

Environment Select Committee

A meeting of Environment Select Committee was held on Monday, 16th December, 2013.

Present: Cllr Nigel Cooke(Chairman), Cllr David Wilburn(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Derrick Brown, Cllr Jean Kirby, Cllr Mrs Maureen Rigg, Cllr Steve Walmsley, Cllr Mick Womphrey, Cllr Bill Woodhead

Officers: Jane Edmends(DNS)Cath Purdy(Vela Group) Graham Birtle, Kirsty Wannop, Jenna McDonald(LDS)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Ray McCall

1 Committee Briefing

The Committee was informed that The Chief Executive of Vela Group was attending to address the meeting and would answer any questions which Members had. The Chair of the meeting explained to all Members that each would get a turn to ask any questions which they may have had.

Members agreed their approach to the meeting.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Draft Minutes - 16th October 2013 and 11th November 2013.

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting held on 14th October 2013.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

4 Review of the Performance of Housing Providers

The Chief Executive of Vela Group attended the Committee to give members an update on future plans of Vela Group. The Committee was informed that it was the third anniversary of the stock transfer on Friday 13th December 2013.

It was highlighted that Vela was in advanced discussions regarding going into partnership with Fabrick which consisted of Tristar Homes, Hartlepool Housing and Fabrick which consisted of Erimus Housing and Tees Valley Housing to create a larger housing provider across Tthe Tees Valley area. Members were informed that one of the main purposes for the merger was to generate a quicker and more efficient service. The aim was to enable the Housing Providers to offer more to Stockton Borough residents on a larger scale. Members heard that the Vela Group had a powerful voice on job creation and regeneration.

Although a merger was being considered at a management level Tristar Homes properties would remain as Tristar Homes for the purposes of the residents.

The Committee was informed that the name of the merged group would be Thirteen. The Chief Executive of Vela Group told the Committee that the name Thirteen was aimed at changing negative views that people may relate to the number 13 as well as social housing providers. The Head Office for Thirteen would be based at North Shore Academy.

Following the merger the providers looked at doing more for local service users. It was heard that there was a commitment to building another 300 homes in the borough in addition to the 100 homes which had already been built.

Members were informed that Thirteen would still offer tenants the Rent to Buy Scheme and would remain affordable and reasonable housing providers.

Members raised the following points/comments/questions:

-Would Tennant Scrutiny remain when Thirteen was established? This was for the tenants to decide.

- Which key performance would Thirteen have in place which were different to those in the past? The Chief Executive of Vela Group informed Members that they would continue to monitor the areas they had previously but would look at adding some performance indicators around efficiencies.

- The Committee was keen to find out how Thirteen would respond to welfare changes and its housing stock. Developing one bedroom properties was considered to be a high risk strategy and so help was being given to offset rental shortfalls for tenants. Rent arrears have increased and Universal Credit was recognised as being a major concern.

- Questions were asked as to whether or not internal or external workforce was used. In response to Members, the Chief Executive of Vela informed that a significant amount of repair work was carried out in house unless specialist work was required from external companies.

- Members asked whether reducing staff would have had an impact on the amount of time that tenants needed to wait for repairs to be carried out. Members were informed that when reducing numbers of staff, many front line posts would not be affected and therefore this should not have an impact on the length of time which a tenant would wait for a repair.

The Committee was interested to learn how anti-social behaviour (ASB) was tackled by Tristar. The Chief Executive highlighted a number of ways. If it was criminal behaviour then the police would be involved. Low level misdemeanors can breach tenancy agreement. Mediation can also be used. Eviction was seen as a last resort.

The Committee heard that the merger would take place on 01 April 2014 and that the main aim was to continue to be the local landlord and to meet promises from the Stock Transfer plans including new builds within the community. The Committee also heard that once merged, Thirteen would still like to maintain a strong relationship with Stockton on Tees Borough Council.

AGREED that the information be noted.

5 Topics for next year's work programme

Members raised the following suggestions for future review topics:

- How is Green Wedge Defined
- Ground Maintenance of Parks
- Environmental Officers Visits/Inspections

6 Work Programme

The Scrutiny Officer outlined the timeline for the Review of the Performance of Housing Providers.

AGREED that the work programme be noted

7 Chair's Update

The Chair had nothing to update.