How we’re doing

Our performance for 1 January to 31 March 2017

Overall satisfaction*

Tenants satisfied with Soha’s service
Annual target: 90%
What we did: 92%

Your views*

Tenants satisfied that Soha listens to their views and acts upon them
Annual target: 81%
What we did: 82%

Arrears

Arrears for current tenants
Annual target: 2.0%
What we did: 1.9%

Repairs

Average time to complete repairs
Annual target: 8.0 days
What we did: 8.5 days

Repairs fixed at the first visit
Annual target: 94%
What we did: 88.5%

Anti-social behaviour (ASB)

ASB case resolution rate
Annual target: 97%
What we did: 98%

Tenants satisfied with the way Soha handled their ASB case
Annual target: 90%
What we did: 88%

Letting homes

Average re-let time for all homes
Annual target: 20 days
What we did: 16 days

*based on MEL rolling telephone survey
Welcome to Hometalk

20 years ago, in July 1997, Soha Housing began life as an independent, non-profit housing association.

Since then, I believe we have played an important role in the local area and now provide over 6,500 homes for people who need them.

Over the last couple of years I’ve mentioned the changes in the world of housing many times. At the time of writing, we are in the run up to a General Election and I’m pleased that housing is taking a central place in manifestos and policy announcements. By the time you read this, we will know the result and perhaps some of the impact on housing associations and tenants.

Whatever the result, Soha will still be here. We will still be making a difference to local communities and people and we will continue to involve you and listen to your views.

We support communities to work well together and take great pride in engaging with tenants and residents who help us to improve services.

That is why we have been consulting with residents about extending membership to all tenants, including shared owners and leaseholders.

I am delighted that we’ve had more than 300 responses, with many of you interested in finding out more about becoming a member. As I write, the Board has agreed to put together a proposed change to Soha’s rules that will give tenants a secure and long-term right to have a voice in how we are run.

As we celebrate 20 years of Soha, I hope these plans set the course for another 20 years of working together and making a difference to our communities.
Free advice in your community

You may have walked past a Citizens Advice office many times but never been sure exactly what this free service offers. To find out more, Hometalk caught up with Liz Johnson of the South and Vale Citizens Advice network.

“We were set up in 1939 to give advice to servicemen when the welfare state was in its infancy. These days we offer advice on just about any money, legal or consumer problem, whether by phone or in person. You can be sure that our service will always be independent, impartial and confidential. We also have an online advice guide you can search.

“About half of the enquiries can be answered on the spot – for example how to complain about faulty goods, or how to get a blue badge for parking. We can also issue referrals to the local foodbank where needed. Whether a client is asking a question, considering their options or facing an actual crisis, we aim to offer a solution.

“Sometimes help with filling out forms is all the support a client needs to face what seems at the outset to be a daunting system. Quite often, the fact they have come to Citizens Advice to prepare for assessment panels or court convinces the authorities that the applicant in front of them has taken their problem seriously – and is genuinely working to do something about it.

“Citizens Advice staff have lots of training – it takes up to six months before a new recruit sees a client on their own. During that time, they get training in content, and ‘softer’ skills, such as being a good listener. Some staff are paid but most are volunteers, and come from all backgrounds. Even unpaid staff can become our in-house expert on something that interests them. For instance, they may have a real passion for sorting out employment issues. The 350 Citizens Advice walk-in branches, the phone and webchat services are each backed by a national advice team so there is lots of support to call on.

“The kind of person who works for Citizens Advice is very public-minded and doesn’t do it for the thanks. Even so, it’s fantastic when a client finds the time to update us on how they’re getting on. Here’s a note that came in this month: ‘This is to pass on very big thanks for being so very helpful. You have a big heart and it shows in the work you do. You make life easier for a lot of people and your support and kindness can’t be put into words.’

You can speak to your local Citizens Advice on 03444 111 444. If the advisor suggests a face-to-face appointment, they can book it right away at your most convenient Citizens Advice branch.

If you would like to volunteer for Citizens Advice, start with a visit to www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/support-us/volunteering. There is also information there about how to help fundraise for your local branch. With the exception of some grants from local Councils, the charity relies on public donations to keep going.

Liz Johnson: “Whether a client is asking a question, considering their options or facing an actual crisis, we aim to offer a solution.”

If you are a Soha resident with benefits concerns, please do tell our welfare team here. It helps them to help you get your entitlement or challenge decisions.

Email housing@soha.co.uk or call them on 0800 014 15 45 (Freephone).
Where does it all go?

20p of every pound of rental income we expect to receive this coming year will be spent on improvements to Soha homes.

Each year we upgrade bathrooms, kitchens, windows and similar according to a schedule. We also carry out vital cyclical maintenance such as gas servicing and electrical testing.

The Government has set a basic standard for all landlords for the quality of the homes they provide. The Decent Home Standard defines a decent home as one that is wind and water tight, warm and has modern facilities.

At Soha we wanted to go beyond the basic standard so, working with tenants, we developed a higher specification, which we called Decent Homes Plus. For example, your external doors will pass the Government standard if they are single glazed and timber providing they are in reasonable condition – but Soha makes sure that doors are double glazed with high quality locking systems. You can find out the details of all the projects we plan to do in your area (not just doors and windows) on the Soha website at www.soha.co.uk/planned-works or by calling Customer Services on Freephone 0800 014 15 45.

One of the major projects in anyone’s home is upgrading the heating. Mrs C of Cholsey (pictured) had a new boiler and all six radiators replaced last year. She is very happy with the result: the new radiators are more compact and she has hot water on demand. Her large old boiler has been replaced with a smaller, more energy-efficient model, so she has a bit more space, too. “The contractors were so pleasant and hardworking and there was no disruption at all. All I did was supply them with cups of tea and they got everything done in just one day, cleaning up after themselves nicely, too!”

Update on water rates charging

If you are one of the 3,400 tenants who pay your water rates to Soha, you will have had a letter inviting comments on our proposal to pass collection back to Thames Water. The rest of our 6,600 households already pay Thames Water direct.

52 people commented when we consulted you. 31 had concerns and we have spoken to them. Six supported it. 15 of you had further questions which we have also answered. In total, fewer than 1% of our eligible tenants said they wanted us to carry on collecting water rates as currently. As a result, our Board has taken the decision to end the arrangement where Soha collects payments on behalf of Thames Water. **This means that from April 2018 we will pass collection to Thames Water. They will continue to charge you at the same rate you pay to Soha. You might also be eligible for a water meter.** Depending on your circumstances many tenants are better off on a water meter. Soha and Thames Water will be writing to the tenants who pay their water bill to Soha again soon, explaining how we will seamlessly pass the accounts back to Thames Water.
Out & about

During the Easter holidays, we organised an Eggstravaganza for families at Sutton Courtenay Environmental Education Centre. We found out about all the amazing lives of egg-laying animals and insects on a trail and completed a challenge. There was den-building and great craft activities on offer, too! Please let us know if you would like to join us when we run this event again in the summer: ri@soha.co.uk or 0800 14 15 45 (Freephone).

The first Tenants’ Forum of what was to become Soha Housing got together on 20 May 1996. Here are this year’s Forum members celebrating turning 21!

On 22 July, we’re at Benson Village Hall with a Fun Day for residents to celebrate Soha’s 20th birthday:

Soha’s Summer Fair.
If you’d like to come along, please tell us as soon as possible – there will be lots of free activities for all ages, plus food.

In April, we held discussion groups in person and on Facebook to see what tenants thought about changing the structure of Soha. We are proposing to Soha’s Board that tenants could become members and have much more of a say about how the company is run. There will be more news about this at the Summer Fair for our 20th birthday (see opposite).
We’ve been working with metalwork artist Nick Garnett and tenants to create a 20th anniversary celebration artwork for the reception area at Soha’s offices in Didcot. It’s due to be installed the week you receive Hometalk.

### Coming up...

**Will you join us at one of these Soha events?**

**July**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>04/07</td>
<td>10:30am-12:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Central Library, Swindon</td>
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<tr>
<td>04/07</td>
<td>4:30pm-7:30pm</td>
<td>Audit and Risk Committee Meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>06/07</td>
<td>11am-1pm</td>
<td>Liaison Group meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/07</td>
<td>11am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Old School Place, Watlington</td>
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<tr>
<td>13/07</td>
<td>5:45pm-8:45pm</td>
<td>Tenants’ Forum meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>18/07</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>St Mary’s Close, Wheatley</td>
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<td>18/07</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Village Hall, Aston</td>
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<tr>
<td>20/07</td>
<td>6pm-8pm</td>
<td>Board meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>22/07</td>
<td>Soha 20th Birthday Summer Fair</td>
<td>Benson Village Hall</td>
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<td>26/07</td>
<td>10am-1pm</td>
<td>Scrutiny Group meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>27/07</td>
<td>1pm-3pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Barnes Close, Didcot</td>
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<td>31/07</td>
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<td>FREE Family activity day - Stephen Freeman School, Didcot</td>
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**August**

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>01/08</td>
<td>10:30am-12:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Central Library, Swindon</td>
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<tr>
<td>03/08</td>
<td>FREE Family activity day</td>
<td>Great Western Park, Didcot</td>
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<td>01/08</td>
<td>10:30am-12:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Old School Place, Watlington</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/08</td>
<td>Gainsborough Community event</td>
<td>Gainsborough Estate, Henley</td>
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<td>10/08</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Towe Court, Goring</td>
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<td>15/08</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>St Mary’s Close, Wheatley</td>
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<td>15/08</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Aston Village Hall, Aston</td>
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<tr>
<td>16/08</td>
<td>10:30am-12:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Petypher House, Southmoor</td>
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<tr>
<td>24/08</td>
<td>1pm-3pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Barnes Close, Didcot</td>
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**September**

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<tr>
<td>28/09</td>
<td>1pm-3pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Barnes Close, Didcot</td>
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<tr>
<td>19/09</td>
<td>10am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>St Mary’s Close, Wheatley</td>
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<tr>
<td>14/09</td>
<td>1:30pm-3:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>YMCA, Henley</td>
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<tr>
<td>13/09</td>
<td>5pm-7pm</td>
<td>Board AGM</td>
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<td>13/09</td>
<td>10:30am-12:30pm</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Petypher House, Southmoor</td>
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<td>12/09</td>
<td>11am-12 noon</td>
<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Old School Place, Watlington</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/09</td>
<td>5:45pm-8:45pm</td>
<td>Tenants’ Forum meeting</td>
<td>Soha offices, Didcot</td>
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<td>FREE Get Online session</td>
<td>Central Library, Swindon</td>
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In addition we have regular estate inspections across Soha’s area, which you can find on the calendar at soha.co.uk/events. If you would like to join your Neighbourhood Officer on one of these, or ask that we carry out an inspection if there’s none planned, please call the Neighbourhoods team.

Contact ri@soha.co.uk or phone 0800 014 15 45 (Freephone) if you’d like more info on any of the events or inspections.

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Adela (pictured), Soha’s Digital Inclusion Officer, says, “You told us that one of the things you find the internet most useful for is using comparison sites – for example for choosing best-value energy deals. So we’ll be having a real push on this kind of support at our Get Online sessions. Anyone can come along to these - email us on digital@soha.co.uk or call 0800 014 15 45 (Freephone).”

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We’ve been working with metalwork artist Nick Garnett and tenants to create a 20th anniversary celebration artwork for the reception area at Soha’s offices in Didcot. It’s due to be installed the week you receive Hometalk.
Soha’s award-winning gardener, Damien, says you don’t need a garden to grow your own vegetables. Here are his top five summer picks for your windowsill:

**SPRING ONIONS**
Start by buying a bunch and eating most of them! Chop up the stems as usual for adding to salads or stir-frys, but save the bulb at the bottom and a couple of centimetres of stem. Drop them in a glass with the roots pointing down and cover the roots with water. Make sure you change the water once every couple of days so they don’t go slimy. Within about a week you’ll have a brand new set of green onions.

**BEANSPROUTS**
Beansprouts are super-healthy and easy to grow. Save some from a packet bought in the supermarket, then tip a few tablespoons of them into about 1 litre of water. Change the water every day or so and within the week you should have regenerated healthy sprouts. They’re great in salads or sandwiches – or what about as a topping on ThriftyLesley’s soup (next page)?

**LETTUCE**
You can treat lettuce the same way as spring onions (go for a stiffer-leaved variety, like a Romaine, rather than a floppy one). Just leave a few centimetres above the heart when you use the rest of a shop-bought one, and put that heart into a couple of centimetres of water. Change the water every day or so and let the heart (or hearts – you could pack several into one glass) get some light. You can do similar with lettuce as you can with spring onions.

**GARLIC**
Does your garlic sprout before you get round to using a whole bulb? You can even make use of the green sprouts. Put a clove with a sprout in a small jar with enough water to cover the bottom of the clove. Within a couple of weeks, it will produce roots, and shortly after the sprouts will start to grow. When they’re at least 10cm tall, the top two-thirds of the sprout is ready to eat – it’s a more delicate flavour and makes a nice change.

Any veg grown with just water eventually needs transplanting to soil to get its full chance to absorb nutrients. If you don’t want to do that, you can throw them away with a clear conscience, knowing you will at least have saved some cash before you need to buy fresh and start growing from scraps again.

One vegetable which really flourishes in soil on a sunny windowsill (and doesn’t need a deep pot) is the cherry tomato. Buying a packet of seeds is the safest way to ensure plants, but here’s a trick worth trying before you do: keep back a couple of tomatoes from the next box you buy. Fill a pot or container with potting soil, almost to the top of the container. Cut the tomatoes in half and lay them cut side down in a circle inside the pot, lightly covering them with more potting soil. Don’t put too many slices in. Water the pot of sliced tomatoes and keep it moist.

Whether you buy a packet or try the slicing method, your seeds should begin to germinate within a fortnight. Select the strongest seedlings and put maximum four per pot to grow a bit further. Then select the one or two strongest from them and repot them.

Whichever way you grow your plants, your sunny windowsill will soon be giving off that gorgeous summery smell of fresh tomatoes!
Budget meals
with ThriftyLesley

£1 per day each for three meals and snacks, what does that mean to you? Dismal, tasteless, uninspiring meals? Well, knock that thought right on the head!

MEAT PASTE
Make your own meat paste with leftovers by mashing the meat – and anything else you fancy – together with melted butter. It’s cheaper and nicer than shop bought! The one we’ve shown here is chicken and sun-dried tomatoes.

SALAD
What about a salad made with value pasta, peas, corn, grated carrot or mixed frozen, diced veg? Dress with a little bit of mayo or home-made oil and vinegar dressing and add a few. Add a few shreds of chicken from the Sunday roast or a chopped hard-boiled egg.

SOUP
Make soup my way and you can have a lovely bowl for around 20p with no fancy soup-makers needed and no mysterious method: Chicken or beef bones (should be free, or almost, from your butcher) make lovely stock. Use the wrinkly veg left at the back of the fridge and fry it. Add 100g red lentils and the stock or water to just cover. Simmer for 20 minutes and season. If you have an electric whisk, blitz it for a smooth texture, or leave it chunky – it’s delicious both ways. Take a look!

MEAT PASTE

SALAD

SOUP

SAUSAGE PATTIES
You can make your own sausage patties (pictured) by squishing together pork mince, plenty of black pepper and some breadcrumbs made from leftover bread. It should cost about 19p for each succulent patty – and you know exactly what’s in it.

OATS
A basics pack of porridge oats costs just pence and is a store cupboard item with lots of uses - not just for breakfast! You can mix them with grated cheese, breadcrumbs/flour and oil for a delicious topping for leftover veg. Add salted peanuts or sesame seeds for added crunch. That should cost about 25p per person.

ThriftyLesley is Lesley Negus. She writes about how to feed yourself for £1 a day at ThriftyLesley.com, where you can find hundreds of recipes, ideas and inspiration, including detailed meal plans.
The days of the rent collector are long gone, and people don’t pay their bills in cash and cheques like they used to.

In our modern days of technology and plastic cards, payments can be sent whizzing off wherever you want at the touch of a button. However the Rent Accounting team at Soha like to keep that personal touch: Hometalk invited Manager Teresa Midwinter (pictured) to tell us how she does that during her day.

“It starts with the post and emails. We still get a few cheques and rent books to fill out, but mostly we receive forms to set up Direct Debits. Half of our tenants pay this way, and we have about 35 new Direct Debits every month.

This is a very important job as we ensure over 3,000 rent payments are made on time each month. When Housing Benefit or rents change, we automatically update the Direct Debit and write to tenants to tell them the new amount.

Many tenants find Direct Debit the easiest way to pay as everything is taken care of but some people juggling their finances and their busy lives need more flexible ways to pay. To help, tenants can pay online via the soha.co.uk website or with a smartphone app, called Allpay (available for Apple and Android). This is particularly useful if you have a busy life and want to get the rent paid when it suits you. We also have an automated payment telephone line available 24 hours a day.

I’ve just emerged from a week of preparing, printing and mailing rent statements. If you want to cut down on post at your address you can see your statement on Soha’s website, or ask for it to be provided in large print if that would be helpful. Call our Customer Services Advisors on 0800 014 15 45 (Freephone) if you’d like to be talked through how to do that.

We’re also just about to run our second quarterly prize draw for tenants who pay their rent via our website, the Allpay app, or the payment line. You can be included in the £100 prize draw as soon as you start paying by one of these.

Although we have all this technology, we still make sure there’s someone at the end of the phone, or at the Cash Office, which is open every Monday (or Tuesday if there’s been a Bank Holiday). It might be me, Danielle or Sue behind the desk. Fewer people come in to pay cash now, but I feel it’s important to still have a face-to-face service where needed. Helping residents is what makes this job: we speak to tenants every day to answer queries about their rent account or benefits. We all enjoy speaking to and serving our customers. Soha reduced the cash office opening hours only after consulting them and asking Tenants’ Forum’s advice. What they had to say really shaped the service we continue to offer.”

You can download this leaflet from our website at www.soha.co.uk/how-to-pay/ or call us to post one to you.
I’m not feeling like myself. I feel tired, drained, can’t focus at work, can’t stop worrying about the little things, about everything. I’m not eating, sleeping. I feel anxious.

fine

Don’t take ‘fine’ for an answer. Every week 1 in 6 of us experiences mental health problems.

For FREE tips on good mental health text TIPS to 70300.

Mental Health Foundation

You may be charged for one text message at your network’s standard rate. Always get the bill payer’s permission. We’d like to contact you with information about other campaigns. If you’d rather we did not contact you again then include the words NO INFO at the end of your message e.g. TIPS NO INFO.
You’ve got what it takes to make a difference!

By volunteering with Soha, you’ll get free training and mentoring, pick up new skills and get a reference for your CV, along with meeting new people and making new friends. You could help build up your community and get valuable voluntary experience.

All this by helping Soha to keep improving. We have lots of opportunities …

We’re looking for:

- **Digital Champions**: Know your email from your social media? Help others to get online and use the internet safely.
- **Tenant Auditors**: Check Soha’s services and report back to Soha’s Directors on what you find – they will listen!
- **Tenant Scrutiny**: Ask Soha the important questions about the business - and get real answers.
- **Community Champions**: Got an idea for your community? We can support you to make it happen.
- **Telling us your views**: Take part in surveys, group discussions online and in person and much more.

Travel expenses are paid, as are childcare or other carers’ costs. Some roles attract a shopping voucher ‘thank you’.

The right role can help you find friends, build community spirit, learn new skills, and improve your job prospects.

Find out more on [www.soha.co.uk/volunteer](http://www.soha.co.uk/volunteer)

Alternatively, email [ri@soha.co.uk](mailto:ri@soha.co.uk) or call **0800 014 15 45** (Freephone) and ask for Resident Involvement.