



Tenant Auditors

18. Grounds Maintenance

July 2016

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Introduction

Tenant Auditors help Soha Housing to understand and put the views and needs of tenants first. We carry out detailed and robust assessments of the services and functions provided by Soha Housing and its partner agencies to check that they do 'what it says on the tin', to help them improve

It has been four years since the last grounds maintenance inspection and a new contractor is in place. The topics taken away from the Co-regulation Day in 2015 indicated that tenants would like Tenant Auditors to look at grounds maintenance, excluding sheltered housing and extra care.

1 Scope of the Audit

The audit focused on grounds maintenance on estates and communal land that is managed and maintained by Soha. Areas of complaints helped the focus and the corporate plan objectives 2015-2017 were used as a guide to areas of audit.

Specifically we wanted to find out:

- 1.1 Is the contract management 'strong'?
- 1.2 How many 'eyes and ears' are there?
- 1.3 What is the programme for developing 'eyes and ears'?
- 1.4 Where does the ABC Assisted, Basic and Costed programme fit in?

Other key questions we wanted answered

- 1.5 Is there assessment of the contract management process?
- 1.6 How do staff and tenants describe 'excellent grounds maintenance'?
- 1.7 Do tenants know the areas that should be covered by Soha's grounds maintenance?

2 The audit team

Trevor Brewerton -- Lead auditor

Angela Harding – Deputy Auditor

Helene McHale

David Robinson

3 The audit programme

The audit began on the 6th of July with a briefing from Lee Hayward (Assistant Director) as the Estates Manager was not available. We then planned our audit to include:

- 3.1 A desktop review of the relevant documents including
 - Corporate Plan objectives 2015 to 2017
 - SP29 Estates and Communal Areas 1.7.15

- Specification and schedule of works for grounds maintenance of communal areas and sheltered schemes April 2015
- Communal Areas leaflet pub May 2016
- Summary of Estates Condition 2016/17
- Estate inspections completed by caretakers
- Estate Inspection Forms
- list of informal complaints May, June 2016
- list of 'Green Champions'
- Handyperson Service 2011

3.2 Consultation with tenants at Benson Big Bash workshop 12.7.16

3.3 Interviews with Soha's Estates and Neighbourhoods Manager, Tenant Portfolio Holder for Estates, Housing Apprentice, Repairs Administration Coordinator, Assistant Director of Customer Services, Head of Housing, Housing Admin Assistant (who manages the assisted grass cutting scheme) and a Tenant Green Champion.

3.4 Work shadowing of tenant portfolio holders estates visits

3.5 A review of the tenant audit survey of tenants - A postal survey to 360 tenants in Didcot, Henley and Thame areas. 12.7% of tenants responded (46) which is a good return rate.

3.6 Website review

3.7 Visits to informal complaint sites

4 Findings

4.1 Is the contract management strong?

4.1.1 Soha currently has two existing grounds maintenance contractors -John O'Conner Ltd and Berinsfield Community Business. We discovered some differences in the way these two contracts are managed

4.1.2 The grounds maintenance specification and schedule of works is very detailed and gives every opportunity for strong contract management.

4.1.3 The Estates and Communal Areas Policy states estates will be checked regularly working closely with residents. That service standards will be set in consultation with tenants and estate tenant satisfaction surveys will be undertaken and results used to improve services.

4.1.4 The Communal Areas leaflet details the existing grounds maintenance and cleaning service standards..

- 4.1.5 The Estate Inspection Records are detailed and show activity throughout the year. They show the frequency of inspection which is helpful for audit. Priority estates are inspected monthly and other estates at least annually. There is also a spot check team who carry out monthly checks of the 12 priority estates.
- 4.1.6 The 12 priority sites are also inspected monthly by Housing Officers and tenants can see on the website when their priority estate is being inspected and are invited to join in.
- 4.1.7 The informal complaint record is excellent and a contract management control tool but requires time in recording information in a separate place.

4.2 Interviews and work shadowing.

- 4.2.1 There was no written estates and communal area procedure to follow. Auditing had to be through interview of the various persons involved in managing the contracts and the checking of forms, spreadsheets, policies, leaflets etc.
- 4.2.2 Both the Assistant Director and the Estates Manager explain that training is given to everyone who conducts an estate inspection. This is to make absolutely certain there is consistency throughout all of the 290 estate inspection sites.
- 4.2.3 The Housing Apprentice monitors day to day reporting, as the estates inspections come on the system and enters them from Green Champions' inspections. Any issues are checked by a site visit and then reported to the contractor. This gives a quick turnaround of a report coming in and is a strong contract management tool. The contractor has seven days to remedy.
- 4.2.4 The Estates Manager has weekly meetings with the main contractor John O'Conner so is able to raise any issues quickly and give the contractor the opportunity to remedy any problems. Financial penalties can be applied if the Contractor fails to complete work on time or to the correct standard.
- 4.2.5 The records show monthly meetings with the main contractor which are minuted and estates scoring below a score of 4 (good) are shared with the Contractor at these meetings.
- 4.2.6 The extensive reports from the portfolio-holders also feed into the contract management.
- 4.2.7 The neighbourhood survey gives tenants an opportunity to comment on grounds maintenance. Soha surveys 50% of every estate/ area each year. The surveys go out in bi-monthly batches throughout the year.
- 4.2.8 There is only one question on the Neighbourhoods survey which asks about grounds maintenance "How would you rate the grounds maintenance service provided by Soha? Excellent/good/average/below average/poor/don't receive this service."
- 4.2.9 The survey results completed in the audit period were not available as the first batch of annual surveys had only just been sent out.
- 4.2.10 The response to the estate survey is about 10%. Any issues are forwarded straight to the Assistant Director Customer Services for action; this is an extra

aid to contract management. Soha also incentivise the survey by carrying out a bi-monthly prize draw worth £25 in supermarket vouchers to the winner.

4.2.11 A Neighbourhood Newsletter dated Spring 2016 for Thame area did tell tenants that they could expect a fortnightly cut from March- 31 October and a monthly maintenance of planted areas trees and hedges. Providing them with some of the 'when' information.

4.2.12 The Assistant Director of Customer Services and the Head of Housing meet quarterly with Mark Williams Director of BCB to discuss the single contract that includes grounds maintenance. The Assistant Director deals with estates maintenance issues including grounds maintenance and the Head of Housing covers the housing management aspects of our Contract with BCB.

Tenants can report grounds maintenance problems to Soha via the website on <https://www.soha.co.uk/resident-services/i-rent-my-home/my-neighbourhood/my-estate-and-grounds-maintenance/report-neighbourhood-issues/#sthash.grTmZwSd.dpbs>

4.3 How many 'eyes and ears' are there?

4.3.1 There are currently six Green Champions (GC) working for Soha with two more in the process of joining

4.3.2 Two GCs were interviewed as part of the audit. One was inspecting a Sheltered Scheme which was not part of the scope but highlighted the value of GC's and said that feedback would enhance his inspection experience. The other GC agreed that feedback would be useful.

4.3.3 The Benson Bash workshop showed that only 'involved tenants' knew about the scheme.

4.3.4 Portfolio holders know about GC's but do not have any contact with them.

4.3.5 The Tenant Auditors survey showed that 80% of respondents did not know about GC's.

4.3.6 30% of these respondents were interested in becoming or learning more or would consider being a GC. Three tenants volunteered to become a GC.

4.4 What is the programme for developing 'eyes and ears'?

4.4.1 Introductory training packs are currently being prepared for the 9 possible GC's on the list.

4.4.2 Training is also due to be provided.

4.4.3 The Soha website gives tenants an opportunity to apply to be a GC

<https://www.soha.co.uk/involving-you/my-community/#sthash.CzBQfcoq.dpbs>

4.5 Where does the ABC Assisted, Basic, Costed Gardening programme fit in?

There does not appear to be a current publication explaining these services although the website under 'Staying in your own home' says " Our handyperson can put up shelves, fix your broken doorbell, clear gardens"- See more at:

4.7 Do tenants know the areas that should be covered by Soha's grounds maintenance?

A survey was sent to 360 tenants and 46 responded which is a 12.8% response rate. 67% (30) of the Tenant Auditors survey respondents did not know the area of their neighbourhood that Soha are responsible for maintaining. At the Benson Bash nearly 50% (5 out of 12) did not know and another 2 were unsure.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 Soha have achieved the right contract and found a good contractor in John O'Conner. One Estates portfolio holder said 'finally after 4 years we have got the right contractor.'
- 5.2 The Corporate Objective of strong management is the right way. The management was strong enough to end an unsatisfactory contract. There is however a need for a written estates and communal areas procedure to cover topics such as grounds maintenance, cleaning, estate improvements, estate surveys, estates inspections etc.
- 5.3 As an Estates portfolio holder explained 'It's not just about grass'. Grounds Maintenance is a small part of Neighbourhood Management with only one question in the survey of tenants and residents and only 3 questions out of 26 on the Estates Inspection/Contractor Monitoring Form. We however felt it was correct to only have one grounds maintenance question in the survey because the questionnaire also covers other key estates issues such as safety and general estate condition and appearance.
- 5.4 The Corporate Objective of developing 'eyes and ears' is correct. Soha carries out grounds maintenance at 290 sites so are really grateful for tenant feedback on the current state of grounds maintenance in their area so we can check our contractors are performing well?
- 5.5 Only two active Green Champions have sent report to Soha in April (there were 4 in 2015/16). Our Benson Bash Workshop and Tenant Audit survey show that there are more willing Green Champions which Soha can recruit.
- 5.6 Soha are right to say that they will 'give tenants information about when and where grounds maintenance work will be carried out'(Communal Leaflet May 2016). But our survey and the Benson Bash suggest that tenants do not always have this information. Tenants have some excellent suggestions as to how this could be achieved. Soha and the Main Contractor benefit from frequent good feedback from tenants.
- 5.7 Soha and BCB need to ensure all monthly cuts are carried out consistently throughout the seven month cutting season.
- 5.8 As Soha grows 'joined up' work between development and maintenance will reduce grounds maintenance on new sites.
- 5.9 As sites grow older, planned maintenance can demolish or rebuild old walls, relay grass areas and reduce site work where Soha no longer own properties in the area.

- 5.10 It would be beneficial if Soha could benchmark its grounds maintenance service with other housing associations.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Write an estates and communal areas procedure to cover topics such as grounds maintenance, cleaning, estate improvements, estate surveys, estates inspections etc.
- 6.2 Consider finding a way to Benchmark the Grounds Maintenance Service
- 6.3 Give grounds maintenance a bullet point on the Neighbourhood report page on the website and tell tenants how to find out when and where grounds maintenance should be done <https://www.soha.co.uk/resident-services/i-rent-my-home/my-neighbourhood/my-estate-and-grounds-maintenance/report-neighbourhood-issues/#sthash.5VvldYw6.dpbs>
- 6.4 Re Launch 'Green Champions' with preparation beforehand to ensure quick response to applicants and consider a programme of recruitment, training, aftercare feedback and encouragement.
- 6.5 Use Tenants suggestions from the Tenant Audit survey to find a way to fulfil the standard "give tenants information about when and where grounds maintenance work will be carried out"
- 6.6 Consider how an 'Assisted grass cut service' can properly be provided in view of increased "Independent Living" demands.
- 6.7 BCB to operate a complaints system compatible with Soha's so that Soha does not get so many calls. (See complaints inspection)

7 Acknowledgements

Thanks to

Tenant Estate Portfolio Holders, Assistant Director of Customer Services, Estates and Neighbourhoods Manager, Housing Apprentice, Repairs Administration Coordinator, Head of Housing, Housing Admin Assistant (Manager of the Assisted Grass Cutting Service), Green Champion for Marymead and Ock Bridge Place.

Extra thanks to the Policy Officer who made it all possible