

**Thrive not Just Survive
Tenant Scrutiny Group Report
October 2016**

Group members:

Dreena Barnard-Higgins
Helen Breach
Lynn Foley (group leader)
Sian Hudson
Edwina Lamond
Richard Mandunya

1) Introduction: What does Thrive not just Survive mean?

Everyone has a different way of coping with every-day life. What makes one person happy is totally different to someone else. Having friends, enough to eat, keeping warm in the winter and a safe place live and call home are the fundamentals.

Some people are born with a disability, others become disabled through trauma. Sudden unexpected events can affect anyone. The loss of a partner, redundancy or job loss, ill health can push a stable happy life into crisis.

How can this be turned round so individuals are able to survive and go on to thrive.

Soha has a Corporate Aim to 'help tenants thrive not just survive'. Our brief was to look at the methods and help Soha provide for their residents who are struggling through difficult times.

The subject is huge so the decision was made to concentrate on three groups. The elderly as they are the group often reluctant to ask for help. Under 35's, this group are affected by the switch to Universal Credit. And the vulnerable of any age.

As a guide for this we chose the Maslow hierarchy of needs as illustrated below.



The simple five step pyramid incorporates the basic needs and goals for individual achievement, health and well-being.

2) Findings

Step 1 – Physiological

The primary objective for Soha is to provide homes for people who cannot, for one reason or another, purchase one of their own. In 2014-15, 29% of the 494 homes let were to homeless households. The housing stock is maintained to a high standard, higher than HCA requirements. Old heating systems are replaced with more modern and economical equipment. Bathrooms upgraded to wet rooms or shower cabinets for residents who find bathing difficult.

More housing choice is given to holder people, from adapted flats to sheltered and Extra Care housing.

The three new Extra Care Homes provide safe, secure accommodation for elderly and disabled residents who find managing daily life is becoming difficult. These also provide companionship and entertainment whilst maintaining individual independence.

Soha has a strong commitment to community. Maintaining their property to a high standard fosters resident pride in their environment, this is reflected in the 93% resident satisfaction with their neighbourhood and the 92% satisfied with their homes.

Step 2 – Safety

This step is important to both Soha and residents. Incidents of Anti Social Behaviour are not tolerated. Troubled neighbourhoods and individuals are flagged on the database and followed up. Last year there were 391 cases reported and logged. 96% were resolved.

Cutbacks in various benefits will have an effect on individual incomes. To highlight any possible problems with younger tenants the Under 35 Project started in April this year. This is managed by Tenancy Support Officer Toby Laver, assisted by Helen Hammans, Lauren Aldridge and Tom Mason, Housing Projects Officer. This is a six month project that monitors tenants where the lead tenant is under 35. Rent payment, behaviour and property condition is assessed.

All tenants affected by welfare reform (particularly the Bedroom Tax and Benefits Cap) are contacted individually so no-one falls through the net.

Toby works to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons Policy which means he deals with rent, mental health, hoarding or any other problems that may be adversely affecting a tenancy. They help with benefit claims, discretionary housing payments for tenants affected by the 'bedroom tax' and works closely with other agencies, Connexions, Floating Support and Turning Point, Child Protection agencies, Credit Unions etc. The under 35 age group are the most likely to get into arrears. Help and information so they understand their responsibilities is offered through the Tenancy Support Team. An action plan is worked out for each tenants individual case and they are given names and contact numbers. Repeat referrals are about 5%, mainly for rent arrears. Budget planning helps avoid this situation. They get help with form filling for housing benefit and any other benefits they may be entitled to claim. and progress is charted so any problems can be quickly dealt with. At the time of interview there were 28 open cases.

Annual visits are paid to residents over 70. They are sent a letter beforehand to arrange a suitable time. These visits are useful in gathering information as this age group are the least likely to ask for help. They are the most susceptible to hoarding and fraud through charity begging letters and prize offers. Budget planning can highlight these problems. The Independent Living Team will offer sensitive support through other agencies like Age UK. The IL Team will visit regularly to build trust, Fire Prevention Officers can visit and give

advice on safety. Elderly residents are asked if they would like to downsize but this is not forced.

These visits only apply to residents in General Needs accommodation as Independent Living residents have Scheme Managers available for advice.

The waiting time for Disabled Adaptations has been greatly reduced with an 'in house' Occupational Therapist. And the Mobile Caretaker Service is available for small alterations like grab handles. At present this is only available to over 70's in General Needs. Feedback has indicated elderly residents would like this extended to all over 70's.

Step 3 – Belonging

Resident Involvement is at the core of Soha and is encouraged from the top down. This unique policy sets Soha above many other housing associations. They are not just landlords, residents are actively encouraged to get involved in the planning and implementation of policies. New ideas are put forward and discussed with interested resident groups and the Forum before being implemented. This lengthens the process, taking approximately six to nine months, but it ensures residents are aware of any changes. Away Days are held twice a year and bring together the various resident groups to discuss any issues that could impact on Soha and residents. Feedback from these meetings often reaffirm or shape policies.

The Seniors Group hold Health and Well-being days with health and safety information from professionals. This also informs residents what help is available in the way of adaptations to their homes. In addition, the group is helping to tackle isolation and bring new members along to regular meetings.

Isolation can be a problem and fostering contacts with neighbours and the Independent Living Team picks up early signs of illness and frailty. The best form of information on elderly residents who are struggling to cope is from other residents and a good neighbour ethos is encouraged through the involved groups. The database has and is being updated with contact and next of kin details. Plus any known problems are 'flagged'. Soha will move older people to help them to sustain their tenancy where this will help, for example moving to Extra Care or Sheltered housing, where isolation issues can be better addressed.

The Digital Inclusion training has helped many elderly residents who have never touched a laptop or tablet before gain confidence and now stay in touch with family and friends via Facebook and Skype.

The Neighbourhoods team play an important role in identifying vulnerable people and signposting them to support.

All tenants are encouraged to get involved in one form or another with Soha. Training courses are frequently offered in many subjects and the Digital Inclusion programme is very popular. Frequent customer satisfaction surveys are carried out to gauge reactions and measure performance.

All forms of involvement cement communities together.
Without them we may not survive, with them we can thrive.

Step 4 – Self Esteem

Soha are helping disadvantaged residents into work through the Employment and Training Project. Referring tenants to Neil Holman who is working on the Employment Project

'Launchpad' provides training, support and mentoring. In the past year Soha had 6 trainee positions, 4 of which were apprenticeships and 18 apprenticeships with contractors. Training and mentoring is offered this supports individuals with the help of outside agencies depending on the individual needs, which could be drug related, mental health or learning difficulties.

This has proved successful with residents gaining confidence and qualifications, digital training allows those involved to apply for jobs on line. This year the project includes under 35's that may be affected by the future LHA cap.

Supporting residents furthest from employment is a high cost project. But the confidence and skills gained can only benefit Soha in the future and less individual isolation from society.

A recent survey carried out by Brunel University London found that training programmes run by housing associations are regarded as better than job centres for finding employment. Unlike Job Centre Plus, housing associations have good staff availability, give friendly, personalised, constructive advice and 'offer hope'.

Step 5 – Self Actualization

The active support Soha offer to older, younger and vulnerable residents has to be praised and complimented. The commitment to people and communities goes beyond their original brief of just providing housing. It has helped people gain confidence and know that they belong to an association that cares.

The skills attained, whether it be digital or practical open new opportunities for each and everyone helped with Soha training. It expands their lives beyond the four walls of their home and opens up new opportunities and new relationships.

3) Methodology

Research included:

- Reviewing documents including:
 - 24 housing article - 19th September 2016
 - Soha Annual Report – 2015/16
 - Relevant action plans and customer journey maps used by Soha
- Looking at best practice by attending the JRF and Inside Housing webinar on 'How social landlords can help to tackle poverty'
- Discussing what 'thrive not just survive' means to residents with two focus groups at Soha's Summer Bash.

Interviews with:-

- Richard Peacock, Chief Executive
- Maureen Adams, Director of Customer Services & Operations
- Jackie Logan, Resident Involvement Manager
- Kerry Lobb, Resident Involvement Officer
- Jude McCaffrey, Head of Housing
- Tom Mason, Housing Projects Officer
- Toby Laver, Tenancy Support Officer

- Emma Morrell, Lettings Manager
- Jayne Sharp, Scheme Manager Co-ordinator.

4) Conclusions

Overall the group concludes that Soha is doing well in this area. However, there is always room for improvement.

The future looks uncertain, with the UK exit from the European Union and austerity. Budgets, business and personal, will likely continue to be squeezed.

The full introduction of Universal Credit will have a big impact on the way household budgets are managed. The pro-active approach Soha have adopted should give advance warning of impending problems but additional staff in the Tenancy Support Department may be necessary on a temporary or part time basis. At present there is never less than 20 cases to deal with, this has the potential to double in future.

The annual visits to over 70's may, in some cases, benefit from the introduction of another resident. The choice would have to be made carefully but some elderly residents may feel more comfortable talking to a fellow resident than someone they consider to be in authority.

5) Recommendations

- i) Continue the existing work to help tenants thrive not just survive.
- ii) Consider how the Tenancy Support Service will cope with increasing demand, including whether additional staffing is necessary on a temporary or permanent basis.
- iii) Consider training for some residents and including them in carrying out the over 70s visits
- iv) There is more to be done on getting a measure of how tenants feel around 'thriving'. Soha should investigate this and put a better measure in place (e.g. consider the government well-being index - <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/2015-09-23>)