



## Helping Build Communities in Oxfordshire



Report from a Conference  
Held on Friday 30th June 2006

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**Soha Housing aims to be excellent at providing and managing homes and services in communities where people want to live.**

**It has long been recognised that housing is about more than bricks and mortar. *Helping Build Communities in Oxfordshire* was a chance to hear from Jon Rouse, Chief Executive of the Housing Corporation. It was also an opportunity to see practical expression of a housing association working in partnership to achieve sustainable communities.**

**This report is available for download from [www.soha.co.uk](http://www.soha.co.uk).**

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## Keynote Speaker: Jon Rouse, Chief Executive, Housing Corporation

### The national agenda

Jon outlined the national government agenda, quoting instructions received by Ruth Kelly from the Prime Minister upon her ministerial appointment to the Department for Communities and Local Government. These were:

- Empowering local communities
- Integration and cohesion
- Ensuring that all citizens and communities share the benefits of economic growth
- Tackling social exclusion and developing the role of the voluntary sector

Jon gave an overview of how affordable housing is provided: the roles of the Treasury, the Housing Corporation, the DCLG, and the Audit Commission,

through to the RSL sector. Affordability, he noted, is a major issue in South Oxfordshire, where house prices are 4.57 times income. This affordability issue is heightened in the region, because there are no neighbouring districts which are less than a ratio of 1:4 (income: house prices). The Housing Corporation is responding to this need for affordable housing in a number of ways.

These include an intelligent approach in rural areas, for example supporting new partnerships, such as rural housing partnerships, and providing a regulatory framework that does not curtail innovation. The Corporation want to encourage those

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associations with a good financial and management basis, such as Soha, which has recently been recognised as a low risk association. This is testament to their financial management and performance.

### The Elton Review

Jon expanded on the Elton Review, an independently chaired study looking at reducing the regulatory burden on associations. The Corporation think the burden should be reduced by around 10%, so long as all associations are ‘pressing on the pedal’ of greater resident involvement. Jon recognised that Soha are already setting a good pace on that. However, he reminded delegates that around 20% of associations with over 250 units do not have a Resident Involvement Strategy. He urged these to take on best practice from associations such as Soha and Bromford Housing Group.

### Efficiency

The drive for efficiency is very much about trying to get more for less. The Corporation wants to see more being achieved for less without any reduction in service provision. Jon stressed that this is not about the government clawing finances back, but rather reinvesting savings in services. Efficiency is about freeing up additional resources. Jon outlined both the increased specialisation and the diversification of Housing Association services. Specialisation in that many associations are starting to offer specialist services throughout the sector. For example, Soha might see if elements of the CLASP approach could be shared with other associations. Diversity, as associations begin to stretch into areas of social business and entrepreneurialism.

The National Affordable Housing Programme is 60% rent, 40% other provision, including social homebuy. Jon acknowledged that this is sometimes a controversial notion, but stressed how it differs from, for example, right to buy, which ate into stock levels of social housing. Where people are willing and able to buy a share in their home, social homebuy offers an option whereby the government isn’t subsidising their rent.

### Myth-busting



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There is a myth that the Housing Corporation is concerned only with major, strategic developments. However, Jon stressed that many schemes funded by the Housing Corporation are relatively small scale, on a local basis, as part of a mixed development and that 80% of these are on brownfield.

The programme includes doubling the scale of supported housing programmes over the next 2 years (14% of resources). This reflects demographic change. The programme also specified a very high quality, with all new homes having to reach the Eco-Homes 'very good' standard.

### **The local picture**

The allocations for South Oxfordshire are:

- £16.7m for 336 homes
- 263 homes for social rent, 73 homes for Newbuild Homebuy
- 8th highest LA allocation in the region
- Soha received £3.3m as part of the Bromford Partnership
- Bid submitted for Didcot as part of New Growth Points Initiative

### **Successful neighbourhoods**

Jon suggested 3 key aspects to making a successful neighbourhood: design, management and mix. He stressed that he feels management is the most important of these. Emphasising that existing stock, tenants and households are going to determine whether communities succeed over next 30 years, Jon mentioned places he had seen which were appallingly designed, with one tenure, but had fantastic management and they worked as communities. He had, on the other hand, never seen a community that's brilliantly designed but poorly managed that is successful.

"In achieving sustainable communities, we mustn't lose sight of existing stock, of the work of existing communities, diversifying Housing Association services and involving tenants to direct priorities".

### **Design**

Jon stressed the importance of safe environments. We know enough about community safety for there to be no excuses for poor design in this area. It is important to involve local people, who know from the experience of living in an area what will and won't work.

Open spaces are another important factor. Great public spaces make great places to live. Housing Associations are the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest owners of urban public space in the country, yet rarely talk about the management of public space. This is an issue of critical importance.

### **Management**

Having residents deeply involved in the management process is of crucial importance. This doesn't necessarily mean managing themselves, but certainly Associations need to be listening, and residents having a say on spend. All Housing Associations should now have tenants on their governing boards.

Jon stressed the importance of community involvement. The Housing Corporation Gold Awards have this year taken on Community Engagement as one of their themes. He encouraged Soha and other Associations present to think about applying for the awards.

### **The future**

Jon outlined some key issues for the future, including:

- New Regional Housing Strategies
  - Sites – capacity, availability, strategic versus windfall
  - Continuing quest to find ways to increase the supply of new housing
  - Partnership Programme, Grants to non-RSLs, EP programme
  - HA diversification
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## Carol Hall, Director of Customer Services, Soha Housing

Carol outlined the work that Soha has undertaken in helping rebuild a village, Berinsfield. This is a self-contained village of 1000 homes, 350 of which are owned by Soha. When the regeneration work started, Berinsfield was the most deprived rural ward in Oxfordshire and there were high rates of vandalism and fear. However, there was good community spirit. The work started with the re-development of 59 flats. However, Soha wanted to do more than just 'bricks and mortar' development; they wanted to help support community development. The project was an ideal opportunity to involve residents and to take an innovative approach. Overall, Soha wanted to change the perception of Berinsfield as a place to live.

### How we did it

Carol outlined the process of consultation with residents and other stakeholders, setting up the Berinsfield Residents' Association and the Advisory Group, working with the Parish Council and Ruskin College to support capacity building for residents, and obtaining an Innovation and Good Practice Grant (IGP) from the Housing Corporation to establish a community business to manage Soha's tenancies. South Oxfordshire District Council were also involved, providing a grant of £0.5 million for environmental improvements.

### Was it worth it?

For Community	For Soha
Improved environment and accommodation – nicer place to live	Enhanced asset value
Increased community capacity	Increased resident satisfaction & involvement
A catalyst for more resources for the village	Developed our regeneration skills
Better direct links with housing management through BCB	Improved image and influence

## Mark Williams, Director, Berinsfield Community Business (BCB)

The BCB is a Company Limited by Guarantee, with a volunteer board. There are 9 staff; 8 from Berinsfield. BCB works in partnership with, but is independent from, Soha. Its concept is to earn money from outside the village and to spend money in the village. BCB's objectives are:

- To provide sustainable employment & training for local people
- To improve the quality of services provided to the community
- To enhance the local environment in and around the village

From a turnover in its first year of £145,000, BCB has increased to a projected turnover of £300,000 this year. It has had an inconsistent profit, but has a target profit of £20,000 for this financial year. Soha, and the district and county councils each gave a start up grant, but the business has been self-sustaining since then. As well as the housing management contract for Soha's Berinsfield properties, BCB now provides services for a number of parish councils, other Housing Associations, and delivers Soha's contract cleaning for the Didcot area.

For Soha, the benefits include: higher tenant satisfaction, the chance to try something new and see if it works, meeting their iN business for communities agenda, and stimulating resident involvement

BCB has had a number of successes, including controlled growth in employment, and improved resident satisfaction. However, there have also been challenges: the need to focus on financial survival, ensuring independence and shifting away from housing as its only business. Mark sees the future of the business as being in continued growth and partnership.

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## Freda Griffiths, Soha resident representative

Freda outlined her perspective on the Community Learning and Support Partnership (CLASP) project, as a resident representative on the steering group.

At the start, it wasn't always easy to grasp the different 'buzz words' and concepts flying around, such as 'capacity building' and 'social capital'. Freda outlined a number of events that took place, including Neighbourhood Listen events, to find out residents' opinions and concerns, mapping existing provision of training, and holding a residents' open day at the Kassam Stadium. There were lessons to be learned from each event held, and lots of ideas and opinions to feed into the project.

As a result of the events, training was organised with Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action (OCVA) for local voluntary groups, including Residents' Associations. This included communication skills, legal and constitutional issues, and committee skills.

There was also an ICT aspect to the CLASP project. This included computers being supplied in sheltered schemes. A partnership with local schools was set up. Didcot 6th Form provided mentors to help train residents in using the computers. The Oxfordshire Rural Laptop Project also came along to a number of events, where the taster sessions inspired several of our residents to seek out training in their local area.

It was sad when we came to the end of the CLASP initiative. Saying farewell to Alan, the project worker was, Freda said, like losing a good friend and ally when there was so much more to do, we had only just got started. He left us with good contacts and a sound base for future Community Capacity Building!!

That, pointed out Freda, is just what we had been doing all along. Only on reflection could it really be seen and recognized how much CAPACITY had been BUILT INTO THE COMMUNITY. CLASP was about grasping onto something, an enriched society with its residents gaining in confidence to take on new challenges because they had acquired the skills to do just that.

## John Ord, Service Manager, Community Learning, Oxon County Council

John outlined the concept of the 'digital divide'; the gap between those with regular, effective access to digital technologies and those without. He emphasises that the digital divide is related to social inclusion and equality of opportunity.

He described some of the actions the County Council were taking in order to tackle this form of social exclusion. These include employing 3 learning co-ordinators for areas of Oxford City, in order to map and link provision and to take a co-ordinated approach to learning. John spoke about the work that had taken place in Berinsfield to provide a 'mentor' who drops in regularly to the IT hub to offer advice and support, rather than an ongoing course.

There is evidence, John went on to say, that links computer access with better educational outcomes. For example, there is a strong correlation between having a computer at home and achieving 5 GCSEs. This adds to the compelling case for agencies to work in partnership in order to tackle the digital divide.

John was pleased that Soha continues to work in partnership with other organisations to try and improve access for its residents. Partnership work has got to be central to finding a solution. He called for organisations to share resources for training and community development, and for housing associations to get involved in discussions about learning. Planning for innovation in IT is an essential priority, emphasised John, and we need to find ways of engaging those people remote from an increasingly digital society. Data sharing is important. Social cohesion is vital in underpinning access to learning and other community and personal development activities. John suggested that Housing Associations work with other providers to look at housing allocations, tenancy movements and building developments to help construct a community building ethos.

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## Paul Rennard, Director of Finance and Resources, Soha Housing

Paul outlined the work Soha has been doing in relation to Residents and IT. The most important areas that we have looked at are:

1. Access to equipment
2. Knowledge, skills, experience to use PCs
3. Using these skills to access Housing Association services
4. Using the skills to help community and involvement projects

Through an annual survey, Soha knows the % of tenants who have access to the internet at home. This was 13% in 2001 and 26% in 2005, with 7% expecting to gain access in the next year. This compares with 63% nationally.

The reasons for a landlord addressing this include: working with communities and addressing social issues, not just providing properties; increasing access to services; acknowledging this as an issue of quality of life for our residents.

Paul outlined some of the work Soha has undertaken, including linking with the rural laptop project, open days, links with local schools to provide mentors for residents, access to courses, and trialling providing laptops in sheltered schemes.

There were problems with some of these initiatives. One off taster sessions on computers do not address longer term issues, and many people do not want formal courses. Providing computers in sheltered schemes is fine until the equipment goes wrong and there is no-one with the technical knowledge to put it right.

Current and future developments in this work include providing more PCs in sheltered schemes, but with clearer lines of support. Soha are also employing a Community and Computer Support Worker to provide regular mentoring and signposting to courses if required.

Paul went on to address the use of IT by residents in accessing Housing Association services. The point is to provide better services, more accessibly, with our main emphasis being on our website. Soha has involved residents in the development of its new website from the beginning of the process, including tendering for the designers, thinking carefully about how the site would be used, and carrying out lots of testing. Paul outlined some of the problems there have been in achieving an innovative, well designed site. However, he was pleased to say that the output has been a new website which is service-orientated and easy to use. Phase 2 will take the website development further.



Paul concluded with the launch of the new website, which can be seen at [www.soha.co.uk](http://www.soha.co.uk).

## Residents' Open Day

In the afternoon, more residents came to the venue to have a go on the internet, learn about Soha's new website, to find out about community learning in Oxfordshire, and to have their say on Soha's Customer Charter.



We were particularly pleased to have pupils from Didcot 6th Form to mentor residents in using the computers.

Congratulations to Andy Dunsmore from Berinsfield, who won the prize draw laptop!

89% of residents thought it was an interesting day.

The most popular activity was computers—83% of attendees enjoyed using the computers.

72% enjoyed the stalls and the chance to meet other residents.

67% enjoyed the 'Have your Say' session.

33% of attendees would like to get more involved.

"I thought it was one of the best meetings I have attended."

"More computer training please!"