

Tenants Leading Change case study – Soha Housing

Key facts

- Soha Housing, owning and managing about 6,000 homes in areas around South Oxfordshire, was set up in 2005 with a strong tenant involvement structure
- in the last year, Soha has recorded £655K savings where tenants were involved in repairs and planned maintenance retendering exercises
- tenant involvement has led to considerable service benefits in relation to repairs, voids, complaints, improved services for disabled tenants, support and communications on welfare reform
- Soha considers that tenant inspections and face to face communications with tenants has had an impact on increases in tenant satisfaction since 2005
- Soha also considers that there are several other benefits that come from tenant involvement – particularly better communications and individual benefits for those involved

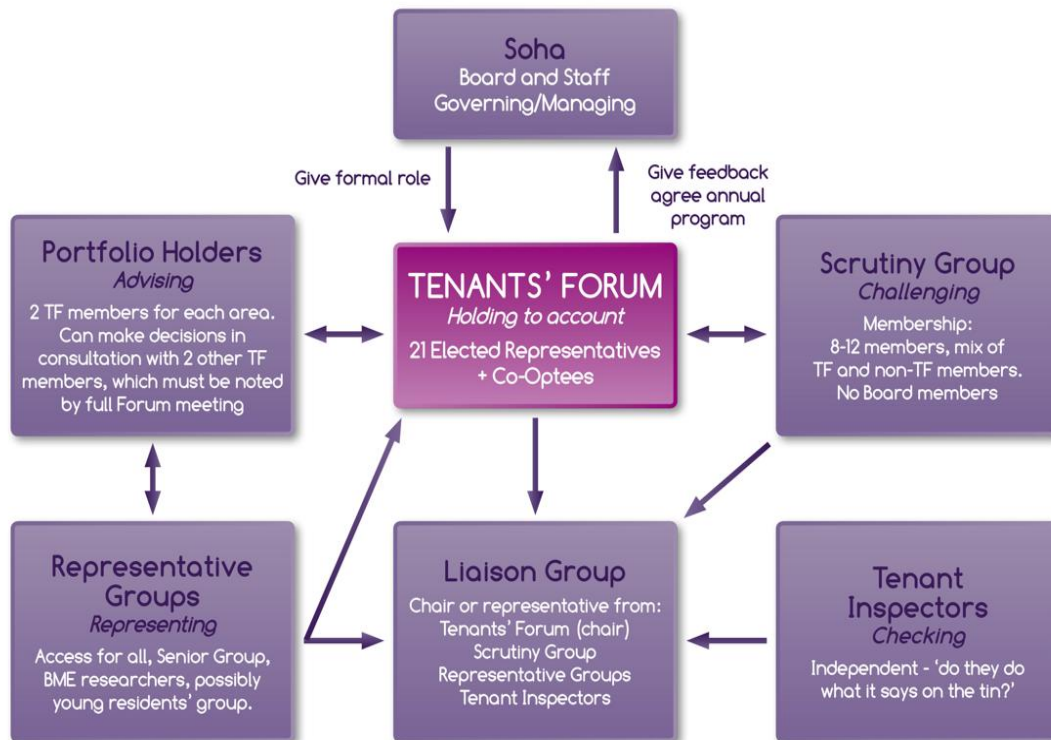
Established in 2005, Soha Housing owns and manages about 6,000 homes. With an annual turnover of £35m, Soha has a development programme building 300 new homes each year in Oxford, South Oxfordshire, Swindon, Vale of White Horse, West Oxfordshire, High Wycombe and Cotswold District.

Background



Formed from stock transfer from South Oxfordshire District Council, Soha has been built on a strong tenant dynamic, including the five tenants on its 12 member Board. Soha lists having “highly satisfied customers” and “empowering and maximising the involvement of residents to make a difference” amongst its aims. Soha's involvement structure is

made up of an elected 21 member Tenants' Forum, a recruited Tenant Inspectors Group and a Tenant Scrutiny Group consisting of 8 to 12 representatives either from the Tenants Forum or elsewhere.



The Tenants Forum is the lead tenant body and the Board seeks their views of major issues like the Corporate Plan and policies prior to them being considered by the Board. Drawn from the Forum, a system of Portfolio holders enables tenant representatives to champion and work with service managers on particular areas of business.



Using robust systems (such as staff, tenant and manager interviews, desktop review, focus group and surveys and site visits), the Tenant Inspectors check Soha's delivery of service standards – “do they do what it says on the tin?”. The Tenant Scrutiny Group challenges Soha's Board and Management at a strategic level, asking “is it the right tin?” For example, they were instrumental in Soha's decision not

to issue flexible tenancies. The group decides with the directorate what they will review and reports to the Board. It has an action tracker to enable it to review implementation of its recommendations, with an escalation process for disputes and implementation delays.

Financial benefits

Tenants were involved in procurement decisions for repairs and planned maintenance contracts which led to savings of **£655,000**. The grounds maintenance contract went through tenant surveying and focus groups at an early stage to ensure tenant views were central to drawing up the specification. Specific tenant oversight of the process was through one of the Tenants Forum's Portfolio Holders, and specification and quality assessment of tenders was through a panel with an equal split of tenants and officers.

In general, Soha considers that it could not afford to resource the volunteer time that tenants give to the organisation. Soha has plans to cost these savings in the future.

Service benefits

Soha identified a number of service benefits that have developed as a result of tenant involvement:

- tenant involvement during tendering led to a number of improvements in the repairs specification, including school run appointments, resulting in a more customer focused service. Mystery shopping highlighted customer service areas for improvement, leading to training and improvements to the out of hours service
- a scrutiny review, based on survey research, improved Soha's complaints process. The resulting new procedure, reduced from three to two stages and introducing more tenant involvement and better early resolution, has halved the number of formal complaints. Tenants now get complaints dealt with promptly, bureaucracy is cut for tenants and staff, but Soha retains a robust process to put things right.
- both the Inspectors and Scrutiny Group insistently raised the need for informal complaints to be consistently logged. This led to a new *Voice of the Customer* project where problems are identified as runners (on going), repeaters (once a week issues) and rarities (one off issues). Feedback from tenants who call Soha is now consistently captured, empowering and enabling the Customer Services team to spot potentially serious issues and to raise less urgent but recurring issues.
- the Access for All Group helped develop the Disability Equality Scheme in 2007 which led to better information being held (profiling data held for more than 90% of tenants) and services tailored to best match tenant needs. Satisfaction with repairs for disabled tenants has increased from 74% to 87% since introduction of the scheme. The group has led to many other improvements, including a more accessible office and meeting

environment, better communication about events, and increased budgets for adaptations. The group is currently considering introducing part-time Occupational Therapist posts. Tenants contributed to Soha's Single Equality Strategy *So what's it got to do with you?* identifying priorities for different groups. Having been part of Soha's formal launch of the strategy, Access for All, the Seniors Group, and BME, younger and LGBT tenants feel an ownership of the strategy and continue to monitor its progress.

- through tenants being more likely to be open with other tenants, tenant inspections, such as post repairs phone contacts and void reviews have led to improved voids cleaning and procedures (for example, chimneys are swept, carbon monoxide tests carried out and fires lit in voids with solid fuel fires) and grounds maintenance performance.
- Tenants have participated closely in Soha's *we're here to help* response to Welfare Reform, including through a Standing Group established in 2012, a Tenant Welfare Champion, word of mouth research and information campaign and reviews by both the Tenant Inspectors and Scrutiny groups. Results from this approach have included falling and top quartile rent arrears, 52 tenants out of 310 affected by the Bedroom Tax transferred, and 88% of general needs tenants think Soha has done a good job in keeping them informed about changes to benefits.
- ASB complaints had risen in Berinsfield village following reduction of youth provision. Discussion with local residents led to Soha funding a short project of street sports. Youth input to the village plan and a short film setting out their aspirations and frustrations led to a successful ongoing funding application. The result of this activity is that there have been no further reported cases of street ASB or dispersal orders.

Tenant satisfaction

Since 2005 tenant satisfaction rates have increased significantly:

	2005	2006	2007	2010	2012	2014
% overall satisfaction	77	77	84	91	90	88
% satisfied that Soha listens	54	54	54	71	73	76

The question about whether Soha listens to tenants has changed, but has remained similar. Figures are accurate to +/- 3% with a 95% confidence rate

Soha considers that satisfaction improvements are linked to increasing tenant involvement, the introduction of Tenant Inspectors and tenant scrutiny – “overall satisfaction and satisfaction that we listen to tenants both increased significantly when we made a strategic decision to invest in and focus on Involvement. These figures had been stagnant for a number of years. A Board paper *Maximising Resident Involvement* from 2007 notes a number of measures that will indicate the success or otherwise of increasing resources to

a still modestly sized team. There is certainly a correlation with this step change and tenant satisfaction”.



Particular work has been done with tenants to understand a lower than average tenant satisfaction with quality of the home. This has included surveys, regression analysis of deeper phone conversations and input from involved residents. This resulted in changes that have included capping the lifespan of components and more and

better communication about what tenants can expect, including a photo diary showing new components being fitted. The outcome from this is that Soha's 2014 STAR survey shows satisfaction with home quality of home has risen from 83% to upper quartile 89%.

Other benefits

Tenants have played an important role in Soha's communications, including:

- tenants started producing Soha's Annual Report in 2008 – picking the agency to use, writing copy and generally telling the story, which immediately resulted in a threefold increase in feedback forms received back. Its engaging and informative nature means that it is read by tenants and improves Soha's accountability to tenants
- a similar approach is taken regarding Soha's Tenant Times – with similar outcomes
- active use of social media by some involved tenants presents a positive impression of Soha as a landlord
- media work by local groups, such as the Gainsborough Residents' Association in Henley, has led to positive news stories in papers that would only include information from local people rather than organisations. This group were one example of the success of Soha's Community Action Plans in their aim to tackle priority issues in individual neighbourhoods. Physical improvements delivered following consultation built resident confidence in their ability to get things done and, with Soha's support, their association was set up. It runs its own surveys, organises planting and physical improvements that have led to prizes for the appearance of the neighbourhood and holds community events bringing people together.

Satisfaction with the area as a place to live has improved and Soha's reputation is enhanced by its support for the association.

- the Seniors Group contributed to the development of Soha's Older Persons Strategy in partnership with Age UK, and now monitors its delivery. The strategy has resulted in new services and activities, such as chair based exercise, improving tenant health and wellbeing. The group also plays a role in communication with older persons (eg. hosting an older person health and wellbeing day and initiating a sheltered housing newsletter). It works closely with Soha to take decisions about unsustainable accommodation and have played an advocacy role with tenants living in schemes due to close, helping them to understand their options. This has resulted in positive moves and decants, with many people reporting an improved quality of life.

Soha considers that work, volunteering, self-confidence, digital inclusion and tackling isolation are part of its business. The following are cited as examples of impact in this area:

- on leaving Tenant Scrutiny Group in the last year, two members had joined Soha's Board, one since gaining employment, two others had gained employment and one had gone onto study at degree level and has since gained employment – “the credit that individuals give to their involvement is some demonstration of the potential impact on helping people achieve their aspirations”.
- “the testimonies of involved tenants as to what they get out of involvement are humbling. One woman talks about her volunteering as one way of asserting herself against lazy media stereotypes of social housing tenants and further her pride in seeing people have easier access (physically or through policy changes) because of a piece of work she's done”.
- “the growth in skills and confidence is quite staggering”. Several tenants have spoken in public for the first time through their involvement with Soha, including one volunteer who now regularly addresses national conferences.
- “the (justified) pride that involved tenants feel in their work, the friendships made and the formal and informal mentoring”.