



NEWS RELEASE

PR131

24th May 2010

Draft

For immediate release

Embargo: 27th May 2010

Somer Community Housing Trust responds positively to Audit Commission short notice inspection

Somer Community Housing Trust says it is confident that all of the weaknesses identified in an Audit Commission inspection report published today will be dealt with before the end of August.

The Audit Commission carried out a short-notice inspection in March 2010 of three of the Trust's services – lettings, empty homes and gas safety – on behalf of social housing's regulator, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). It made a number of recommendations to improve the services, which must be variously completed by the end of July or August. Since then, the Trust has been consulting with residents on an action plan detailing how it will meet those recommendations, which must be returned to the Audit Commission by 21st June. The commission will then judge what it thinks the Trust's prospects for improvement are, and publish its final report.

Angela Gascoigne, Managing Director of Somer Community Housing Trust, said:

'The idea behind short notice inspections is that they focus on your weaker services, partly based on the information we give ourselves to the TSA. So the Audit Commission's findings were no surprise, and we were already making good progress on dealing with those weaknesses.'

'The inspectors' findings necessarily represent a snapshot in time of our organisation. We welcome their findings, as they validate what we were already doing or planning, to improve these services. We will also continue to work with residents to make improvements that go beyond the Audit Commission's priorities where we can.'

The inspectors praised Somer Community Housing Trust for a number of strengths, including: high levels of tenant satisfaction with their opportunities

to participate and influence decision-making, that complaints are responded to sensitively and comprehensively, and specific initiatives to work with older tenants, black and minority ethnic tenants, and those affected by the major pre-cast reinforced concrete (PRC) redevelopment and refurbishment project.

These are the Trust's responses to some of the weaknesses raised by the Audit Commission:

Empty properties take a long time to re-let, the re-let standard is basic, and tenants are not given information on what standard to expect

- The Trust was just about to review its lettings service, following a restructure to put more resources into the service late last year.
- The time that homes stay empty has already been reduced by 12 days (20 per cent) since the inspection.
- To achieve the best value for money, the Trust includes empty homes in existing programmes to update kitchens, bathrooms and heating systems, such as the major project in Snow Hill, Bath. This can add delays, but provides a higher-quality home for the new tenant.
- The Trust is developing a simpler and clearer re-let standard with residents and comparing what we do with other social landlords.

There are no service standards currently in place

- 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 scheduled to be considered by the Board in May and agreed. They will be published in July and will form the basis of our 'local offer' with tenants for the new TSA standards introduced in April this year.

Telephone performance and complaints handling is not consistently monitored

- Better monitoring of performance on answering and dealing with telephone calls is underway and performance is also checked through an established group of resident 'mystery shoppers'.
- The complaints policy and procedure is being reviewed with the assistance of ComplaintsRgreat, following a tender process to appoint a specialist in this area.

Information collected about tenants has not been used to tailor and direct services

- A 'customer profiling' project to collect more accurate data about tenants was already underway, and C&R Associates has been appointed to carry out the survey, following a tender process.
- Another ongoing, major project is to procure a new housing management system, to record and access this information.

External auditing of gas safety inspections shows they are not meeting good practice levels

- 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.

- Gas servicing is being changed from an 11-month to a 10-month cycle to prevent any services from slipping past the legal requirement of a year.
- The existing audit arrangements have been reviewed and stepped up, and EnergyServ UK has been appointed as external auditor.

The Trust has not made sure that the inspected services are giving residents value for money

- While the report recognises that the Trust has good processes for procurement, it will continue to make progress in this area, particularly given the current economic climate, where efficiency is ever more important.
- A new strategy on value for money had already been developed and was approved by the Board in February. It is now being rolled out across the organisation, and there will be better monitoring of our performance, including more benchmarking of our services against other social landlords.

ENDS

Notes to editors

The **Audit Commission** is an independent watchdog, working with local authorities, arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations to improve their services through its audit, inspection and research functions. The Audit Commission's report on Somer Community Housing Trust can be found here:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Pages/bodypage.aspx?AIBId=1027&bodyname=Somer%20Community%20Housing%20Trust>

The **Tenant Services Authority** (TSA) is the new, independent regulator for affordable housing in England. It works with landlords and tenants to improve the standard of service for tenants and residents. It has taken a radically different approach to regulating a sector that provides homes for more than eight million people in over four million homes and has set out six clear standards focused on outcomes. www.tenantservicesauthority.org.

Somer Community Housing Trust is a social landlord providing 9,700 affordable rented homes. Based in Bath, it owns homes across Bath, Somerset, Wiltshire, and the Bristol area. The charity has an active social housing development programme and an investment programme in excess of £10million a year. The Trust is a member of Somer Housing Group. www.somer.org.uk.

Issued by

Bernard Allen, Communications Manager

Tel: 01225 366043

Email: bernard_allen@somer.org.uk