

thirteen

Customer Scrutiny panel

Home Gardening Service

August 2016

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Who we are | 3 |
| 2. Why we chose to scrutinise this area..... | 3 |
| 3. Our approach..... | 4 |
| 4. Document review | 5 |
| 5. Further evidence | 6 |
| 6. Summary of recommendations..... | 6 |
| 7. Findings from our research | 8 |
| 8. Next steps..... | 20 |
| 9. Thank you | 20 |
| 10. Our next Scrutiny review..... | 20 |

Thirteen Customer Scrutiny panel

Home Gardening Service

1. Who we are

We are the Thirteen Customer Scrutiny panel, a team of volunteer customers from the four landlords of Erimus Housing, Housing Hartlepool, Tees Valley Housing and Tristar Homes.

We formed in November 2014 to work in partnership with Thirteen Group and to provide an in-depth, critical-friend role looking at services which we feel are important to customers. In carrying out this review we spent approximately 700 volunteer hours to complete it.

2. Why we chose to scrutinise this area

2.1 Customers

The Scrutiny Panel considered a number of different options for its review but chose to look at the Concessionary Garden Scheme as we wanted to assess what customers want from a group wide garden service and how this could be delivered.

Through the landlords within the group, Thirteen currently offer a range of gardening services to elderly and vulnerable tenants - there are currently offer 6 types of concessionary garden scheme across the group.

Published criteria, payment options and specifications for the different services are lacking, and to some extent appear to have been passed on informally. This has to lead to confusion over who can access the scheme, and what customers should expect from it.

The service is seen by many as a vital service that helps our most vulnerable customers retain dignity and manage their tenancy. We wanted to verify this.

2.2 Value for Money

Currently scheme prices are subsidised by the landlord ranging from 50% (Erimus Housing) to 80% (Housing Hartlepool). Last year the annual subsidy across the group was £180,000. This approach is not considered sustainable by Thirteen going forward.

There are differences in local authority approaches to concessionary garden charges. Erimus Housing customers in the Middlesbrough Borough Council local authority are the only customers who can apply for housing benefit towards to current concessionary charge. However, council budgets are reviewed annually and further budget cuts are not out of the question.

Universal credit and the Local housing Allowance will impact the services customers receive benefits towards and the income the organisation receives.

We wanted to future proof the charges against changes in welfare income.

2.3 The Service

The current gardening teams have inherited a variety of services as schemes are currently delivered a charged for differently as outlined below:

Erimus Housing – the scheme is currently delivered in-house with the cost of the gardens attached to the tenancy as a charge and recovered as a service charge via Housing Benefits. The service is currently provided to 867 residents. There is a single level of service/standard offered and the charge is £3.83/wk (£199 per annum).

Tristar Homes – the scheme is delivered in-house by seasonal workers. They offer three levels of service – 424 in total, of which 40 are enlisted on the gold service, 21 on the silver service and 363 on the bronze service. The cost of the service is added to the customer’s rent account, and the charges are: £3.59/wk (Gold); £3.28/wk (Silver) and £2.61/wk (Bronze). Per annum this is - Gold: £186.68; Silver: £170.56; Bronze: £135.72.

Tees Valley Housing – the in-house team delivers the scheme across all the stock and the take-up on the Tees Valley Housing side amounts to 11 properties. These are added to the existing rotas for each scheme, and the charge is £72 per annum.

Housing Hartlepool – the scheme is delivered in-house as part of an existing contract. The service is currently available to 200 tenants each year, with an existing waiting list of 120 residents that qualify for the scheme. The cost of the service is paid via an annual invoice of £29.00.

3. Our approach

The Scrutiny Panel decided to investigate this topic and were asked to consider the following questions:

1. Should Thirteen continue to offer garden services?
 - a) Is it valued by customers?
 - b) Is it valued by the organisation?
 - c) Is it value for money?
 - d) What would happen if the service was not offered?

2. Who will the service be offered to?
 - a) Is the service currently offered to the right people?
 - b) Are the current criteria for accessing the scheme too restrictive?

c) Could the service be commercialised?

3. Who will deliver the service?
4. What will the service cost?
 - a) Should the scheme offer different grades of service?
 - b) Does one price fit all size gardens?
 - c) Could a commercial element subsidise the cost for those in need?
 - d) Should the scheme continue to be 'concessionary'?
5. How will it be paid for?
 - a) Does the garden charge sit in the rent account?
 - b) What is the simplest, easiest to manage payment method?

The Panel review intended to develop proposals for a new service going forward.

To gather evidence the Scrutiny Panel:

- spoke to customers and staff in a variety of ways, including; site visits, postal surveys, digital surveys and Facebook polls,
- benchmarked the Thirteen Group with other landlords,
- researched what other garden service providers offer including commercial contractors,
- reviewed all documentation available related to the current gardening services including specification, promotional literature, website information and customer data,
- carried out a number of face to face interviews with staff and customers,
- carried out SWOT (strengths and weaknesses) analysis of the evidence from the various activities we participated in.

4. Document review

In carrying out this service review we reviewed the following documents:

Neighbourhood Strategy.

Garden service spreadsheets for each of the four landlords.

Letters welcoming customers to the scheme.

Local Housing Allowance guidelines.

Universal Credit guidelines.

GIS mapping of the garden service.

Feedback from previous customer engagement.

Written promotional material for the concessionary garden schemes.

Benchmarking comparisons.

Housing Hartlepool's garden scheme waiting list.

Referral form and promotional publications from Owton Fens Community Association.

197 customer responses to surveys (Appendix 2).

15 survey responses from garden crew members. (Appendix 3).
28 survey responses from Neighbourhood Officers and Assistants (Appendix 4).
Gardeners time sheets.

We requested a Garden Scheme Policy but was advised there isn't one currently in place.

5. Further evidence

We interviewed and received information from the following staff from the Thirteen Group:

Denise Powell – Grounds Maintenance Manager
Dave Ayton - Grounds Maintenance Supervisor
Brian Moore - Grounds Maintenance Supervisor
Charlie Saul – Grounds Maintenance Supervisor
David Hill – Procurement Manager
Helen Ivison – Neighbourhood Manager
Paul Noddings – Policy and Contracts Manager
Rob Thompson – Rents and Income Manager
Samantha Granger – Corporate Social Responsibility Manager

We also conducted internet research to see what other landlords and business provide.

6. Summary of recommendations

Key recommendations are highlighted in bold:

R1 – Thirteen should continue to offer an affordable gardening service.

R2 – The service should be offered to a defined Priority client group – see suggested scheme criteria in Appendix 1 and 7.2b.

R3 - The service should be offered on a not-for-profit basis to all customers of Thirteen Group, for the initiation of the new scheme.

R4 – The availability of the new service should be promoted widely to all customers of Thirteen Group.

R5 – The scheme should be named the Home Gardening Service.

R6 - Thirteen should develop a policy for the garden scheme (see Appendix 1 entitled "Proposed Home Garden Service Policy content").

R7 - Consideration should be given to whether a commercial service should be offered at commercial rates to non-Thirteen customers.

R8 – Thirteen should continue to deliver a value for money gardening service for customers using its own in-house team.

R9 – Thirteen should benchmark the in-house service against other providers to ensure that it continues to deliver value for money.

R10 – There should be a standard unit charge across Thirteen Group for a single standard specification.

R11 – An enhanced specification of 10 cuts per season (a three week cutting cycle) should be offered.

R12 – A standard charge of £5.60 is recommended.

R13 – Additional services should be offered – see Appendix 1 Customer Choices.

R14 – Consider introducing a garden restoration service.

R15 – The scheme should charge a single price for all garden sizes.

R16 - The service should no longer be offered on a concessionary basis.

R17 – Thirteen Boards consider if it is desirable and affordable to subsidise charges for those in the Priority client group defined in Appendix 1.

R18 – Thirteen could consider investigating whether funds that may become available via EU Social Value Act from procurement activity could subsidise charges for the Priority client group.

R19 – Charge for the service via an annual invoice with payment options.

R20 – The charge for the service should be removed from the rent account into a sub-account in Orchard.

R21 - Introduce a Customer Contract.

R22 - Provide customers with a range of payment options.

R23 - Move the Home Gardening Scheme onto Orchard.

R24 - Agree a process for service continuation in bad weather.

R25 - Introduce a pro-active text messaging service that will notify customers the date the service will visit the week before, and advise of any delays as they arise.

R26 - Provide gardeners with calling cards for the gardener to specify proposed date and time for their return.

R27 - Consider providing a mobile solution for the gardeners.

R28 - Consider offering a money advice appointment to all customers who enquire about accessing the garden service.

R29 – Provide advice and signposting to other services where customers may not be able to meet the costs of the service

R30 - Clearly publish what service customers can expect from Thirteen (see Appendix 1, section 3).

7. The findings from our research

7.1 Question 1: Should Thirteen continue to offer garden services?

a) Is it valued by customers?

Approximately 1500 customers currently access the various gardening schemes across the group. The Panel received an overwhelming 194 survey responses through the post and during face to face site visits – see Appendix 3.

During our research we asked customers how important it was for them to be able to access a gardening service on a scale of 1-10 (1 = I could manage without it, 10 – I couldn't possibly manage with it). Only 4% rated the level of importance below 7. The average across the group was 9.6 out of 10. When we asked customers why they access the service; nearly all stated disability, ill health and limitations due to their age.

We asked if customers felt their own garden and other peoples gardens affected how they felt about their neighbourhood. The average response was 8.7 out of 10, clearly indicating that customers feel the state of gardens reflects on themselves and their community.

Customers told us:

"I could not manage the gardening on my own as I am 94 years old"

"Because of my disability I am unable to do the garden myself and because of family living out of town and others living in other areas we rely heavily on the gardening scheme to keep some order in the garden"

"It helps my husband keep his pride as he doesn't want me to have to struggle cutting the garden. He is in a care home."

b) Is it valued by the organisation?

The neighbourhood and gardening team members rated the importance of offering a gardening service as 9.3 out of 10 (very important).

The Panel interviewed a Neighbourhood Manager and along with surveys this demonstrate that the service is a useful tool to help keep neighbourhoods lettable, improving kerb appeal, help reduce void levels and reduce tenancy enforcement action costs and legal costs for the organisation.

Staff told us:

“If this service is not available it will have a negative impact on the appearance of our neighbourhoods and our properties may be less appealing to prospective tenants.” – Neighbourhood Officer

“Some once keen gardeners are now too ill or frail to maintain but not too old or frail to enjoy and take great pride in their outside space. We give them the platform to enjoy and benefit from a very important and therapeutic part of their lives.” – Gardening team member.

KEY Recommendation:

1 – Thirteen should continue to offer an affordable gardening service.

c) Is it value for money?

The Scrutiny Panel recognise that the current service is operated at a significant level of subsidy that is not sustainable for Thirteen going forward and does not offer value for money to the organisation in purely financial terms but there are non-monetary benefits to the scheme, as referred to in b) above. The current subsidised scheme with its low charges is attractive to customers.

The Panel considered that if the approach going forward is for the service to cover its operating costs (and is not for profit for scheme members), this would result in better value for money for all Thirteen customers as it results in a fairer approach to rents across the wider customer base, particularly noting that some customers will be impacted by shortfalls in welfare benefits e.g. the Local Housing Allowances.

Although such an approach would result in increased cost to garden service users, the criteria for accessing the scheme should make sure service users are in receipt of income that would help meet the cost.

A not for profit service combined with low operating costs offers an affordable service for customers, and if it is offered without subsidy it would yield savings for Thirteen of £180,000 p.a (2015-16).

d) What would happen if the service was not offered?

If the service was not offered the Panel felt that it would:

- Reduce customer satisfaction with the appearance of their neighbourhoods.
- Result in a loss of dignity for vulnerable customers who rely on a service to manage their garden for them.
- Reduce kerb appeal for properties and risk them becoming unlettable or empty for longer.
- Result in more time and money being spent on taking enforcement action.
- Adversely impact on vulnerable customers at risk of increased financial pressure from legal costs associated with court action, and having to pay profit making organisations to deliver a service.

7.2 Question 2: Who will the service be offered to?

a) Is the service currently offered to the right people?

The existing concessionary garden scheme is aimed at elderly and vulnerable tenants and our customer surveys and face to face meetings with customers told us for the most part that the people on the scheme are generally in need of it. We did receive evidence that shows some people are on the scheme because they inherited it from the previous tenancy or because their neighbourhood officer had helped them access the service even though they admitted they didn't really need it. The Panel believe that at the current time the service should be offered to a 'Priority' client group with eligibility criteria clearly defined—see 1b) below and Appendix 1.

The Panel also sought to capture evidence of demand from the wider Thirteen customer base. A survey was conducted via an online poll to ascertain interest in a paid garden scheme from the wider customer base, but it received limited responses and further research is required. In total 5 respondents indicated that they would be interested in paying for a gardening service from their landlord. However the Panel believes that, there is likely to be demand for such a service offered on a not for profit basis, and this should be offered from the initiation of the new scheme. The Panel felt that other Thirteen customers may wish to access the scheme and should not be excluded from the scheme because they do not meet the 'Priority' client criteria for the scheme.

The Panel was also asked to consider whether the service could be commercialised – this is discussed further in Section 7.2 c) below.

In summary the Panel believe that:

- The service should be offered to a Priority client group.
- The service should also be offered to the wider Thirteen customer base.
- Consideration should also be given to offering the service on a commercial basis that could generate revenue to help subsidise charges for those in the Priority client group.

KEY Recommendation:

2 – The service should be offered to a defined Priority client group – see suggested scheme criteria in Appendix 1 and 7.2b).

KEY Recommendation:

3 – The service should be offered on a not-for-profit basis to all customers of Thirteen Group, from the initiation of the new scheme.

Recommendation:

4 – The availability of the new service should be promoted widely to all customers of Thirteen Group.

Recommendation:

5 – The service should be named the Home Gardening Service.

b) Are the current criteria for accessing the scheme too restrictive?

We were unable to obtain written criteria for the scheme as none appeared to be available or exist. The rules of the scheme appear to have been passed on by word of mouth and are subject to different levels of understanding. We were told it was for “People over 65 or people classed as vulnerable or having a disability”. The definition of ‘vulnerable’ was unclear and open to interpretation. Therefore a customer’s ability to access the scheme cannot be objectively assessed against a set of clear criteria.

The panel believe that Priority criteria for accessing the scheme need to be defined that reflects those in particular need or deemed ‘vulnerable’. This should be defined in such a way as to ensure service users are in receipt of income that would help them to meet the cost. See recommendation 2.

KEY Recommendation:

6 – Thirteen should develop a policy for the garden scheme (see Appendix 1 entitled *Proposed Home Garden Service Policy Content*).

c) Could the service be commercialised?

It is the Scrutiny Panels view that consideration should be given to whether a commercial service (offered at commercial rates) could be offered to non-Thirteen customers that could generate revenue that could subsidise costs for Priority scheme members, as well as enabling the service to operate at a higher volume of activity that could generate economies of scale.

KEY Recommendation:

7 – Consideration should be given to whether a commercial service should be offered at commercial rates to non-Thirteen customers.

7.3 Question 3: Who will deliver the service?

The Panel looked at other businesses, including what other landlords offer, and what customers could expect to pay if they sourced services themselves. It did not look at contracting out the service, as the tendering process would be too intensive for purely research purposes.

The majority of landlords that offer a garden maintenance scheme deliver it in house.

Our customers gave very positive feedback about the Thirteen gardening teams, and we note that the Deerness contract that previously delivered the Housing Hartlepool scheme was recently brought in-house as it has proved more cost effective to do so.

The Panel noted from customer feedback that they appreciate the ‘personal touch’ they get from knowing the service comes from their landlord, and appreciate the familiar faces the current structure provides. In addition, we noted from staff interviews that our in-house team had identified specific incidents where our tenants were at risk or vulnerable, and had been able to liaise internally with colleagues to make sure customers were safe.

The Panel concluded that the in-house service provides a cost effective, customer friendly service that enhances the reputation of Thirteen.

The Panel also recommends that Thirteen should assess whether an in-house service continues to offer a value for money service by periodically benchmarking against other ways of providing the service.

KEY Recommendation:

8 – Thirteen should continue to deliver a value for money service with its in-house team.

Recommendation:

9 – Thirteen should benchmark the in-house service against other providers to ensure that it continues to deliver value for money.

7.4 Question 4: What will the service cost?

a) Should the scheme offer different grades of service?

The Panel received comments from the gardening team, supervisors and Grounds Maintenance Manager that the bronze, silver and gold service provided to tenants of Tristar Homes is inefficient. The Panel inspected and saw photographs of gardens that received the bronze service (monthly grass cuts), and were disappointed to see the condition of the lawn. Research revealed that sometimes a garden is identified for tenancy enforcement action when it is receiving the garden service from the landlord.

A gardening team supervisor cited an example of a garden that receives monthly cuts. If the garden was tended to fortnightly, each cut would take approx. 40 minutes (or 80 minutes per month plus additional journey time). However, when tended to on a monthly basis, the cut would take 120 minutes.

Due to differing approach between local authorities, most Erimus Housing tenants living in Middlesbrough receive Housing Benefit to cover the garden charge. This is guaranteed income for the group while the local authority continue to pay for the service. However, (if the service is personalised (e.g. by offering different options), it would be ineligible for housing benefit.

Although Tristar Homes is the only landlord to offer personalised garden services, it had the lowest customer satisfaction rating (See Appendix 3).

The Panel asked customers if they wanted the garden service to deliver any other services? Almost 50% of respondents identified additional services they would like, including additional hedge cuts, extra weeding and flower planting. Some also identified more frequent cuts as well, suggesting a monthly service is less desirable.

The Panel asked customers on a scale of 1 (cheaper) – 10 (a better garden service), what did they feel was more important? The average was 7.8, indicating that many customers are open to paying more for a better quality service.

The Panel also heard evidence from the gardening team that some customers access the service to bring their garden back into a manageable condition, but then cancel the service shortly afterwards. This incurs unmet costs for Thirteen and members of the service. The Panel recommends that Thirteen consider a garden restoration service as an additional service that could be added to the annual contracted charge.

The Panel considered alternative specifications for the service based on customers receiving a grass cut every 2, 3 or 4 weeks, including as standard that all cuttings disposed of; paths, patios and other areas will receive a weed spraying treatment as needed. Lawn edges and borders will be trimmed, and flower beds and borders will be weeded. A winter maintenance visit will take place during November or December to prune and hedges or shrubs that require attention.

The different cost scenarios are included in Appendix 2.

The Scrutiny Panel believe customers across the group should be able to access the same level of service and taking account of the preferences of customers and staff interviewed it is the Panels view that the preferred service offer should be 10 cuts per season (a three week cycle).

The Panel recognises that Thirteen has minimised overhead charges in the cost scenarios to minimise charges for customers.

KEY Recommendation:

10 - There should be a standard customer unit charge across Thirteen for a single standard specification.

KEY Recommendation:

11 – An enhanced specification of 10 cuts per season (a three week cutting cycle) should be offered.

KEY Recommendation:

12 – A standard charge of £5.60 is recommended.

KEY Recommendation:

13 - Additional services should be offered – see Appendix 1 Customer Choices.

Recommendation:

14 - Consider introducing a garden restoration service.

b) Does one price fit all size gardens?

Panel site inspections revealed a great variety of garden sizes and content. Some were large, but mostly paved and required mainly weed spraying. Other large gardens had lawns and hedgerows. Others were very small and required minimal attention.

An exercise to determine the exact time spent on each garden has not been carried out, and would require that each property is inspected. We also noted that some elderly residents who under-occupy large homes that come with a large garden, are already managing the added expenses of running a larger home such as increased fuel costs. It was also noted that large garden sizes were not just limited to large homes as some bungalows also have gardens of a significant size, and customers with larger gardens appreciate the financial equalising the scheme.

Almost no customers complained about garden sizes affecting prices. The Panel were also concerned that Thirteen may be perceived as introducing a garden tax for those with a large gardens, in particular pensioners and those with disabilities, who may to be adequately housed, but may find that larger gardens are too costly to manage.

KEY Recommendation:

15 - The scheme should charge a single price for all garden sizes.

c) Could a commercial element subsidise the cost for those in need?

It is the view of the Panel that consideration should be given to whether a commercial service should be offered at commercial rates to non-Thirteen customers - see Section 7.2 c).

d) Should the scheme continue to be 'concessionary'?

As the Panel believes that the service should be offered to all Thirteen customers it recommends that the service should be priced to cover its operating costs on a not for profit basis for scheme members. This would result in better value for money for all Thirteen customers as it results in a fairer approach to rents across the wider customer base.

However the Panel is recommending the service should be offered to a Priority client group defined - those in particular need or deemed 'vulnerable' – and it suggests that Thirteen Boards consider if they feel it may be desirable and affordable to subsidise charges for those in the Priority client group. It should be noted that this priority group have been defined to provide an opportunity for charges to be covered by benefits they are in receipt of.

KEY Recommendation 16: The service should no longer be offered on a concessionary basis.

KEY Recommendation 17:

Thirteen Boards consider if they feel it may be desirable and affordable to subsidise charges for those in the Priority client group defined in see Appendix 1.

Recommendation 18:

Thirteen could consider investigating whether funds that may become available via EU Social Value act from procurement activity could subsidise charges for the Priority client group.

7.5 Question 5: How will it be paid for?

a) Does the garden charge sit in the rent account?

The Scrutiny Panel we provided with a detailed explanation of the different ways income can be managed by the Customer Accounts and Income Services Manager.

If the garden charge is collected in the rent account, this can lead to confusion over rent arrears and reporting of rent collection figures. There is a risk that Thirteen could commence tenancy action for rent arrears when in fact the arrears have arisen due to ancillary charges, such as the garden scheme.

The Panel also found that some customers do not understand that the charge for the gardening service is payable across the year, not just during the gardening season. It is seen as a weekly payment instead of a payment for an annual service. At the moment, if a customer pays weekly, and has received 100% of the service between April and October, but chooses to cancel the garden charge from October, we have no contract in place that obliges them to pay outstanding instalments for a service they have received.

The Panel concluded that in order to help customers understand the full cost for the service and improve our income collection when people cancel the service, the service should be operated on a contract basis with an annual invoice raised for its cost. The charge for this

service should be managed through a sub-account in Orchard and removed from customers rent account, and thereby remove confusion over where any rent arrears are being incurred.

The Panel felt that a Customer Contract or Agreement should be introduced between Thirteen and customers signing onto the scheme. It should set out scheme costs, optional extras, the scheme offer and conditions, including what Thirteen expects from customers and so on as set out in Appendix 1, section 4.

Recommendation:

19 – The service is charge for via an annual invoice with payment options.

Recommendation:

20 – The charge for the service should be removed from the rent account into a sub-account in Orchard.

Recommendation:

21 – Introduce a Customer Contract that customers must complete.

b) What is the simplest, easiest to manage, payment method?

The Panel discussed a range of payment methods and associated costs. It was noted that Standing Orders can sometimes present problems when payment amounts are changed. This means Thirteen have to make contact with the tenant and the tenant then has to contact their bank in order to update the payment amount.

Whilst payment by Direct Debit is often most people's preferred method of payment, customers need to be offered different options as customers require flexibility and need to feel in control of their spending. The Panel therefore recommends adoption of a payment scheme that suits all customers, alongside efficient collection methods using Direct Debit service, Allpay Cash Payment card service and payment options via Pay Points - see Appendix 1.

Recommendation:

22 – Provide customers with a range of payment options.

7.6 Other recommendations

a) Move the Home Gardening Scheme onto Orchard

The Panel found that records for the garden service are based on a collection of spreadsheets. Some neighbourhood officers compile their own and the back office team that supports the gardeners have their own. The Panel found that errors can occur where services have been provided to those no-longer on the scheme. The Panel recommends holding live customer information, and records updated in real time in Orchard, will reduce unnecessary work carried out and any wasted cost and enhance value for money

Recommendation:

23 - Move the Home Gardening Scheme onto Orchard.

b) Communicating with customers

The Panel understands how the garden service is impacted by adverse weather conditions. It is not clear however at what point the weather is considered too adverse to deliver the service as the Panel discovered that some gardeners will work in heavy rain while at other times the service stops. Customers are not informed of delays unless they phone up.

The Panel asked for figures to clarify the number of contacts, but were told this was unavailable. The back office team did tell us they had been very busy dealing with customer enquiries, as at one point the schedule was 3 weeks behind. Our survey respondents told us they are unsure when their garden will be tended to, leading to access problems on occasions. The Panel were pleased to hear from Denise that she is looking into a website function for customers to type in their post code and see up-to-date gardening rota's, that are edited as delays are managed. Though the Panel considered this a really good proposal it is possible that some vulnerable and elderly tenants might struggle to access this website.

The Panel has made a number of recommendations that would assist and enhance communication with customers, for example where there is bad weather and improve service efficiency, by reducing avoidable contact, paperwork and back-office support.

Recommendation:

24 – Agree a process for service continuation in bad weather.

Recommendation:

25 – Introduce a text messaging service that will notify customers the date the service will visit the week before, and advise of any delays as they arise.

Recommendation:

26 – Provide gardeners with calling cards for the gardener to specify proposed date and time for their return.

Recommendation:

27 – Consider providing a mobile solution for the gardeners.

c) Enhance opportunities to maximise tenant income

Although there is no indication that this does not happen, the Panel did not see any evidence that customers enquiring about the gardening service are offered money advice appointments to make sure they are claiming all of their benefit entitlement.

Recommendation:

28 – Consider offering a money advice appointment to all customers who enquire about accessing the garden service.

Recommendation:

29 – Provide advice and signposting to other services where customers may not be able to meet the cost of the service.

d) Clearly communicate service standards for the garden service

The Panel discovered that there are no published service standard for the garden service and considers these are required in order for customers to hold Thirteen to account for the service provided.

Recommendation:

30 – Clearly publish what service customers can expect from Thirteen (see Appendix 1, section 3).

8. Next steps

In line with the Customer Involvement strategy we expect the Audit and Risk Committee to monitor the delivery of the action plan that accompanies this report, as they do by exception, with internal audit action plans. We also expect to meet with any managers responsible for the service areas we have covered to ensure our recommended actions are progressed for us. This is to be done every six months until the actions have been progressed.

9. Thank you

We would like to thank all the customers, managers and staff we interviewed and who gave their time to speak to us as part of this service review, for their honesty and for sharing areas which they had identified for service improvement. We would like to thank those involved for sharing data, policies and information with us.

The Thirteen Customer Scrutiny panel who undertook this piece of work are:

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Michelle Bendelow | Tristar Homes |
| Brian Binns | Housing Hartlepool |
| Ann Carter | Housing Hartlepool |
| Tom Casey | Tees Valley Housing |
| George Cook | Tees Valley Housing |
| Diane Kitching | Housing Hartlepool |
| Anne Lancashire | Erimus Leaseholder |
| Jimmy McElvaney | Erimus Housing |
| Gill Pallister | Tristar Homes |
| Melvyn Rhodes | Erimus Housing |
| Stewart Wraith | Erimus Housing |

Finally we would like to thank Matthew Trueman for supporting us.

10. Our next Scrutiny review

The Scrutiny Panel is seeking recommendations from customers, the Boards, Thirteen Customer Council, the Audit and Risk Committee, Director/Heads of Service for our next and future scrutiny piece(s).

