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Riverside Scotland Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise – Service Improvement Group Report

April 2024



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1. Executive Summary

Welcome to the Riverside Scotland Service Improvement Group Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise Report. Since June 2023, Service Improvement Group (SIG) members have been independently reviewing and assessing Riverside Scotland's voids management policy and processes.

The SIG was established in June to represent customers of Riverside Scotland's housing services. The SIG has a core membership of five participants, with the following aims and objectives:

- To operate on behalf of tenants and customers and work in partnership with Riverside Scotland to help ensure it provides customer-centric services of the highest standard.
- To strive, through investigation, analysis, and discussion, in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration to achieve the best service performance possible.
- To develop greater customer influence in decision making on services and the functions of the housing service.

Following Riverside Scotland's reducing percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home, combined with increasing re-let timescales, it was acknowledged and agreed that Riverside Scotland's voids management policy and processes provided an excellent opportunity for a SIG scrutiny exercise.

The SIG, Riverside Scotland and TIS agreed that a customer-led scrutiny exercise be undertaken to allow customers to understand and experience the voids management process.

This report provides an independent Tenant-Led Inspection review and evaluation on behalf of the SIG.

The scope of the review included:

- To carry out an independent review of Riverside Scotland's Voids Management Policy (incl. Letting Standards) and voids management processes; and
- To identify areas of good practice and additionally make recommendations where appropriate.

The SIG followed an agreed work plan which included the following key stages:

a) Review of information and relevant fact finding

- Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) context
- Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) context
- Scottish Social Housing Charter context

- Riverside Scotland's Voids Management Policy (incl. Letting Standards) and Repairs and Maintenance Policy, Rechargeable Repairs Policy, and Abandoned Property Procedures
- Riverside Scotland's Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) Key Performance Information and Tenant Satisfaction Reports
- Benchmarking comparisons with Almond, Barrhead; Clyde Valley; Fife; Glen Oaks; Maryhill; Thenue and West of Scotland.

b) Understanding and reviewing Riverside Scotland's systems and processes

- Understanding Riverside Scotland's operational approach to carrying out voids management
- Review Riverside Scotland correspondence / communications sent to tenants

c) Reality Checking – *what's happening on the ground*

- Tenant-Led Inspections of void properties accompanying staff
- Meetings with Riverside Scotland staff to capture experiences and views to understand if what's happening at an operational level is reflected at a corporate/strategic level
- Seeking tenants' views on their recent experiences of the Riverside Scotland's letting standards.

Summary Findings and Recommendations

The SIG have found this scrutiny exercise to be invaluable in understanding the Riverside Scotland Voids Management Policy and voids management processes.

A full account of the findings and recommendations can be found within *Sections 4 and 5* of the report. Below is a summary of the key findings and recommendations.

Findings	Recommendations
Performance and Customer Satisfaction	
The percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home and the percentage of tenants who feel rent for their property represents good value for money continue to reduce year-on-year.	1. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland continue to monitor and review performance and satisfaction, and re-introduce the Key Performance Indicator ' <i>tenants satisfied with the quality of their home when moving in</i> ' to proactively seek tenants views within one month of moving in and identify areas of concern.
Although the average length of time taken to re-let properties was significantly lower than the Scottish national average, it increased 16% between 2021-22 and 2022-23.	2. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland aim to reduce the average length of time taken to re-let properties to minimise void rent loss.

The Letting Standard	
A desk top review of peer group policies suggested a requirement for the existing Voids Management Policy to be more prescriptive and robust to align with good practice comparisons.	3. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland review and develop their existing Voids Management Policy to align with industry standard, and highlight Almond Housing Association and West of Scotland Housing Association for consideration.
Voids Management	
The SIG acknowledged feedback raised with cleaning standards throughout TLI's, staff discussions and tenant surveys.	4. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review and develop a transparent minimal cleaning standard to ensure each property is cleaned to a uniform standard. The standard of cleaning should be continually monitored and reviewed with action taken where appropriate to maintain standards.
Through staff discussion the SIG acknowledged the existing contract permits Bell Group to charge/bill for the agreed amount (£2,200) per void property regardless of the scale of works required.	5. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review the existing contract and aim to get value for money for each property through an individual property assessment.
The SIG acknowledged good practice through staff discussions and tenant surveys where Riverside Scotland retain any good items/furnishings or fittings (e.g. (pre-existing floor coverings) to minimise costs for incoming tenants.	6. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland continue to proactively support incoming tenants through this positive practice.
The SIG acknowledged ongoing challenges for Riverside Scotland with rechargeable repairs/removals.	7. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland continue to proactively pursue previous tenants for rechargeable repairs/removals, and consider publishing a case study example to raise awareness with new and existing tenants.
Through TLI's of void properties the SIG acknowledged challenges where pre-existing "loud" paint colours/tones can require redecoration, and potentially discourage future tenants from accepting a property.	8. The SIG recommend the reintroduction of a paint package limited to neutral colours/tones to minimise the number of properties being returned with challenging decoration.
Through staff discussions the SIG acknowledged communication challenges between housing and asset	9. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review the voids management process to support

management staff throughout the voids management process.	housing and maintenance staff to work more efficiently.
Staff discussions and the tenant survey demonstrated examples of where the existing contractor doesn't always perform to the required standards of Riverside Scotland, with properties at times being returned with outstanding defects.	10. The SIG recommend a review of the existing process to increase inspection of works and minimise repeat occurrences.
The SIG acknowledged increasing voids expenditure costs, however staff discussions highlighted opportunities for Riverside Scotland to provide floor coverings as part of the voids management process to support incoming tenants.	11. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland explore opportunities to provide floor coverings as part of the voids management process, should voids expenditure significantly reduce.
Tenants Responsibilities - information and advice provided to tenants	
<p>The SIG acknowledge the challenging conditions of properties being returned to Riverside Scotland.</p> <p>Staff discussions and the tenant survey feedback highlighted a potential lack of understanding and/or awareness of tenants responsibilities and expectations with maintenance and repairs.</p>	12. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland develop a communications plan to raise awareness of ' <i>who is responsible for what</i> ' in terms of maintenance and repairs.
<p>The SIG acknowledge new tenants are provided with a copy of the Riverside Scotland Tenants Handbook which outlines tenants' responsibilities (<i>Welcome to your home – Page 9</i>).</p> <p>The SIG acknowledged good practice with Barrhead, Fife, Glen Oaks and West of Scotland as providing tenants with a full breakdown of '<i>who is responsible for what...</i>' within their Tenants Handbook as clear and concise, and good practice.</p>	13. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland introduce a clear and concise section of ' <i>who is responsible for what...</i> ' into the Tenants Handbook.
The SIG highlighted that tenants responsibilities are currently not referenced or linked within Riverside Scotland's Repairs and Maintenance Policy or the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.	14. The SIG recommend that tenants responsibilities are clearly referenced and linked within Riverside Scotland's Repairs and Maintenance Policy, and separately the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.
Pre-Termination Process	
The SIG agreed Riverside Scotland's pre-termination process doesn't provide a breakdown of tenants' responsibilities	15. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland develop and implement a pre-termination tenancy exit pack

<p>prior to exiting a property. The SIG identified areas of good practice when comparing with comparative peer groups' Tenancy Handbooks and website information.</p> <p>The SIG acknowledged Dalmuir Park Housing Association's '<i>A Guide to Giving Up Your Tenancy</i>' as good practice for consideration.</p>	<p>(incl. exit checklist) to outline tenants' responsibilities prior to termination of tenancy.</p>
<p>The SIG acknowledged good practice and personal experience of previous social landlords undertaking mandatory pre-termination and collection of keys face-to-face within properties.</p>	<p>16. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland implement a mandatory pre-termination (incl. collection of keys) process to take place face-to-face within the property to maximise opportunities to assess the condition of properties.</p>
<p>The SIG acknowledged good practice from North Ayrshire Council who include a list of common rechargeable repairs with associated costs within their standard pre-termination letters to tenants.</p>	<p>17. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland implement a breakdown of common rechargeable repairs and associated costs within the standardised pre-termination letters to tenants.</p>

2. Foreword

Welcome to the Riverside Scotland Service Improvement Group (SIG) Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise Report. Since June 2023, SIG members have been independently reviewing and assessing Riverside Scotland's voids management policy and processes.

The SIG has a core membership of five individuals. Membership of the SIG is collectively competent with individual members understanding scrutiny in a strategic context whilst working together within the core standards.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank staff and customers who participated in the review, making it a positive and valuable exercise.

2.1 The Riverside Scotland Service Improvement Group

The SIG is a group of tenant and customer representatives who meet independently to work collectively to review Riverside Scotland's services. This is known as "Scrutiny". Our overall aims are to:

- Learn more about Riverside Scotland's policies, procedures, and service delivery
- Understand how services are provided to customers
- Understand customers views on the services provided
- Consider what works well and what could be improved, and
- Make recommendations for changes or improvements to Riverside Scotland's Senior Management and Board.

We work to a set of agreed core standards and follow a determined Terms of Reference and Code of Conduct.

We undertake our work through Tenant-Led Inspections (TLI's), interviewing and shadowing staff, reviewing information about Riverside Scotland's services and performance, gathering feedback from other customers, comparing, and benchmarking against other landlords and reviewing housing and service standards set by the Scottish Government within the Scottish Social Housing Charter (the Charter) and expectations of the Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR).

The Tenants Information Service (TIS) provided the SIG with independent advice, training, and support to assist in our work. In addition, Riverside Scotland supported us throughout by organising meetings and providing the information we required to review services and standards.

2.1 The role of the Service Improvement Group

The role of the SIG is to:

- Take an independent view of Riverside Scotland's overall performance
- Act as a 'critical friend' of Riverside Scotland

- Agree a programme for scrutiny work and identify areas of Riverside Scotland's housing services that need to be reviewed
- Review Riverside Scotland's Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) to the SHR
- Oversee tenant-led scrutiny activities
- Independently scrutinise housing services and performance in accordance with the Charter
- Make recommendations to Riverside Scotland and highlight where performance falls below agreed standards and where performance meets or exceeds customers' expectations
- Support Riverside Scotland's contribution to national housing policy consultations and regulatory frameworks
- Report to tenants and other customers on progress being made
- Review and monitor its own performance; and
- Promote equality and diversity.

2.2 Our core standards

Our work is based on the following core standards:

- Being accountable to all tenants and customers
- Being open and honest and act with transparency
- Reflecting the needs and aspirations of tenants and customers
- Making recommendations based on robust evidence that is proportionate and reflects the context in which the Riverside Scotland operates
- Respecting the views of the SIG members
- Respecting the decision-making role of Riverside Scotland

3. The Scrutiny Process – Our Approach

3.1 Selecting a Service for Scrutiny

The SIG undertook a desk top study comparing and benchmarking Riverside Scotland's performance from the 2022-23 ARC report.

SIG members noted Riverside Scotland's reducing percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home, combined with increasing re-let timescales, and expressed interest in further investigating this area to ascertain why, using a TLI approach. It was agreed that a customer-led scrutiny exercise into voids management would naturally align with a review of the Voids Management Policy.

3.2 The Key Stages of Scrutiny

The SIG followed an agreed work plan for the *Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise*, which included the following key stages:

- a) Review of information and relevant fact finding**
 - Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) context
 - Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) context
 - Scottish Social Housing Charter context

- Riverside Scotland Voids Management Policy (incl. Lettable Standards) and Repairs and Maintenance Policy, Rechargeable Repairs Policy, and Abandoned Property Procedures
- Riverside Scotland Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) Key Performance Information and Tenant Satisfaction Reports
- Benchmarking comparisons with Almond; Barrhead; Clyde Valley; Fife; Glen Oaks; Maryhill; Thenue and West of Scotland.

b) Understanding and reviewing Riverside Scotland's systems and processes

- Understanding Riverside Scotland's operational approach to carrying out voids management
- Review Riverside Scotland correspondence / communications sent to tenants

c) Reality Checking – *what's happening on the ground*

- Tenant-Led Inspections of void properties accompanying staff
- Meetings with Riverside Scotland staff to capture experiences and views to understand if what's happening at an operational level is reflected at a corporate/strategic level
- Seeking tenants' views on their recent experiences of the Riverside Scotland letting standards.

3.3 Three Definitive Steps

Our scrutiny review had three definitive steps for each exercise carried out.

- » Summary (outline of the methods we used and background information)
- » Findings (key findings throughout the process)
- » Positive points (good practice points)

4. Key Findings and Positive Practice

4.1 Voids Management Expenditure

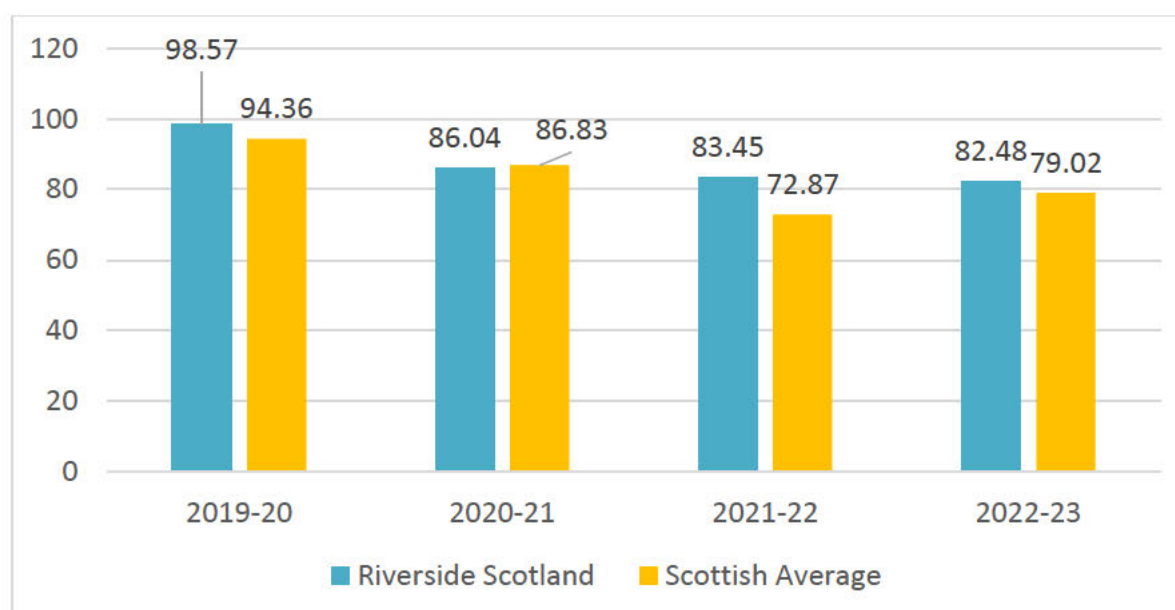
In recent years Riverside Scotland's voids management expenditure has significantly increased. The total voids management expenditure has increased from £152,301 in 2020-21 to £578,098 in 2023-24.

Riverside Scotland's voids management expenditure in recent years has been reported as follows:

Year	Voids expenditure (£)	Total number of voids	Average costs per property (£)
2023-24	£578,098.00 (<i>as of 15/04</i>)	132	£4,379.53
2022-23	£368,228.38	133	£2,768.63
2021-22	£225,098.85	126	£1,786.49
2020-21	£152,301.23	101	£1,507.93

4.2 Performance and Customer Satisfaction

Chart 1: Riverside Scotland percentage of stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) – CO6



Since 2019-20 the percentage of Riverside Scotland's stock meeting the SHQS has reduced from 98.57% to 82.48%, however it has regularly remained higher than the Scottish national average.

Chart 2: Peer group comparison of percentage of stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) – CO6

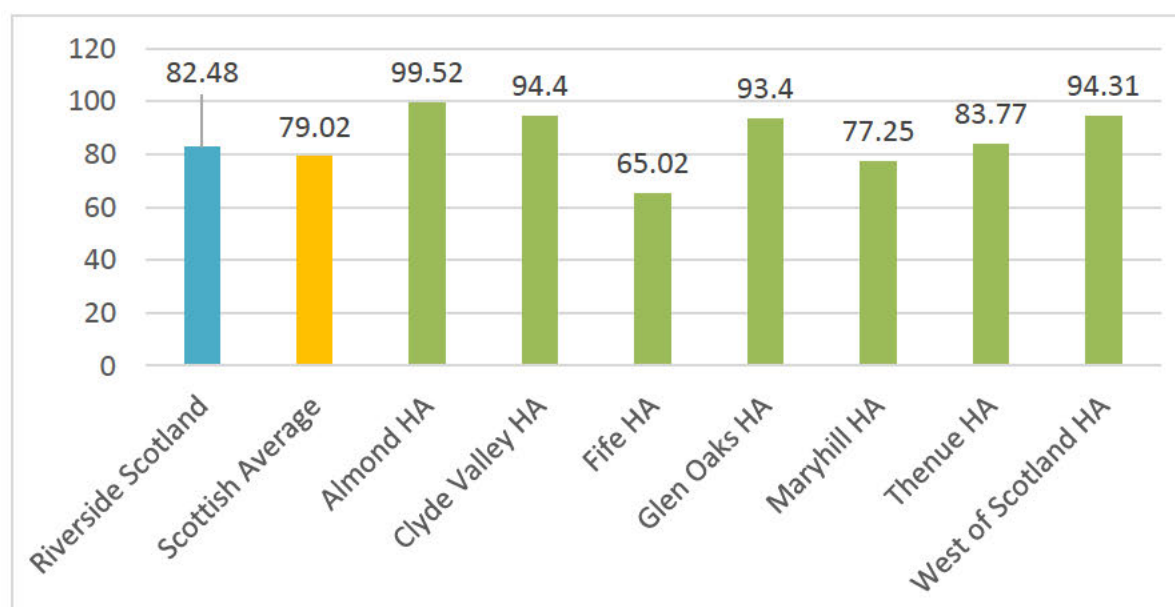
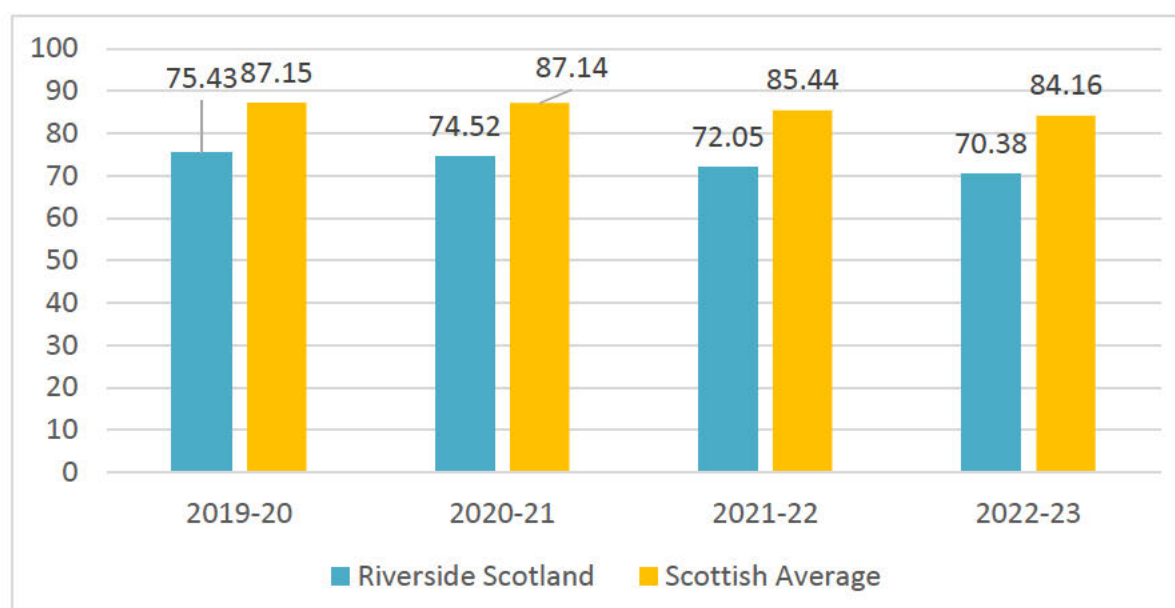


Chart 2 illustrates Riverside Scotland's 2022-23 performance in meeting the SHQS compared against its comparative peer group. The SIG members highlighted Almond, Clyde Valley, Glen Oaks and West of Scotland's performance in this area.

Chart 3: Riverside Scotland percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home – CO7



Since 2019-20, Riverside Scotland's percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home has been consistently lower than the Scottish national average and has been steadily decreasing year-on-year.

Prior to 2019-20, the ARC required social landlords to monitor and report on the percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home when moving in, however this has since been omitted from the ARC by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Chart 4: Peer group comparison of percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home – CO7

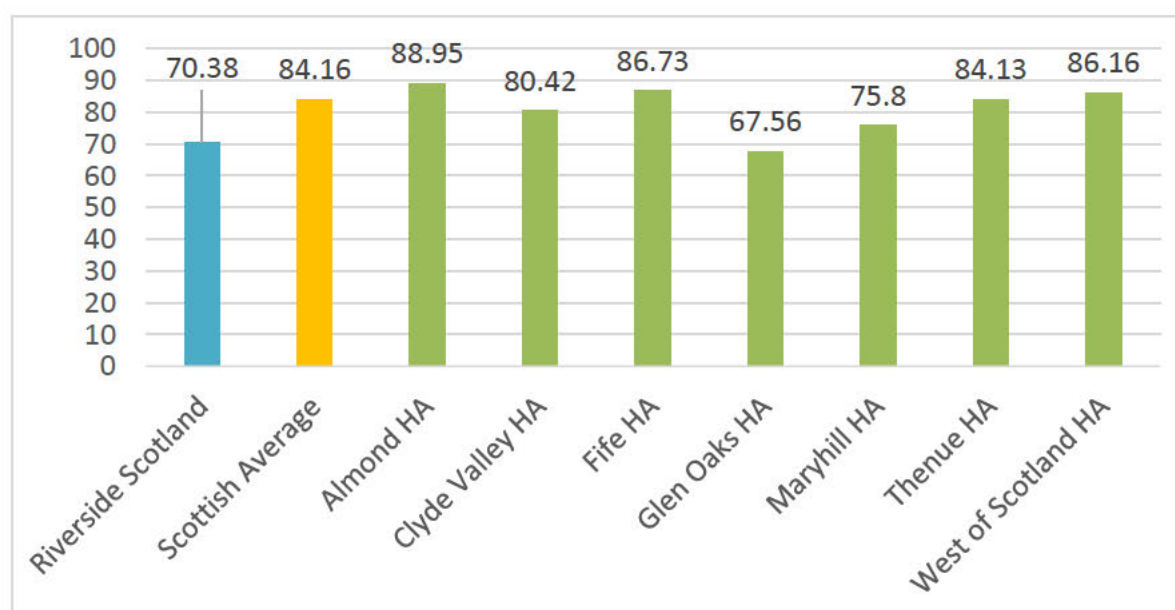


Chart 4 illustrates Riverside Scotland's 70.38% of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home as being significantly lower than the Scottish national average of 84.16%, and the second lowest amongst its comparative peer group.

Chart 5: Riverside Scotland percentage of tenancy offers refused during the year– CO14

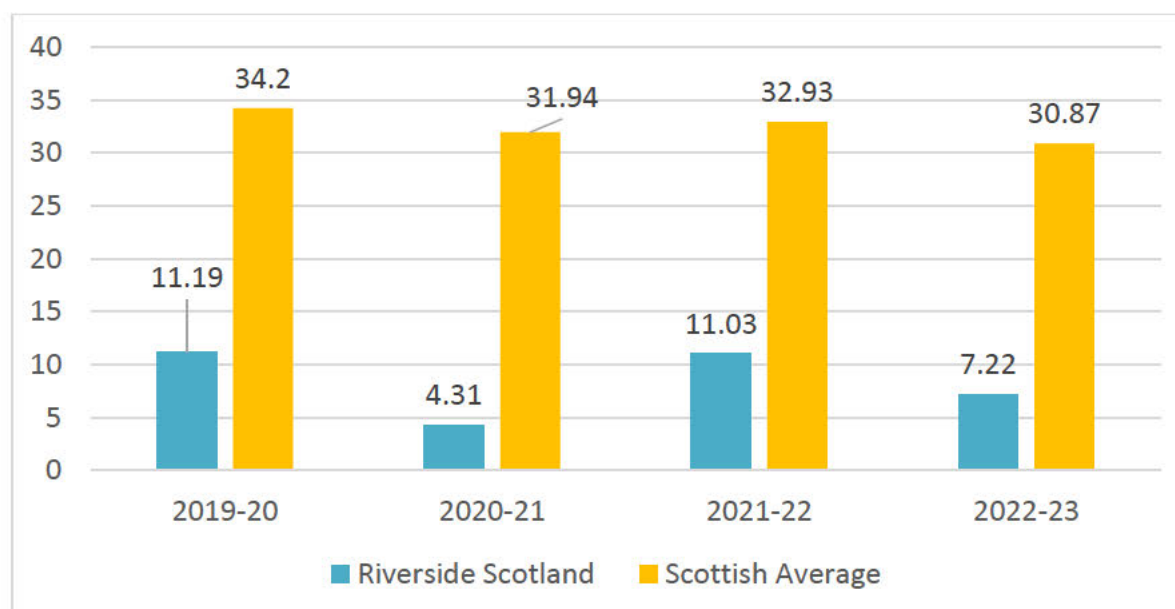
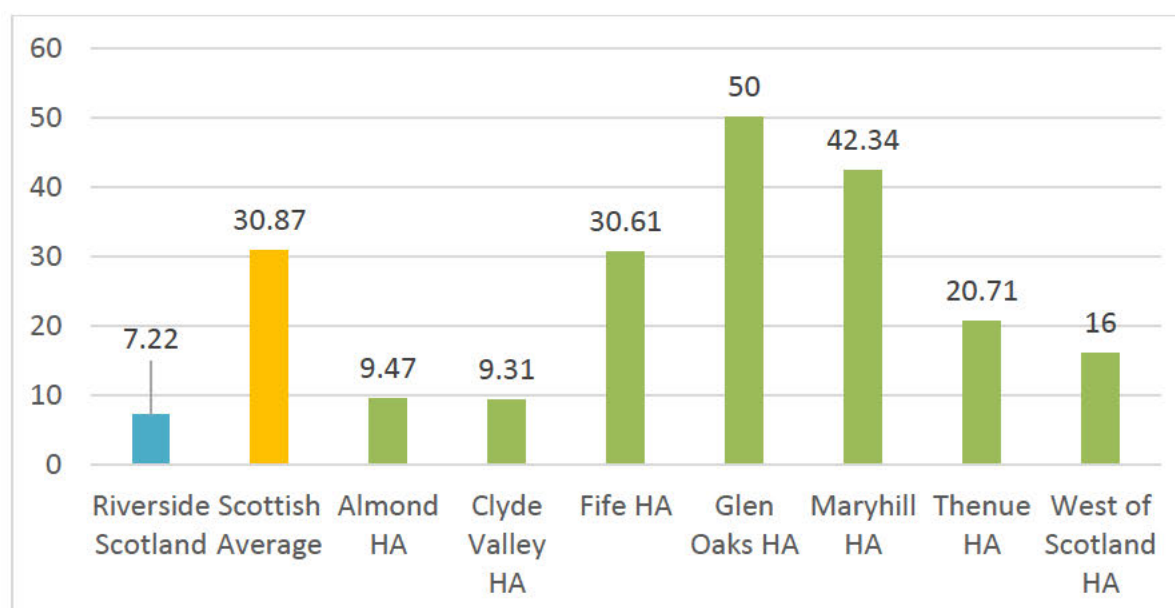


Chart 5 illustrates Riverside Scotland's consistently strong performance in the percentage of tenancy offers refused when compared to the Scottish national average.

Chart 6: Peer group comparison of percentage of tenancy offers refused during the year– CO14



When considered against its comparative peer group, Riverside Scotland excelled in 2022-23 in this area and had the lowest percentage of tenancy offers refused.

Chart 7: Riverside Scotland percentage of rent due lost through properties being empty during the last year – CO18

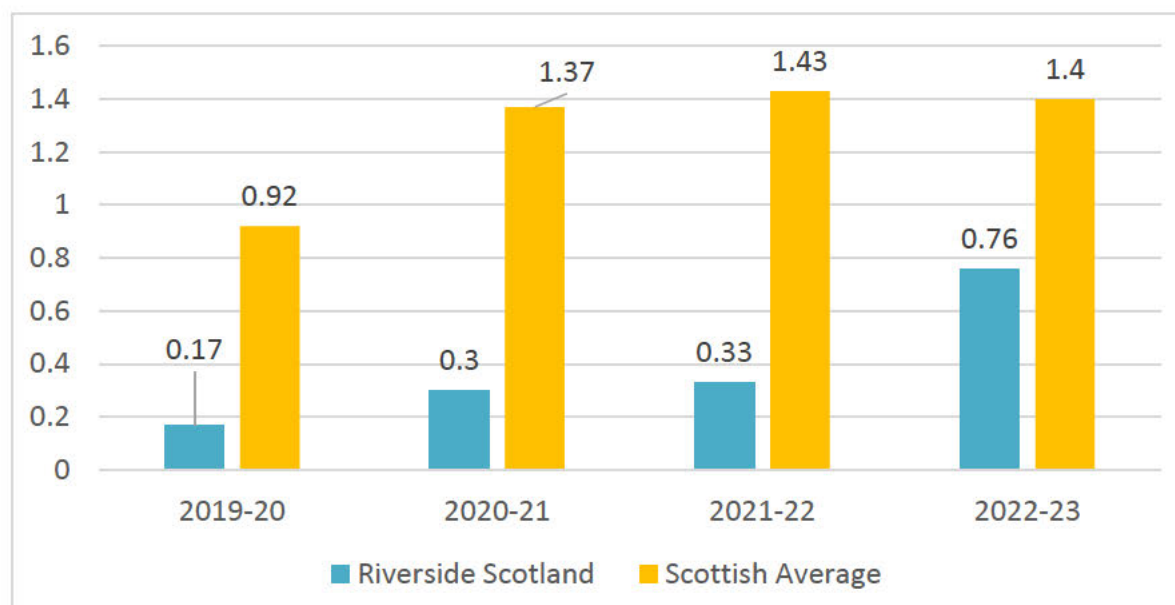
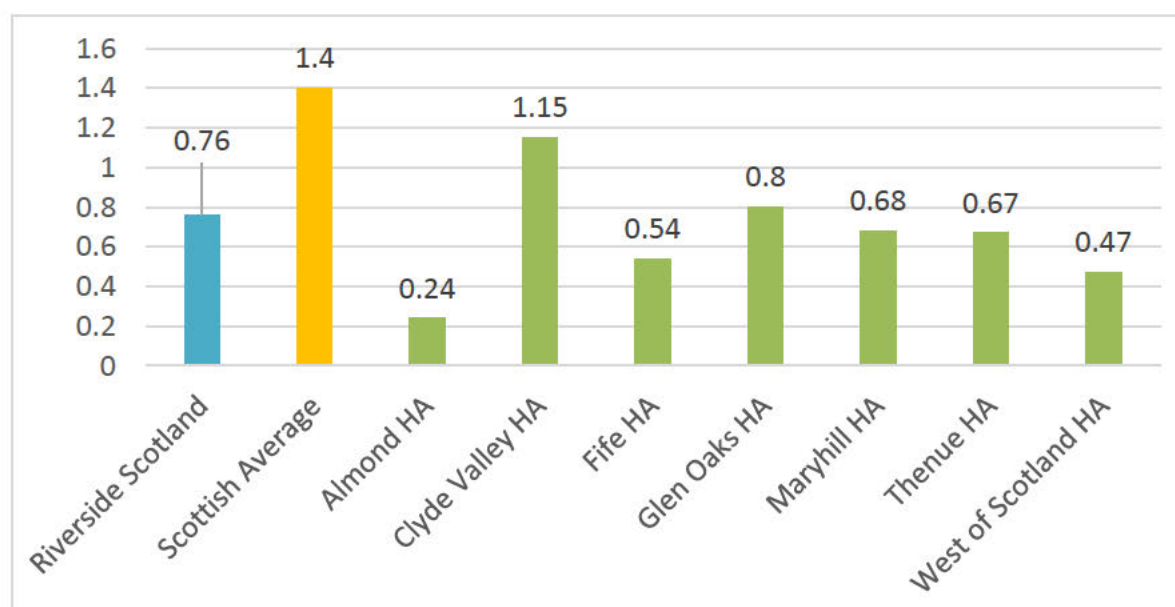


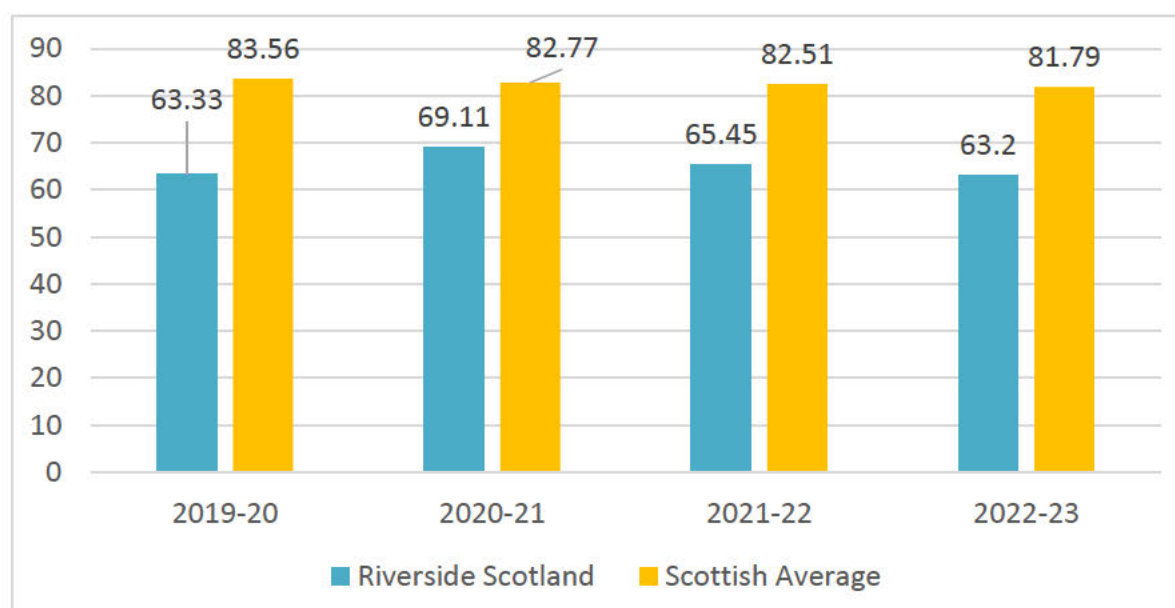
Chart 7 illustrates Riverside Scotland's strong performance in minimising rent due lost through properties being empty over the year.

Chart 8: Peer group comparison of percentage of rent due lost through properties being empty during the last year – CO18



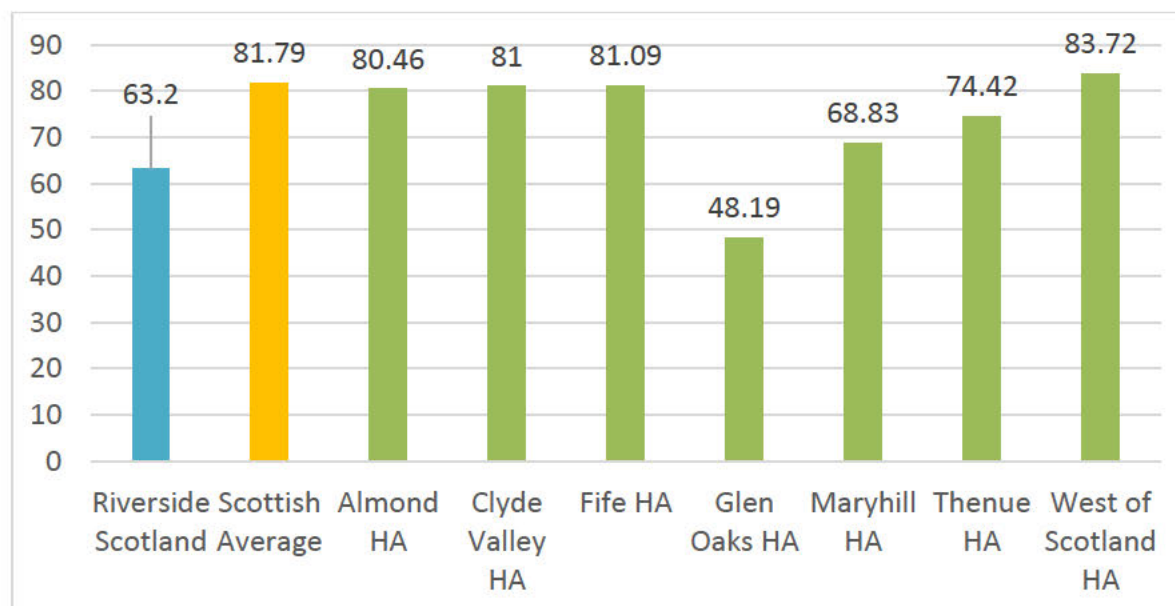
The 0.76% (£85,684) of rent lost through properties being empty was considerably lower than the Scottish average of 1.4%. However, it was the second highest in its comparative peer group.

Chart 9: Riverside Scotland's percentage of tenants who feel rent for property represents good value for money– CO25



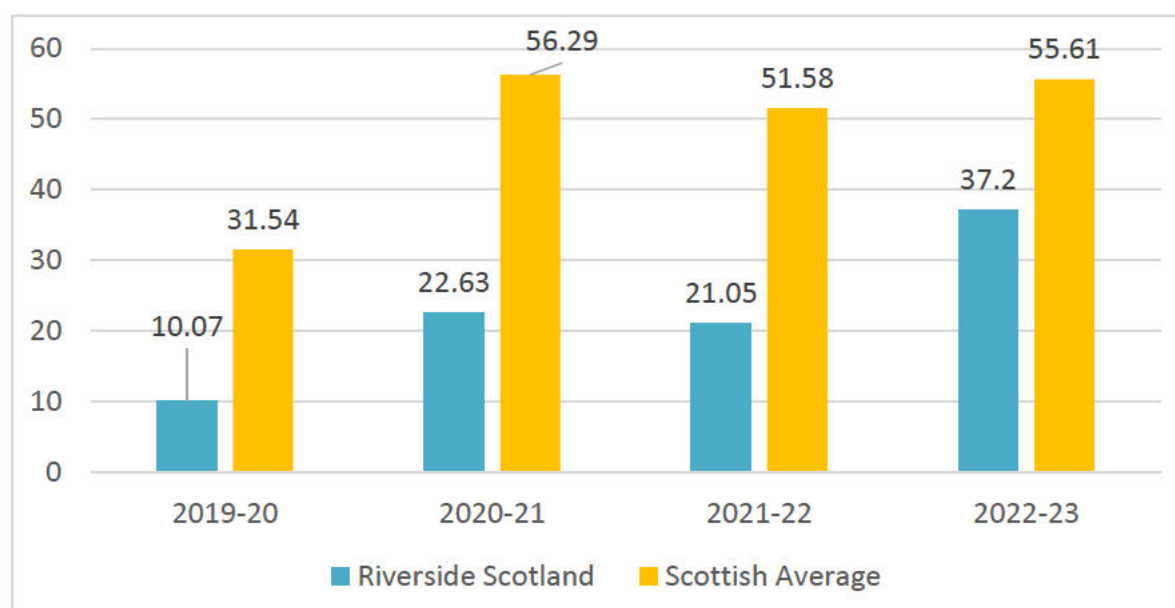
The percentage of tenants who feel rent for their property represents good value for money has been consistently significantly lower than the Scottish national average.

Chart 10: Peer group comparison of percentage of tenants who feel rent for property represents good value for money– CO25



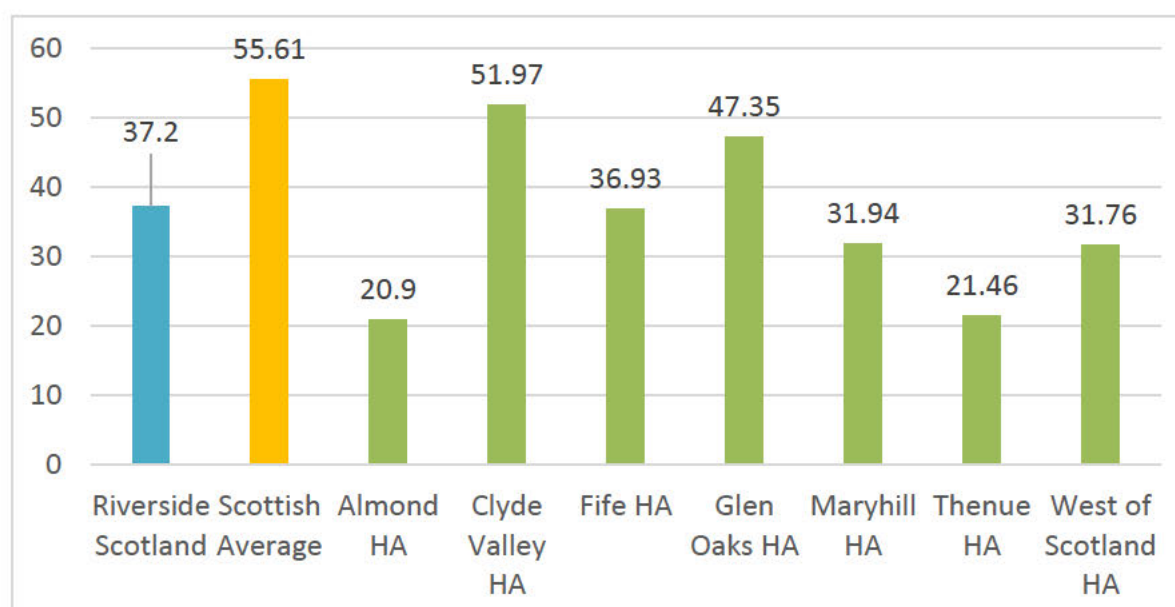
Riverside Scotland's 63.2% of tenants who feel their rent represents good value for money was second lowest in its comparative peer group for 2022-23.

Chart 11: Riverside Scotland's average length of time (days) taken to re-let properties in the last year – CO30



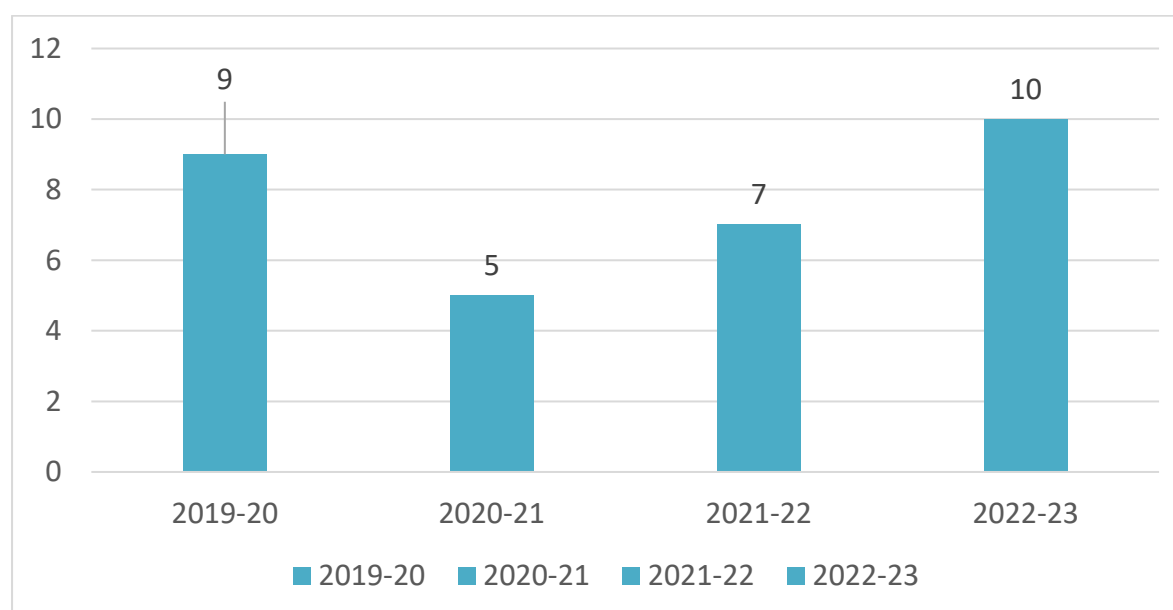
The average length of time taken (days) by Riverside Scotland to re-let their properties has increased from 10 days in 2019-20 to 37 days on 2022-23. Although, it has consistently been significantly lower than the Scottish national average.

Chart 12: Peer group comparison of average length of time (days) taken to re-let properties in the last year – CO30



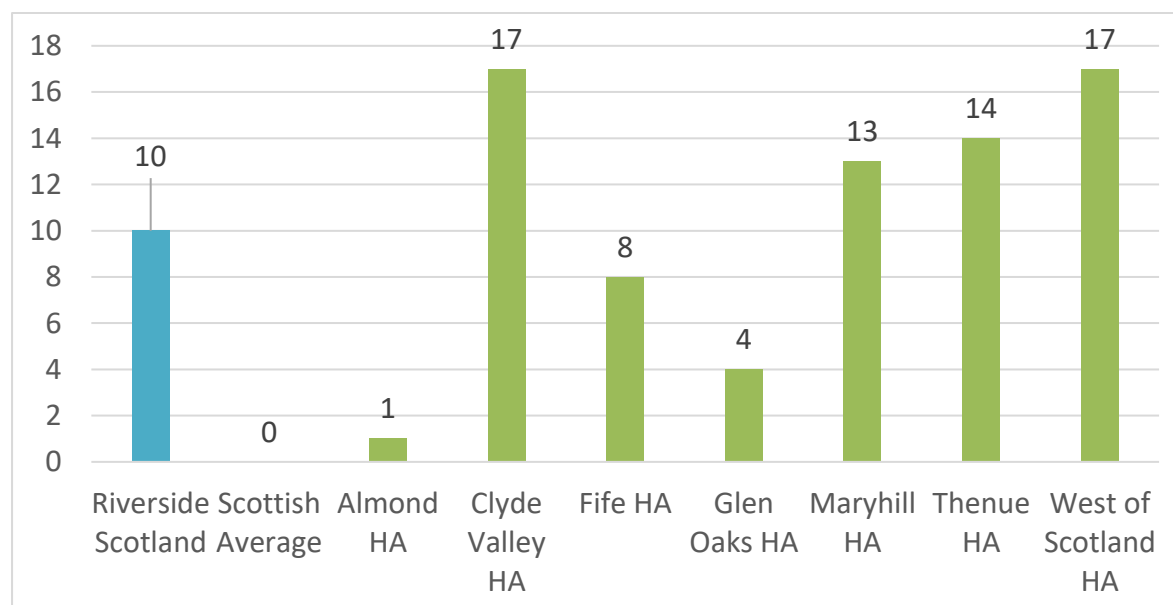
When considered against its comparative peer group, Almond, Maryhill, Thenue and West of Scotland took less time to re-let their properties over 2022-23.

Chart 13: Riverside Scotland number of abandoned homes – C4



Since 2020-21 the number of abandonments has consistently increased annually.

Chart 14: Peer group comparison of number of abandoned homes – C4



The number of properties abandoned in 2022-23 (10) remains relatively average in comparison with Riverside Scotland's peer group.

4.3 Desk Top Study

4.3.1 Voids Management Policy

The SIG undertook a review of Riverside Scotland's Voids Management Policy (incl. letting standards) together with a desk top study and comparison of peer group landlords, such as Almond, Clyde Valley, Maryhill, Thenue, and West of Scotland.

The following points were noted for consideration:

- Riverside Scotland's current [Voids Management Policy](#) is available on the website.
- The Voids Management Policy reviewed by the SIG was developed and implemented under Irvine Housing Association in 2021.
- The SIG highlighted the use of ambiguous wording, such as '*reasonable standard*' as being subjective and open to personal interpretation, which may cause challenges in managing tenants expectations.
- When compared to other voids management policies, the existing policy lacks structure and detail, and needs to be more robust, prescriptive and transparent to align with peer group policies.
- The SIG highlighted [Almond Housing Association's Voids Management Policy](#) and West of Scotland Housing Association's Voids Management Policy as good practice examples for consideration.

4.3.2 Tenants Responsibilities – *Information and advice provide to tenants*

The SIG undertook a review of Riverside Scotland's Tenants Handbook, focusing specifically on tenants' responsibilities, together with a desk top review and comparison of peer group landlords. Almond, Barrhead, Fife and Glen Oaks.

The following points were noted for consideration:

- New tenants are provided with a copy of the Riverside Scotland's '*Welcome to your home*' tenants handbook, which includes tenants' responsibilities.
- The SIG suggested Riverside Scotland's tenants handbook could benefit from adopting similar approaches to peer group landlords in terms of communicating tenants responsibilities.
- The SIG Group highlighted [Barrhead](#), [Fife](#), [Glen Oaks](#) and [West of Scotland](#) tenant handbooks as being clear and concise and good practice for consideration, and in particular the '*who is responsible for what*' table section.
- The SIG highlighted that tenants responsibilities are not referenced within Riverside Scotland's Repairs and Maintenance Policy or Rechargeable Repairs Policy.

- The SIG noted that there is currently no section within Riverside Scotland's website to provide straightforward and accessible guidance on tenants responsibilities.

4.4 Voids Inspections

Members of the SIG carried out Tenant-Led Inspections (TLI's) on 14th December 2023 at three properties, a mix of property size and type, across Irvine and Dumfries. The SIG used a checklist aligned with Riverside Scotland's letting standards to collate feedback.

The findings captured by the SIG were as follows:

Tenant-Led Inspection	Points for consideration
Property 1 - [REDACTED]	<p>The property was reported to have been returned to Riverside Scotland in particularly challenging conditions. The TLI took place following the completion of the void process, and it generally complied with Riverside Scotland's existing letting standards.</p> <p>The property was previously left full of items by the previous tenant and they will be charged and pursued for the debt associated with removal.</p> <p>The property has neutral paint colours/tones throughout, although was left with challenging colours/tones in the bedrooms by the previous tenant. SIG members acknowledged the new neutral paint colour and decoration as being good practice.</p> <p>Gaps in the floorboards were highlighted by SIG members.</p> <p>The windows were highlighted as unclean in comparison to the remainder of the house. The SIG were advised that the 'Sparkle Clean' cleaning specification is under review.</p> <p>Staff explained that the property had taken 3 weeks to turnaround due to the significant amount of belongings left by the previous tenant and the damages to the property. The property looked generally in good condition throughout and ready for a new tenant to be moved in.</p> <p>This void took 35 days and the total costs for this property was £5,904.97 (<i>this includes a standard charge [REDACTED] per property, plus additional work required</i>).</p> <p>There were rechargeable repairs for £219.82 for x2 internal doors.</p>

<p>Property 2 - [REDACTED]</p>	<p>The property was returned to Riverside Scotland in excellent condition from a longstanding tenant. The TLI took place following the completion of the void process, and it generally complied with Riverside Scotland's existing letting standards.</p> <p>The TLI highlighted non-standard fixtures and fittings which require to be removed with originals reinstated.</p> <p>The carpets left by the previous tenant were generally in good condition and good practice highlighted where they will be retained for the future tenant.</p> <p>Similarly, the blinds left by the previous tenant will be left for the future tenant.</p> <p>In the bathroom a new splashback and bath panel were to be fitted to modernise the bathroom. However, an overbath shower would not be installed.</p> <p>The kitchen was generally in good condition, however outdated. A new kitchen will be installed prior to being handed over to the new tenant</p> <p>The property was generally in good decorative condition and wallpapered throughout. However, the wallpaper was considered "outdated".</p> <p>Staff explained that the property had been handed back in generally very good condition. The previous tenant would have been charged for the reinstatement of the downstairs internal pass doors.</p> <p>This void took 25 days and the costs for this property was £9,887.76 (<i>this includes a standard charge [REDACTED] per property, plus a new kitchen and additional works required</i>).</p> <p>There were rechargeable repairs for £439.64 for x4 internal doors and £1288.60 for clearance of items left.</p>
<p>Property 3 - [REDACTED] [REDACTED]</p>	<p>Riverside Scotland presented photographs to demonstrate the extremely challenging conditions in which the property had been returned.</p> <p>The property was left full of items by the previous tenant for which they will be pursued for the rechargeable repairs (i.e. removals and repairs).</p> <p>The property was decorated with loud paint colours/tones throughout, meaning the property would require to be</p>

	<p>fully decorated, or the incoming tenant to be offered a paint package.</p> <p>This void took 103 days and the total costs for this property was £5,311.07 (<i>this includes a standard charge [REDACTED] per property, plus additional work required</i>).</p> <p>There were rechargeable repairs for £ 549.54 for x5 internal doors and £ 799.04 for clearance of items left.</p>
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4.5 Staff Discussions

The SIG agreed a range of questions to be used to collate qualitative feedback from Riverside Scotland staff involved throughout the voids management process. Five members of staff from across housing, asset management, and senior management participated in tenant-led discussions on 22nd February 2024.

A full breakdown of responses is outlined within *Appendix 2*, however the following key points were noted:

Challenges

- The conditions of properties being returned has significantly deteriorated and void re-let timescales and funding required is increasing.
- Tenants often don't provide access and/or vacate properties prior to the pre-termination visit which restricts Riverside Scotland's ability to determine the condition of the property.
- Tenants often hand keys into the office which hinders Riverside Scotland's ability to undertake a pre-termination visit and again the ability to determine the condition of the property.
- Tenants don't always provide a forwarding address to allow us to proactively pursue rechargeable repairs.
- Riverside Scotland haven't been proactively pursuing rechargeable repairs in recent years.
- Tenants aren't proactively maintaining their properties and/or reporting repairs.
- The external contractor doesn't always perform to the standard we require and properties don't always meet the letting standards following the voids process.
- Construction costs are outstripping general inflation (i.e. CPI).
- Tenant partners and asset management staff don't work or communicate as closely as they could.

Expectations and Responsibilities

- When considering the deteriorating condition of properties being handed back, there appears to be a lack of awareness of expectations and tenants' responsibilities.
- Tenants are made aware of their responsibilities where the pre-termination interview takes place, however too often the pre-termination interview doesn't take place.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some tenants either can't afford or are physically unable to reinstate their properties prior to terminating their tenancy ▪ Tenants are provided with information/advice on their responsibilities at the beginning of a tenancy, however Riverside Scotland are otherwise reactive in providing further information/advice.
<p>Refusal of Offers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There's no clear link between refusal of offers and the letting standard. ▪ Decoration and cleanliness can be discouraging for prospective tenants. Loud paint colours or wallpaper can prevent tenants from accepting a property, however this doesn't fail the letting standard. ▪ The level of work required for a prospective tenant can be a factor where they are required to decorate and furnish, and community care grants can take several weeks to get in place.
<p>Opportunities to Improve the Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement processes to ensure that pre-termination interviews take place to enable Riverside Scotland to visually inspect a property prior to being handed back. ▪ Introduction of a robust rechargeable repairs policy to enable Riverside Scotland to proactively pursue former tenants for outstanding debts. ▪ Proactively raise awareness of tenants responsibilities towards maintenance and repairs. ▪ Review processes to ensure external contractors are doing what is required for each individual void property. ▪ Review processes to support tenant partners and asset management staff to work more closely to minimise delays in re-let timescales. ▪ Re-introduce and refine a decoration package that is limited to neutral tones. ▪ Re-introduce the collection and monitoring of tenant satisfaction when moving into the property (previously an ARC requirement). ▪ Aim to get value for money for each individual void property through an individual property assessment. ▪ Support external contractors to query Riverside Scotland decision-making. ▪ The provision of an incentive for tenants to leave their property in good condition. ▪ Review the voids management budget to find a cost effective way to provide floor coverings for prospective tenants.

4.6 New Tenant Surveys

The SIG agreed a range of questions to be used to collate qualitative feedback from new tenants who have recently moved into Riverside Scotland properties. Riverside Scotland eighty-one tenants, recently allocated a property within the past 12-18 months, however received seven responses.

The following feedback was noted:

Of the seven respondents to answer the question *'what was the overall condition of your property when you moved in?'* The responses were as follows:

57% answered 'Excellent'
29% answered 'Good'
0% answered 'Fair'
14% answered 'Poor'

"The flat was very clean and made a very good first impression."
"It would have been excellent but the radiators were loose."
"The garden was terrible; the front door was broken; fences were damaged; smashed glass left in the garden; and the security light doesn't work."

Of the seven respondents to answer the question *'what was your opinion of the cleanliness of the property?'* The responses were as follows:

72% answered 'Excellent'
0% answered 'Good'
14% answered 'Fair'
14% answered 'Poor'

"It was in good condition."
"The windows and window ledges could have been wiped down and the dust hoovered."
"Every surface was spotless even though everything is white."

Of the seven respondents to answer the question *'are you familiar with Riverside Scotland's Letting Standards?'* The responses were as follows:

71% answered 'Yes'
29% answered 'No'
0% answered 'I don't know'

Of the seven respondents to answer 'yes' to this question, 57% felt their property met the letting standard.

Of the seven respondents to answer the question *'are you familiar with Riverside Scotland's Tenants Handbook and specifically your responsibilities as a tenant?'* The responses were as follows:

100% answered 'Yes'

Thinking about the standard of the property when you moved in, tell us three (3) things you liked.

"It was clean, and there were no repairs needed and in a good standard."
"I liked the nice worktops."
"The cleanliness....blank canvas....layout of the property."
"I am delighted and thankful to the team for the home I was allocated. They were so helpful."

Thinking about the standard of the property when you moved in, please tell us what could be improved.

"Loose radiators."

"Check all electrical outlets. The condition of the gardens. The front door was broken."

4.7 What the Service Improvement Group Liked

Throughout the *Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise*, SIG members identified good practice and information including:

- ✓ Riverside Scotland staff involved in the scrutiny project were helpful and informative.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland staff involved in the scrutiny project appeared to be committed and passionate about their jobs.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland provided information requested and additional information when required.
- ✓ The Voids Management Policy and Tenants Handbook is publicly accessible via the Riverside Scotland website.
- ✓ On paper the Voids Management Policy is easy to understand, written in Plain English and covers a basic level of detail.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland have a weekly meeting to review and monitor voids management of properties and to consider potential sensitive lets.
- ✓ The locks are changed after each tenancy.
- ✓ Where necessary, tenant partners' will challenge the condition of void properties signed-off by asset management where there may be outstanding defects.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland has recently started to proactively pursue costs associated with rechargeable repairs/removals, tenant damages and vandalism to properties.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland staff will retain any good items of furnishings and fittings for the benefit of incoming tenants where possible. However, it was noted that this practice is discretionary.
- ✓ Riverside Scotland are efficient in bringing properties up to the current standard. SIG members are now informed and knowledgeable regarding the challenges and barriers Riverside Scotland encounter through the voids management process.

5. Recommendations

The SIG have found this scrutiny exercise to be invaluable in understanding Riverside Scotland's Voids Management Policy and voids management processes. The SIG would like Riverside Scotland to consider the following recommendations.

Findings	Recommendations
Performance and Customer Satisfaction	
The percentage of tenants satisfied with the quality of their home and the percentage of tenants who feel rent for their property represents good value for money continue to reduce year-on-year.	1. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland continue to monitor and review performance and satisfaction, and re-introduce the Key Performance Indicator ' <i>tenants satisfied with the quality of their home when moving in</i> ' to proactively seek tenants views within one month of moving in and identify areas of concern.
Although the average length of time taken to re-let properties was significantly lower than the Scottish national average, it increased 16% between 2021-22 and 2022-23.	2. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland aim to reduce the average length of time taken to re-let properties to minimise void rent loss.
The Letting Standard	
A desk top review of peer group policies suggested a requirement for the existing Voids Management Policy to be more prescriptive and robust to align with good practice comparisons.	3. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland review and develop their existing Voids Management Policy to align with industry standard, and highlight Almond Housing Association and West of Scotland Housing Association for consideration.
Voids Management	
The SIG acknowledged feedback raised with cleaning standards throughout TLI's, staff discussions and tenant surveys.	4. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review and develop a transparent minimal cleaning standard to ensure each property is cleaned to a uniform standard. The standard of cleaning should be continually monitored and reviewed with action taken where appropriate to maintain standards.
Through staff discussion the SIG acknowledged the existing contract permits Bell Group to charge/bill for the agreed amount [REDACTED] per void	5. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review the existing contract and aim to get value for money for

property regardless of the scale of works required.	each property through an individual property assessment.
The SIG acknowledged good practice through staff discussions and tenant surveys where Riverside Scotland retain any good items/furnishings or fittings (e.g. (pre-existing floor coverings) to minimise costs for incoming tenants.	6. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland continue to proactively support incoming tenants through this positive practice.
The SIG acknowledged ongoing challenges for Riverside Scotland with rechargeable repairs/removals.	7. The SIG recommend that Riverside Scotland continue to proactively pursue previous tenants for rechargeable repairs/removals, and consider publishing a case study example to raise awareness with new and existing tenants.
Through TLI's of void properties the SIG acknowledged challenges where pre-existing "loud" paint colours/tones can require redecoration, and potentially discourage future tenants from accepting a property.	8. The SIG recommend the reintroduction of a paint package limited to neutral colours/tones to minimise the number of properties being returned with challenging decoration.
Through staff discussions the SIG acknowledged communication challenges between housing and asset management staff throughout the voids management process.	9. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland review the voids management process to support housing and maintenance staff to work more efficiently.
Staff discussions and the tenant survey demonstrated examples of where the existing contractor doesn't always perform to the required standards of Riverside Scotland, with properties at times being returned with outstanding defects.	10. The SIG recommend a review of the existing process to increase inspection of works and minimise repeat occurrences.
The SIG acknowledged increasing voids expenditure costs, however staff discussions highlighted opportunities for Riverside Scotland to provide floor coverings as part of the voids management process to support incoming tenants.	11. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland explore opportunities to provide floor coverings as part of the voids management process, should voids expenditure significantly reduce.
Tenants Responsibilities - information and advice provided to tenants	
<p>The SIG acknowledge the challenging conditions of properties being returned to Riverside Scotland.</p> <p>Staff discussions and the tenant survey feedback highlighted a potential lack of understanding and/or awareness of tenants responsibilities and</p>	12. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland develop a communications plan to raise awareness of 'who is responsible for what' in terms of maintenance and repairs.

expectations with maintenance and repairs.	
<p>The SIG acknowledge new tenants are provided with a copy of the Riverside Scotland Tenants Handbook which outlines tenants' responsibilities (<i>Welcome to your home – Page 9</i>).</p> <p>The SIG acknowledged good practice with Barrhead, Fife, Glen Oaks and West of Scotland as providing tenants with a full breakdown of '<i>who is responsible for what...</i>' within their Tenants Handbook as clear and concise, and good practice.</p>	13. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland introduce a clear and concise section of ' <i>who is responsible for what...</i> ' into the Tenants Handbook.
The SIG highlighted that tenants responsibilities are currently not referenced or linked within Riverside Scotland's Repairs and Maintenance Policy or the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.	14. The SIG recommend that tenants responsibilities are clearly referenced and linked within Riverside Scotland's Repairs and Maintenance Policy, and separately the Rechargeable Repairs Policy.
Pre-Termination Process	
<p>The SIG agreed Riverside Scotland's pre-termination process doesn't provide a breakdown of tenants' responsibilities prior to exiting a property. The SIG identified areas of good practice when comparing with comparative peer groups' Tenancy Handbooks and website information.</p> <p>The SIG acknowledged Dalmeir Park Housing Association's '<i>A Guide to Giving Up Your Tenancy</i>' as good practice for consideration.</p>	15. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland develop and implement a pre-termination tenancy exit pack (incl. exit checklist) to outline tenants' responsibilities prior to termination of tenancy.
The SIG acknowledged good practice and personal experience of previous social landlords undertaking mandatory pre-termination and collection of keys face-to-face within properties.	16. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland implement a mandatory pre-termination (incl. collection of keys) process to take place face-to-face within the property to maximise opportunities to assess the condition of properties.
The SIG acknowledged good practice from North Ayrshire Council who include a list of common rechargeable repairs with associated costs within their standard pre-termination letters to tenants.	17. The SIG recommend Riverside Scotland implement a breakdown of common rechargeable repairs and associated costs within the standardised pre-termination letters to tenants.

6. Conclusion

The SIG would like to thank all staff who assisted our members to carry out this scrutiny exercise through providing information and presentations and arranging voids inspections, staff discussions and customer feedback. This has been invaluable to the SIG, and staff are to be commended for their commitment to the process.

We trust our recommendations will deliver improvements in the voids management process for Riverside Scotland and its customers.

7. Next Steps and Timetable

The SIG considered and agreed a draft of this report in April 2024 and the final agreed report with tenant recommendations was submitted to Riverside Scotland. Thereafter meetings will take place to allow:

- » The SIG to present key findings and recommendations to the Riverside Scotland Board of Directors in May 2024.
- » Riverside Scotland to meet with the SIG to discuss the Riverside Scotland response, present and agree specific actions to the recommendations at a meeting in June 2024.
- » The SIG to agree the actions required to publicise their work of the scrutiny project and attract new members.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

It is essential that this scrutiny project is monitored and evaluated to find out if agreed objectives have been met, to recognise what works well and what may need to be adapted to meet the changing needs and priorities of Riverside Scotland and its customers.

This is about evaluating the effectiveness of the scrutiny project itself but also monitoring the implementation of the agreed action plan has been carried out.

The SIG recommend that an exercise to review the action plan takes place in May 2025.

9. Contact

To discuss anything within this report, please contact TIS on the details below:

Stephen Connor – Development Manager

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix One – Service Improvement Group Membership

The Service Improvement Group provides the opportunity to have a core membership of **up to 15 participants**. Any Riverside Scotland tenants or customers (i.e. homelessness service user, factored owners, etc.) can become a member of the group.

Where possible, the membership of the Service Improvement Group should reflect and recognise the existence and importance of the different ages, races, genders, abilities and lifestyles within our communities to ensure that no group or individual will be disadvantaged. Support workers or carers of Service Improvement Group members are also entitled to attend meetings and take part in scrutiny activities.

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

Appendix Two – Voids Management Scrutiny Exercise: Tenant-Led Staff Discussions

Discussion Preparation

Stephen Connor (TIS) will meet with the Service Improvement Group (SIG), prior to staff discussions, to support with preparations and understand the format, questions and outcomes.

Discussion Roles

- A nominated SIG member will welcome everyone, introduce the discussion session and set the scene.
- SIG members will ask the questions.
- SIG members should not use the discussion to identify or discuss personal circumstances
- Stephen Connor (TIS) will take the notes of the session.
- A nominated SIG member will thank staff for their participation.

Staff Session		
Housing Staff	Assets Staff	Senior Management

1. Please can you tell us about your role in the voids management process within Riverside Scotland?
I'm the void lettings coordinator. Each week [on a Tuesday] we have a voids meeting where we discuss progress, timescales and consideration for potential sensitive lets (e.g., potential vulnerable tenants).
My role is the management of the asset management and housing teams . I report performance regularly to the Board in terms of void rent loss; timescales for completion; contract management and monitoring with contractors; and number of days to re-let. My role is the operations management of asset officers; budgetary management; and performance management with contractors.
2. What are some of the challenges Riverside Scotland experience with voids management?
Properties are not always returned in good condition and we aren't always provided with forwarding addresses to pursue rechargeable repairs/removals. It can become clear that tenants aren't always maintaining their properties or reporting repairs.

Tenants often don't provide access to the property to allow us to carry out the pre-termination visit to ascertain the condition of the property. Tenants often hand keys into the office and thereafter we don't hear/see them again. This means we aren't aware of any issues with property conditions or repairs until the void stage.

The contractor is not up to the standard where we would want them to be. Properties are not always where we need them to be. **Tenant partners' do at times challenge the condition of properties being signed-off by asset management staff.** We pick up things that can be often missed by asset team.

The Tenant Partners and Asset Team **could work closer and improve communication.**

Since Covid-19 **the condition of properties being returned has significantly deteriorated.** Although, it has over this past 10-years worsened in terms of longer turnaround time required and increasing funding required to bring properties back up to the letting standard.

We need **more robust processes to allow us to be more proactive with pre-termination interviews** which will enable us to visually inspect properties before they are handed back.

We need to have **a robust rechargeable repairs policy.**

Construction costs are significantly higher than CPI so **the cost of void works is significantly higher** than in previous years – *"we're getting less in return for more money."*

Tenants often hand **properties back in poor condition and full of furniture.**
"Is there is a lack of understanding of reasonable expectation to leave a property in?"

3. Do you think tenants are aware of their responsibilities, and Riverside Scotland's expectations, when vacating a property (i.e. void property standards and tenancy end checklist obligations)?

Tenants **should be aware of their responsibilities** as they are told of them at sign-up and again during the pre-termination visit. It's **easy to forget as there is so much information provided at the beginning of a tenancy.** Maybe we aren't clear enough though because alterations usually aren't reinstated.

We need to **be more proactive in pursuing rechargeable repairs.**

Tenant partners don't have **a visual aid to support tenants to fully understand their responsibilities towards maintenance and repairs.**

Tenants **understand their responsibilities where a pre-termination interview happens.** The challenge is often we don't get to carry out pre-termination interviews.

<p>Some tenants can't afford to reinstate their property or they aren't physically able to do the required work.</p> <p>It's unclear if tenants are aware of expectations of the letting standard at sign-up.</p>
<p>4. In your experience, what are the main reasons why a tenant may refuse a property due to the letting standards (e.g. condition or cleanliness)?</p>
<p>Sometimes the level of work required by tenants to decorate and furnish a home can be overwhelming. Community Care grants can take weeks sometimes!</p> <p>Properties can often look "tatty" and can be discouraging for prospective tenants.</p> <p>In my opinion cleanliness and decoration is often the main reason why a potential tenant will refuse a property.</p> <p>Loud paint colours or wallpaper can be off-putting to prospective tenants. They have to paint or decorate to their taste.</p>
<p>The letting standard doesn't usually tend to be a reason for a property being refused.</p> <p>There's no clear relation or link between refusals and the letting standards. It tends to be more down to location or the size or layout of properties.</p>
<p>5. How could we improve the existing Riverside Scotland voids management process and/or letting standards?</p>
<p>Improving processes to ensure that external contractors are doing what is required for each individual property.</p> <p>Tenant partners and asset management staff need to be working closer to minimise any challenges or snagging that arise – <i>"we need tighter internal processes and better communication."</i></p> <p>We need to improve how we communicate the voids process with our prospective tenants.</p> <p>We need to bring back decoration packages.</p> <p>We need a decoration package that is limited to neutral tones that would potentially encourage tenants to continue with neutral tones – <i>"it's the tenants choice what colours they decorate the property but maybe neutral tones would encourage most to continue with neutral tones."</i></p>
<p>We need to start collecting and monitoring tenants satisfaction when moving into the property. That will give us an indication.</p> <p>Delivering more independent customer-led scrutiny of housing services will support us to improve the service we deliver.</p>

We need to improve internal processes to **support staff to work closer and improve communication.**

We need to **aim to be getting best value for money for each individual property through an individual property assessment**, rather than the uniform blanket approach we have been using – *“not all properties require the same standard works.”*

We need to improve our working relationship with our external contractors to **encourage them to query decision-making** by our staff.

If we **reviewed our internal budgets and found a cost effective way to provide floor coverings** it would massively help prospective tenants.

We must be more **proactive in pursuing rechargeable repairs.**

We should explore **opportunities to incentivise tenants to leave the property in good condition** to meet their responsibilities – *“a small incentive may save Riverside Scotland a lot of money.....”*

6. Is there anything else you would like to comment on the voids management process, policy or letting standards?

No other comments.

No other comments.