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William Sutton Homes is providing value for money to residents

William Sutton Homes (WSH) has more strengths than weaknesses across the services inspected according to a report released today by the independent Audit Commission.

Audit Commission inspectors reached this conclusion following a short-notice inspection of the housing association, which is a member of the Affinity Sutton Group. The inspection looked at how well WSH carries out repairs and gas servicing, and how effectively it involves its tenants in managing and improving services.

Hugh Boatswain, Audit Commission Lead Housing Inspector, said: 'William Sutton Homes has a strong approach to delivering value for money in its repairs service and is now also achieving this in its gas servicing programme. Residents have a range of opportunities for involvement and are influencing how their services are delivered. However, more needs to be done to ensure that the organisation understands the diversity of its residents so that it is able to shape services to meet their needs.'

Strengths include:

- Repairs are carried out promptly and generally completed at the first visit. Quality and cost effectiveness are key factors in the new repairs and gas contracts. The repairs partnering contract is on course to achieving significant savings in its first five years, while maintaining an appropriate standard of service.
- Additional services and improvements have been delivered as a result of efficiency gains. These include an annual property 'MOT' (inspection), and an enhanced community investment fund.
- Residents can easily access services by telephone or in person, and satisfaction with services is generally high.
- The percentage of properties with a current gas safety certificate has consistently exceeded 99.5 per cent, and appropriate steps are being taken to access properties without a current safety certificate.
- Residents are influencing the way services are delivered and have played a key role in improving the repairs service. Residents can choose from a menu of options for involvement, and there are appropriate resources in place to support residents who wish to be involved.

Weaknesses include:

- WSH has limited information on the profile of its residents and this information is not consistently accessible to the staff that may require it, and has not been used to tailor services overall. As a result, services may not be meeting the needs of all residents.
- There are limited service standards in place and inconsistent monitoring and reporting to residents of performance against those that are in place.
- The speed of answering repairs telephone calls needs to improve, with around 25% not answered within a 30-second target.

To help the service improve, inspectors made a number of recommendations. These include:

- Developing comprehensive service standards with residents, and publicising performance against those standards.
- Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the tenant profile and using this to ensure that services are accessible and meeting need.
- Improving the management and performance of complaints handling.

Copies of the report are available from William Sutton Homes or from the Audit Commission website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) is the affordable housing regulator in England and works with the Audit Commission on the inspection of housing associations. The TSA commissions the Audit Commission to carry out inspections and the results are used by the TSA in its overall assessment of housing association performance.

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Notes to editors

William Sutton Homes (WSH) is a registered charitable subsidiary of The Affinity Sutton Group. WSH was formed by the merger of Ridgehill Housing Association and William Sutton Housing Association in 2007. William Sutton Housing Association was formerly the asset-owning parent of the William Sutton Group which merged with the Affinity Homes Group to form the Affinity Sutton Group in October 2006. In September 2009 WSH employed 285 staff.

WSH owns 24,362 homes throughout England and is active in more than 50 local authority areas. The Affinity Sutton Group provides financial and corporate services to WSH and, from 12 October 2009, has delivered housing management services. The Group is in the process of implementing a 'Transition' project, which aims to amalgamate and streamline the approach to service delivery across its subsidiaries. The Audit Commission introduced short-notice inspections for housing associations to give inspectors a clearer and more realistic view of the services that tenants receive.

Associations are given just five days notice of the inspection before their services are rated on a four point scale - from 'strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses' down to 'weaknesses outweigh strengths'.

Within two months of the publication of this report, William Sutton Homes will provide the Audit Commission with a plan showing how it will implement the report's recommendations. The Commission will then assess and publish William Sutton Homes' prospects for improvement.

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.

Further details about the role of the Audit Commission can be obtained from www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

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