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Date: September 2009

Dear Resident,

## **Re - The results of the short notice inspection at Orwell Housing Association**

A team from the Audit Commission has recently inspected some of the housing services provided by your landlord. This letter tells you what we found.

We looked at how Orwell improves and maintains tenants' homes and concentrated on the following three areas:

- how well Orwell maintains and improves properties (this is about major work, such as kitchens, bathrooms and heating systems);
- how quickly and to what standards it re-lets empty homes to new tenants;
- how well Orwell makes sure all homes receive an annual gas service.

We also asked the following questions. These are called 'cross-cutting themes', as they apply to all of the services we inspect:

- how easy it is for tenants to access these services;
- what tenants think of Orwell's customer care;
- how Orwell caters for different peoples' needs; and
- whether it provides value for your money in these services.

Overall we found that Orwell does things well. We found strengths in all of the areas we looked at, with Orwell doing particularly well in the way its lets empty homes and arranges for gas servicing to be carried out. The main area needing improvement was around how improvement works to residents' homes are decided and agreed. Below we tell you about some of the key things we found:

### **1. In general (the cross cutting themes)**

We found that Orwell offers its residents a high standard of customer care, with easy access to services and good quality information available. It seeks and listens to residents' views and makes improvements based on these. Orwell also uses the information its holds about residents to meet their individual needs. Progress is being made in improving value for money, with savings made in the way that Orwell chooses and arranges the contracts to carry out improvement works to homes. However, some of the service standards that residents can expect are still new and Orwell does not yet know how well it is achieving these. Services have not been looked at in detail to make sure that all customers have fair access to services, and that no person or group of people is disadvantaged because of their particular needs.

### **2. Major works and improvements to residents' homes**

Orwell is carrying out improvements to residents' homes to a high quality. It provides good information about the work that will take place in the home and has agreed service standards so that residents have a clear understanding of what is involved. However, because programmes of work have only been developed on a year by year basis there is no longer term information for residents about what work they can expect to their homes in the future.

Residents are not involved enough in deciding what standard their homes should reach, agreeing what sort of work should be carried out, and where the money should be spent.

### **3. Empty homes**

Orwell repairs and lets empty properties very quickly. It has recently reviewed and improved the quality standard for letting empty properties with a group of residents, and properties are now being let to meet this standard. The repair work is carried out efficiently with costs kept to a minimum. New tenants told us they were happy with the standard of their homes. The main improvement needed is to involve residents in inspecting the quality of properties when they are ready to be let to make sure standards are maintained.

### **3. Gas servicing**

The arrangements for carrying out gas servicing to residents homes work well. There is good customer care with flexible appointments and fitting servicing around the needs of residents. Orwell makes sure that all of its homes receive a gas service once a year and, where access has not been given, takes action to minimise any safety risks. To improve the service further Orwell has recently introduced better arrangements to quality check the servicing work.

To help your landlord improve its service to all residents, we have made the following recommendations:

- Developing systems to show how well service standards are being met and reporting these to customers
- Developing longer term programmes of work with residents and publicising these; and
- Increasing resident involvement in monitoring services and specifically in whether standards are met for major improvement works and empty properties.

The report is available on our website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing). You can also find further information about housing inspections there. Alternatively the association will be able to let you have a copy of the report.

### **3. Next steps**

We have asked Orwell to work with its residents over the next few weeks to develop an action plan showing how it intends to implement our recommendations. Once we have their finished action plan we will consider the likelihood of Orwell Housing Association improving the inspected services. We will then publish our final report. We hope to publish this by December 2009.

The Association's regulator, the Tenant Services Authority will work with them to make sure that the recommendations in the inspection report are acted upon and improvements to your service are delivered.

I hope this letter has been of interest to you.

Yours faithfully

Trish Nixon  
Principal Inspector  
Audit Commission

CC Tenant Services Authority regulator  
Orwell Housing Association board members

The Audit Commission uses a four point scale for judging the quality of services, as follows:

- Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses;
- Strengths outweigh weaknesses;
- A balance of strengths and weaknesses; and
- Weaknesses outweigh strengths.