely high;
- Internal doors cleaned as part of works.

Cobalt

- Perceived to be of a lesser standard to SLH's empty homes;
- Officers advise that Cobalt are not currently experiencing demand issues;
- Poor facilities within the neighbourhood – has not got what South Liverpool has to offer;
- Lesser cleaning standard.

5. Conclusions

The Scrutiny Panel feel that SLH has much to do to market homes available to let but more importantly has much work to do on improving the perception of South Liverpool, particularly Speke, as a whole. We feel that outside of the area, long term perceptions of Speke and Garston not being desirable and having high crime levels put potential applicants off.

In terms of the product itself, Scrutiny Panel feel that with some minor improvements, SLH can be extremely competitive due to the standard of home that we offer. Our empty homes compare well with local landlords and are spacious, well maintained homes however the marketing of these features is poor.

In terms of flats and in particular those considered hard to let, we feel that SLH has some work to do to improve the kerb appeal of the communal areas which are of a lower standard and give the impression of a prison block rather than a place you would want to live in. Scrutiny Panel feel that should these be given a more modern feel and made more apartment like, the flats could be transformed into desirable homes.

SLH Scrutiny panel

Appendix A Lettings Service Review Recommendations

Application

1. Ask and offer what each applicant needs rather than guessing what needs are and making inefficient offers;
2. Make clear welfare reform implications at application and offer stage but make this more positive rather than negative “you can’t apply for this home because...”. Marry customers to homes available;
3. Clearer definition of banding and how homes are banded;
4. Send a text to those who have been unsuccessful when bidding and make reference to up and coming homes.

Marketing

5. Promote homes through posters and leaflets to a wider audience, examples include Metro, local employers, Liverpool airport;
6. No direct link to available homes on SLH website;
7. None of the SLH homes advertised on Property Pool for one particular week had any images;
8. Improved description of homes and enticing statements such as “viewing highly recommended”;
9. More information about location and facilities of home should be used as a selling tool;
10. Promote an anonymous number where new tenants can report neighbourhood issues to.

The product

11. Could benefit from energy efficient installations such as showers as standard;
12. Use neutral colours to decorate before the tenant moves in where vibrant colours have been used by previous tenant;
13. Improve appearance of communal areas – make more modern and attractive not only for potential tenants but to existing;
14. Replace damaged bathroom suites as standard;
15. Update empty home standard to include a clearer link to customer feedback policy – “what to do if your new home doesn’t meet this standard”;
16. Consider enhancing appearance of homes by boxing in pipework.