

CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

5 OCTOBER 2006

REPORT OF CORPORATE MANAGEMENT TEAM

INFORMATION ITEM

Housing-Lead Cabinet Member- Councillor Leonard

TRISTAR IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS

SUMMARY

The services provided by Tristar Homes Ltd will be the focus of a re-inspection by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate, which is due to commence its on-site phase on October 24th, 2006.

Cabinet previously received a report on June 15th 2006 on the progress made to date in the drive for Tristar Homes to achieve excellence in its delivery of housing services. This is an update to that report, with particular emphasis on the progress made in implementing the recommendations made in the Audit Commission's last inspection report in May 2005.

DETAIL

1. In May 2005, Tristar Homes received an inspection score of fair (one-star), with poor prospects for further improvement. This was a significant reduction from the previous inspection score of December 2002, where the service was rated as good (two-star) with promising prospects for improvement. One of the key recommendations within the inspection report was that an improvement plan should be produced to bring the service back to its previous standard within twelve months.
2. This Service Improvement Plan (SIP) was produced in July 2006, following a period of intense analysis of the actual position and what was required to achieve excellence in each of the key services provided by Tristar Homes. The SIP was a high level document, detailing 90 key actions to be undertaken, with each action having a named responsible officer and a specific deadline for completion. Below this document, action plans were developed containing the larger number of smaller actions and pieces of work required to achieve these key actions.
3. The Tristar Service Improvement Plan has been in place since July 2005 and has been a key driver in bringing about fundamental improvements in service delivery in that period. Some of the significant achievements to date include:

Change in culture and improved relationship with the Council

4. The culture of the organisation has been transformed in a very short period from one where challenge was seen as a threat and to be discouraged, to the present situation where challenge is being embraced as vital to the continuous improvement of the company.

5. The change in culture is particularly evident at Board meetings, where informed and in-depth discussions now take place, with directors much clearer about their role in driving improvement. Board members also attend monthly drop-in sessions where they can find out more about specific service areas and regular tailored training sessions, and monitor the quality of the service provided through regular visits to housing offices and estate walkabouts.
6. This improved relationship with the Council is well illustrated by Tristar's response to the report by the Housing and Community Safety Select Committee into access to Tristar's services. This report recommended nearly 40 significant actions to improve access to Tristar's services. In a recent follow-up exercise carried out by the Select Committee, virtually all of these recommendations were seen to have been completed satisfactorily, with the remaining few items timetabled for action in the near future.

Management and staffing structures

7. Tristar's management and staffing structures needed to be radically reshaped and strengthened to enable the necessary service improvements to be delivered. A completely new management model was developed and is now fully populated, with major staffing restructures undertaken in all service areas.
8. Tristar's management and staffing structures are now "fit for purpose", with significant improvements in performance now being delivered.

Decent Homes Programme

9. A full long term programme of works to bring Council houses up to the Government's Decent Standard has been developed. This has enabled Tristar to advise tenants when they can expect to receive the improvements to their homes, which has been a major step forward in communications.

Performance Results

10. The success of the Service Improvement Plan will be judged on the effect that these service changes have on the bread and butter housing issues of how effectively rent collection, repairs and maintenance and the reletting of properties is carried out.
11. Performance in most of these areas are improved from the position in 2005, with the services now operating at the performance levels that would be expected of a two or three-star rated housing management provider.
12. This can be most clearly seen in the area of reletting properties. In previous years, the average time for reletting Council homes were between 70 – 80 calendar days, which compared very poorly with national standards. This level of performance continued up until September 2005, when new procedures, management and staffing arrangements were introduced into the voids service. The latest performance results show that Council homes are now taking an average of less than 34 days to be relet, which is the best relet result reported in the last five years.
13. Full details of Tristar's results up to the end of August 2006 are attached at **Appendix 1**, which is a copy of the performance report which forms the basis of discussions at Tristar's Board and other performance framework meetings each month.

14. The Service Improvement Plan has now been updated for 2006/07, with the key actions that have been completed removed and emerging issues added in. A full re-assessment of timescales and available resources on the outstanding actions has also been undertaken, with the plan improved further by identifying what the highest risk issues are.
15. Two issues of major importance that have been focussed on very heavily over the past few months have been resident involvement and value for money, particularly with regards to the repairs service. These both featured prominently in the previous inspection report as areas that required a significant amount of effort to reach the required standard.
16. Since the management and staffing structures have been put in place in these areas, these issues have begun to be fully tackled with good progress being made.
17. On resident involvement for instance, the future strategy was agreed by the Tristar Board in July following a period of consultation with residents, staff and other stakeholders. This strategy is now being implemented, with residents advised through a "Ways to be Involved" leaflet, as well as publicity at housing offices and through Tristar's tenants bulletin, "Tristar News".
18. The Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate are due to be on-site on the 24th and 25th October 2006 and again from October 30th to November 3rd 2006 to carry out the re-inspection of the service. They will use this time to fully test Tristar's self assessment of their services, through visits to housing offices, carrying out mystery shopping exercises and through interviews and focus groups with Council and Tristar Board Members, residents, officers and partner organisations.
19. Tristar Homes and the Council are working in partnership in preparation for this inspection, with the Council assisting particularly by providing a high degree of challenge to Tristar on their self assessment. All the statements contained within Tristar's self assessment have been verified by reviewing documentation and supporting evidence, and by carrying out mystery shopping exercises. Tristar have been advised of the areas where their evidence or service delivery needs to be strengthened, work which is being undertaken up until the on-site phase.
20. Planning for the inspection itself is also well advanced, with an inspection preparation team involving senior officers from both Tristar Homes and the Council meeting on a regular basis. Whereas professional management of the inspection process is not directly reflected in the rating of the service, it is vital that the inspection is organised well to enable the inspectors to get an accurate picture of the service and to enable any misconceptions to be challenged at an early stage.

FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

21. None directly from this report, although it is vital that Tristar Homes is operating within Best Value principles as it is the key partner in the delivery of cost effective housing management services to the Council's tenants.

COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

22. None directly from this report, although the delivery of excellent housing management services is of importance to several policy platform areas within the Community Strategy, in particular Community Safety and Well-being.

CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD COUNCILLORS

23. The Service Improvement Plan was drafted following an intensive period of analysis and consultation with residents, Tristar board members and staff of both Stockton Borough Council and Tristar Homes. Improving resident involvement in the development of Tristar Homes is also one of the key priority issues tackled within the Service Improvement Plan.

Contact details:

Julie Allport
Head of Housing

Telephone:

01642 527072

E-mail:

julie.allport@stockton.gov.uk