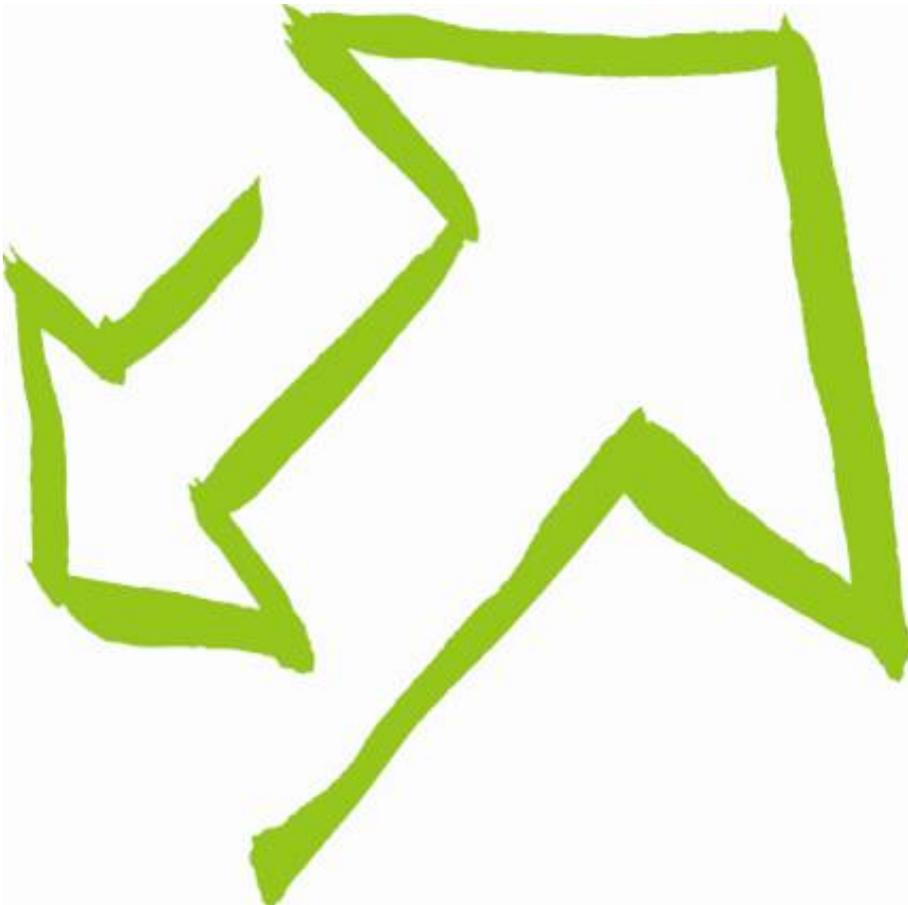


Short Notice Inspection

Responsive Repairs, Relets and Gas Servicing

Solon South West Housing
Association Limited

October 2009



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Housing Association Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

For housing associations our current inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41A and 41B of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003). Provisions contained in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 will amend our role and remit in due course, but are not yet in force. Our role is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact.

Short notice inspections (SNIs) have been developed to encourage improvements in the performance of housing associations (HAs) at delivering services to their customers – tenants and leaseholders. They focus on the outcomes for residents and work on the basis that associations will concentrate on improving services rather than preparing for an inspection, which could happen at any time.

The scope of each inspection of a housing association, undertaken by the Audit Commission has been agreed in consultation with the Tenant Services Authority. The Tenant Services Authority is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable as set out in its Regulatory Code.

The Association

- 1 Solon South West is a charitable housing association set up in 1974 to develop and manage affordable rented housing for people in housing need. It now provides over 1,000 homes in Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Mendip, Bath and the Forest of Dean. The majority are in Bristol with the largest concentration in Easton, Clifton, Southville, Bedminster and Totterdown.
- 2 The association employs 32 staff at its central Bristol office and works in some areas where there is a large black and minority ethnic community. Its purpose as set out in its mission statement is 'to deliver good quality, affordable homes and customer-focused housing services in a way that satisfies the housing and social needs of each of our customers'.

The scope of the inspection

- 3 The scope of this inspection focused on the following areas, which have been identified in consultation with the regulator.
 - Responsive repairs.
 - Relets (repairs to empty properties).
 - Gas servicing.
- 4 The inspection also included an assessment of how Solon South West Housing Association is addressing three cross-cutting themes: Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money within the services included in the inspection's scope.
- 5 We would like to thank the staff of Solon South West Housing Association who made us welcome and met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 7 to 10 July 2009.

Summary of our findings

- 6 We have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Assessment

How good is the service?	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access and customer care¹	Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diversity	Weaknesses outweigh strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Value for Money	Weaknesses outweigh strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Responsive repairs	Weaknesses outweigh strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relets (empty properties)	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gas Servicing	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance

- 7 We have asked Solon South West HA to consult with its tenants on the findings of this report and on the preparation of an action plan to implement our recommendations. We will publish Solon South West's response together with our assessment of the association's prospects for improvement within the next three months.

¹ Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money are assessed in relation to the service areas inspected only.

How good is the service?

Access and Customer Care in the service areas inspected

8 We found that weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in this area.

9 There are a number of key weaknesses.

- The association has a weak understanding of the needs of its customers with which to tailor its services.
- Services are not always delivered in a customer-focused way. The association does not routinely offer appointments outside normal office hours. This limits accessibility for customers who have commitments during normal office hours.
- Customers are not routinely involved in shaping and designing the services that they receive. By failing to involve customers in managing the services that they receive it is uncertain whether the association is delivering a service that meets the needs of its customer base.
- Information that is available in leaflets and on the website is incomplete and does not provide customers with what they may need to know about services..
- There are no service standards in place to help customers understand and challenge the level of service that they can expect to receive.

10 There are no significant strengths in this area.

Diversity in the service areas inspected

11 We found that weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

12 There are a number of weaknesses.

- The association is not properly considering all six nationally recognised strands of diversity. It therefore does not know whether all of its customers are receiving services equitably.
- None of the inspected services have been assessed from an equality and diversity perspective to ensure that they are delivered in a fair and equitable way.
- The association is not proactively working with contractors to ensure that they are committed to, and are delivering the association's expected equality and diversity standards.
- Services are not systematically tailored to the needs of vulnerable customers.

How good is the service?

13 There are some strengths.

- Staff understand key issues around equality and diversity and know how to access information and support, to allow them to provide services.
- The make-up of the Board and staff reflect the make up of the community within which Solon works which helps the organisation to understand the issues that some communities experience.

Responsive repairs

14 We found that weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

15 There are a number of key weaknesses.

- There remain concerns about the quality of performance data. Until recently, there have been significant data quality issues with conflicting information provided by the association and its contractors.
- Information for customers about responsive repairs is limited leaving customers unsure about repairs priorities and Right to Repair timescales².
- There are a high number of emergency and urgent works undertaken. The association has not analysed the reasons for this and is therefore unable to tackle this effectively.
- Investment plans including programmes and budgets have not been informed by a detailed understanding of repairs carried out. Although there is some evidence of responsive repairs pre-inspections informing strategy, failure to analyse the potential links means Solon may not have in place effective plans.
- Customers are not always able to make appointments at the time they report a repair.
- The emergency out-of-hours' service does not provide an easy and accessible way to report emergencies.

16 There are some recent and developing strengths.

- A high proportion of jobs are reported as completed within challenging timescales.
- There are now high levels of satisfaction among customers.
- An increasing proportion of day-to-day repair jobs are completed in a single visit reducing inconvenience to customers
- The association is taking some active steps to ensure work is completed to a high standard.

² Right to Repair - a scheme to ensure that repairs that may affect health and safety are completed within certain timescales.

Relets (empty properties)

17 We found that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

18 There are a number of strengths.

- Performance is strong with most empty properties repaired and ready to let quickly. Average relet time is currently 2.1 weeks which places Solon among the best performing 25 per cent of associations.
- Customer satisfaction with the condition of their new home is high, with 88 per cent expressing that they were very satisfied during the year to date.
- There are appropriate links between empty property repairs and the investment programme.

19 There are a number of weaknesses.

- The cost of repairing empty properties is high.
- The relet standard has not been developed or costed with customers and is not easily available to new or existing customers.
- The approach to helping new tenants with decorations is variable, with no publicity or formal policy to ensure that the service is delivered consistently.

Gas servicing

20 We found that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

21 There are a number of strengths.

- Performance on completing annual gas safety checks is strong. At the time of our inspection only four properties did not have valid safety certificates.
- There is a clear gas safety culture in place with all staff aware of the importance of safety checks and relevant information reported to the Board.
- Procedures are effective with all staff engaged in ensuring access and supporting effective information sharing between the association and its contractor.

22 There are a number of weaknesses.

- Gas servicing and safety information is not well advertised to tenants.
- Satisfaction is not measured and customers have not been consulted about appointment arrangements offered.
- The association is not robustly managing the gas safety service in some important areas. It is failing to ensure that all tenants are receiving a copy of their gas safety certificate, there are no regular quality assurance checks undertaken and there is no account taken of circumstances where customers are sleeping in rooms with gas appliances.

How good is the service?

Value for Money in the service areas inspected³

23 We found that weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

24 There are a number of weaknesses.

- There is no strategic approach to value for money or procurement in the services inspected.
- There has not been any detailed analysis of the costs, performance and satisfaction of individual service areas.
- There has been a lack of scrutiny of value for money either by the Board of Management or by customers.
- Added value anticipated as part of the new contact arrangements for responsive repairs not been delivered to date. This includes failing to offer appointments outside normal working hours.
- There are high proportions of emergency and urgent repairs.
- The involvement of residents in procurement processes has been limited.
- In some areas, IT equipment is not maximising efficiency. This leads to manual processes which waste staff resources.

25 There are some strengths.

- Staff are conscious of the need to identify and control costs and make efficiencies wherever possible, without detracting from the quality of service.
- Some efficiency gains have been realised, including savings on the new gas servicing contract and minimising rent loss through repairing and letting empty properties quickly.
- The new partnering contract is delivering added value by setting challenging targets for the completion of responsive repairs.

³ In assessing value for money we are looking at two questions: 'How do costs compare?' and 'How is value for money managed?'

Recommendations

26 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs⁴ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve outcomes for customers in the services inspected by:

- developing a comprehensive understanding of the profile of customers and using this to ensure that all services are accessible;
- monitoring and managing arrangements with contractors to ensure service delivery meets expected standards; and
- involving customers in designing the services that they receive, including setting standards and developing information.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers can access services that they have helped to design and which better meet their needs; and
- the services provided by your contractors also meet the needs of customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010.

⁴ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen the approach to equality and diversity in the services inspected by:

- monitoring services against the six diversity strands and acting on the findings;
- putting in to place a timetable of robust equality impact assessments and acting on their findings;
- working with contractors to ensure that they are complying with your expectations and delivering a fair and equitable service; and
- putting into place systems to ensure that vulnerable customers systematically receive services adjusted to their needs.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved leadership on equality and diversity;
- services will be demonstrably delivered equitably, with no inadvertent discrimination; and
- vulnerable customers will be supported more effectively.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010

Recommendation

R3 Improve outcomes for tenants in responsive repairs, relets and gas servicing by:

- offering appointments for repairs at the point that customers report them;
- developing more effective links between responsive repairs and planned and programmed maintenance;
- undertaking an analysis of your approach to variations and ensuring that your approach effectively supports operatives in undertaking repairs in a single visit;
- reviewing your approach to your emergency out of hours service including customer information, staff rotas and quality assurance;
- agreeing with customers an appropriately costed relet standard and ensuring that your approach to this includes a robust approach to supporting vulnerable customers;
- implementing a system of measuring satisfaction with gas servicing and acting on the outcome;
- ensuring that all tenants are provided with a copy of the gas safety certificate;
- implementing a robust approach to managing the performance of your contractors that includes the appropriate tools and activities to ensure that they are delivering a customer focussed and timely efficient service; and
- developing an appropriate and accurate suite of indicators, using reliable data to ensure that performance can be robustly challenged.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more repairs will be completed at a single visit;
- fewer repairs will be undertaken as emergencies or urgent;
- a consistent and transparent approach to the repairing of empty properties; and
- gas servicing will be undertaken to a high standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010

Recommendation

R4 Adopt a value for money approach in the areas inspected by:

- putting into place, with the involvement of customers and staff, a value for money strategy that clearly identifies your approach to embedding value for money principles;
- taking steps to understand the detailed costs, performance and satisfaction in the service areas inspected, how these compare to your peers, and acting on the findings; and
- ensuring that your approach to IT maximises efficiency by analysing current failings and establishing changes that need to be made, and putting into place a plan to deliver improvements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- high levels of understanding and awareness of value for money issues across the organisation;
- improved value for money and achievement of efficiency gains; and
- better outcomes for residents

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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