

Somer Community Housing Short Notice Inspection

What is your request of the LSP Board?	The LSP Board is asked to note the contents of the report and appendices. This report is confidential to the LSP Board.
What do you want from the Theme Delivery Partnerships?	Nothing at this stage.
Background material	Audit Commission Report

1 Summary

- 1.1 Somer Community Housing Trust (Trust) received a short notice inspection of its gas safety and voids and lettings services from 22-24 March 2010. This report sets out the findings of the inspectors; the current position in terms of responding to the inspection; and the next steps for the Trust.

2.0 Background and context

- 2.1 On 12 March 2010 the Audit Commission informed us that they would conduct a short notice inspection of the following services from 22-24 March:
- Gas safety;
 - Voids and lettings;
 - Access and customer care, diversity and value for money in the areas being inspected.
- 2.2 The inspectors' pre-inspection work and on-site work relates to Judgement 1 – How good is the service? This focuses on how well are we doing at this point in time. The second stage of the process is the assessment for Judgement 2 – prospects for improvement? This judgement is based on an improvement plan that we will be required to develop, in consultation with residents, to achieve the outcomes outlined with their recommendations in the report.

3.0 Inspection process

- 3.1 Pre-inspection
In preparation for the site visit, the inspectors requested 5 key documents plus 5 additional documents to support information they already had about Somer, to assist them with developing their initial

impression of the Trust's performance and to help frame what they would concentrate on during the inspection.

3.2 On site

While the inspectors were on site, after presenting their initial findings they spent three days meeting with residents, staff, managers and Trustees and visiting properties and Local Service Centres. They used a range of methods to assess how we were performing, including:

- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Mystery shopping
- Telephone interviews
- Document review

3.3 On their last day, the inspectors presented their findings and gave us the opportunity to respond within five days. We gave them comments on their feedback and further detail or information where requested.

3.4 The outcome of the inspection was as follows:

Lettings and void management – weaknesses outweigh strengths

Gas safety – strengths and weaknesses in balance

Equality and diversity – weaknesses outweigh strengths

Customer care and access – weaknesses outweigh strengths

Value for money – weaknesses outweigh strengths

3.4 Draft report

The Audit Commission sent their draft interim report to us on 12 April 2010. This sets out what they found in each of the areas inspected in terms of specific strengths and weaknesses, and gives their assessment for Judgement 1 in each of the areas.

3.5 We were given five days to comment on this report and challenge any aspects we didn't agree with. The report, findings and recommendations are in line with our expectations and therefore we have no reason or desire to challenge the Audit Commission's judgements.

3.6 The inspectors have now published their interim report on their website (Annex A) and have issued a press release. The Bath Chronicle has covered the report which was balanced. Our press release is attached at Annex B. They have given us a letter which will go out to all tenants this week. A special page on our website has been established so that residents and others can monitor our progress against the plans.

4 Next Steps

4.1 In order for the inspectors to make an assessment for judgement 2, the next stage is developing an improvement plan to address the weaknesses highlighted in the initial report. This plan must be submitted to the Audit Commission by 21 June 2010. In order to achieve this

deadline, a staff project team has been established and is meeting weekly to review actions and track progress.

- 4.2 In addition, a project board made up of four Trustees has been established. This group will monitor progress with the Trust's response to inspection and provide assurances to the Board. Given their background, skills and experience it is proposed that the following Trustees sit on the Project Board: Margaret Connor; Rob Appleyard; Janet Durk; John Kilner. All have indicated their willingness to commit to the project.
- 4.3 A 'critical friend' Ellis Blakemore from HQN has been commissioned to support the delivery of the project and a successful response. .
- 4.4 The final improvement plan will be presented to the Trust Board in June. The plan has been developed with full involvement of residents including an insert on the Audit Commission's findings and recommendations going out with Somer Times at the beginning of May 2010; focus groups being set up to review the inspectors' findings and input their ideas into the planned response; review of our plans by the residents in Viewpoint; a special meeting of the Somer Residents Committee on 18 May 2010 to review the outcome of the consultation and feed into the plan themselves.
- 4.5 The final improvement plan will be submitted to the Audit Commission by 21 June 2010. They will then make their judgement from poor prospects to excellent prospects for improvement and this will be published on the website along with the judgement 1.
- 4.6 In the meantime the Trust have been working to address the weaknesses raised by the Audit Commission:
- 4.7 **Voids and lettings**
The Trust was about to fundamentally review its lettings service, following a major restructuring last year. We've already reduced the time homes stay empty by 12 days (20 per cent) since the inspection. The new simple, clear re-let standard developed with residents is now being used.
- 4.8 **Service standards**
The Trust has been consulting with residents over the last few months on what service standards they would like to see put in place. These were approved by the Board in May and will now form the basis of our 'local offer' with tenants for the new TSA standards introduced in April this year.
- 4.9 **Tailoring services**
At the time of the inspection, we were tendering for a 'customer profiling' survey. The consultant has been appointed and work on gathering the profiling information will start in June. This links in with

another major project to procure a new housing management system to record and access this information.

4.10 Telephone monitoring and complaints

Following a tender process, ComplaintsRgreat have been appointed to review our complaints policy and procedure and are due to report to the Board at the beginning of July on a new system. We have set up new systems for monitoring performance on answering and dealing with telephone calls and the first set of information will go to the Board in July.

4.11 Gas safety inspections

The gas safety service was already in the middle of a fundamental review at the time of the inspection, and the changes were about to be implemented. These include moving to a 10-month, rather than 11-month, cycle to be certain all services take place within the legal requirement of a year and establishing more flexible working hours and a better appointment service.

4.12 Value for money

The report recognised that we have good processes for procurement and the Board approved a new value for money strategy in February, which will lead to better monitoring and benchmarking of our performance. This is in the process of being rolled out across the Group.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 This report has set out the findings from the recent short notice inspection, the current position and next steps for the Trust. In order to achieve a successful response the Trust is taking a project approach with reports back to the Board at regular intervals.

5.2 The report's findings validate the work already in progress and the Trust is confident we can deliver the improvements required.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

(1) That the LSP Board notes the contents of the report and appendices;