



a blueprint for the future

Soha's plans for 2025-2030



Welcome



The past four years have been among the most volatile in recent memory. I'm incredibly proud of how we have risen to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and rising interest rates.

Together, we have remained focused on what truly matters: our service to our residents, being a good employer for our staff, the quality of our homes, and building new homes to meet local housing needs. We emerge from this difficult time financially strong and well-positioned to plan for our long-term future.

Developing this action plan has provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on who we are today, and who we aspire to be in the years ahead. This is why, for the first time, our corporate plan is structured by our organisational values. As we look ahead, our values will guide us when making the big decisions, such as:

- **broadening access to our homes** so that we can meet a wider range of housing needs in our communities
- **responding to the growing challenges** our local authority partners have providing temporary accommodation, as part of our ongoing commitment to ending homelessness
- **planning now for the homes we want to own in 2050**, by ensuring we make the decisions and investments that align with our long-term vision.

We aspire to provide our residents with a repairs service which puts them at its heart, so you will find the aims and ambitions for our repairs and maintenance service, Soha Response, threaded throughout this plan too.



Hundreds of people contributed to the creation of what you're about to read, by sharing their perspectives and priorities for the future. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to residents, staff, partners, Board members, and everyone else who generously gave their time and input — it's been inspiring to hear what matters most to you.

This 5-year plan lays out how we will continue to strengthen the ways residents, staff and Members shape Soha. We want to lean into our identity as a mutual housing association and allow that to increasingly influence all that we do.

Ultimately our hope is that by 2050, we will be housing a broad range of people in homes that are high-quality, carbon zero, well-maintained and in the places that people want to live.

This action plan provides a blueprint to help us turn our vision into reality.

Kate Wareing

CEO of Soha

our vision, values and making them a reality

Our vision is for vibrant, sustainable and resilient communities where everyone can find a home.

To make our vision a reality, we will continue to work with residents, staff, communities and partners to provide, and help people access and retain, quality homes and services that meet their needs. We will support each other and together create opportunities for a better future.

Our organisational values shape all that we do. We are and will be:

- **mutual** we belong to our residents and communities and make decisions together
- **committed to residents** we put residents' wellbeing first and go the extra mile
- **open and honest** we are clear about what we can and can't do, and share information so we can be held to account
- **invested in local communities** we are passionate about building stronger communities, in partnership with others
- **here for the long term** we are planning well now to build homes for the future



how we've delivered for you

Over the last four years we've been working hard to deliver on the commitments we made in our last action plan.

In Tenant Satisfaction Measures, we have consistently benchmarked in the top 25% against other housing organisations for satisfaction with our approach to anti-social behaviour, and in making a positive differences in communities

Cullum House in Wheatley, one of our existing schemes, is the first net zero carbon scheme where we had complete control over the design and specification. SODC provided a £736,000 grant, without which we wouldn't have been able to deliver this achievement

We developed the *MySoha* app and provided kiosks in some schemes to help residents be online

We achieved ISO 14001 in 2022, showing how we continually improve our environmental performance

Our local authority partners have agreed to use their planning powers to make sure more homes are built for social rent

Since 2021, we have completed 3,200 stock condition surveys, helping us collect vital information to help maintain homes

In 2024 we completed our first net zero carbon development with Hook Norton Community Land Trust (and won an award)

100 homes were acquired from Bromford Housing

We exceeded our build 800 new properties target. Between 2020-2025, we completed 68 social rent homes, 630 affordable rent homes and 312 shared ownership homes

we are proud to be a **mutual** housing association



As a mutual housing association, Soha is owned by its Members – just like a building society.

Tenants, shared owners, employees and our Board members can all become Members of Soha. In the future we will consider whether to open up Membership to family members and community partners too.

Membership matters because it allows Members to actively participate in shaping the future of our organisation.

It means that the most significant decisions are made by a large number of staff and residents, giving real power to those we exist to serve. In this way, our mutual structure helps to protect the things that Members care about, what they value and want to prioritise.

Members also play a vital role in holding Soha to account. As shareholders of the organisation, Members have the right to information about Soha's activities, finances and plans. Equipped with this knowledge, Members help to ensure that we deliver on our commitments.

Our mutual structure embodies our commitment to meaningful inclusion and participation. It highlights the importance we place on making good decisions, together.

Over the next five years, we will make sure that being a mutual continues to influence everything we do as an organisation, so that Members, residents and staff can have even greater power to guide and shape Soha.

we are a community-based, mutual housing association



Unlike an increasing number of housing associations today, Soha has a distinctly local focus. We only provide homes within an hour's travel time from our headquarters in Didcot so we remain locally rooted and able to serve our local communities well.

We understand that a home is more than just a roof over your head: it's about a sense of place, connection, and belonging. Our vision extends beyond individual homes – we want to see entire communities thrive.

As Soha Members live and work in our communities, they know what makes them great. They play a vital role in shaping how we engage with and invest in our communities, making them even better places to live.

Crucially, Members have the responsibility of approving our Communities Strategy. This strategy outlines how Members, residents and the wider community will be able to lead Soha's engagement in their own community and direct Soha's investment in addressing local priorities.

By empowering our Members to lead, our work is not only grounded in local needs but also driven by the people who know these communities best.

developing this plan in a **community- based, mutual** way



The process of developing this strategy shows how strongly we feel about investing time and resources to meaningfully involve staff, residents, Board and Members when shaping future goals and priorities.

Throughout this journey, we've had the privilege of hearing from hundreds of people. They've shared what matters most to them, what they hope we might do less of in the future, and their aspirations for Soha's future.

One recurring theme in these conversations was our repairs service. Over the past four years, and throughout consultation on this plan (detailed on the next page), residents have recommended we continue to evolve this vital service. That's why we have taken the very important decision to set up Soha Response – an in-house direct repairs, maintenance and investment service.

Establishing Soha Response will be a significant focus for us between now and 2030. We will invest time and resource in ensuring the new service delivers excellent results for our residents. As Soha Response shares our organisational values and aspirations, its journey is interwoven with, rather than separate to, our values-based goals for the organisation. We are one team, with one vision, and shared goals.

We are grateful to everyone who participated in this process. Your generosity in sharing your time and thoughtful reflections has been invaluable.

developing this plan with communities and stakeholders

phase 1: consultation

We asked people what Soha could do more or less of, and how we could change or improve. We heard from:

- 74 Members at the Members' Forum AGM
- 125 staff at the annual staff conference
- 8 partners in interviews
- 39 residents and 42 staff members completed our survey
- 450+ other inputs from social media and in-person doorknocks.

phase 2: setting the direction

We developed draft objectives in workshops with more than 50 participants, including Board members, staff and residents.

We tested and refined those objectives with:

- 55 residents at the Board AGM
- 41 residents in an in-person workshop
- 6 younger residents in an online workshop
- 100 staff members in two online workshops.

phase 3: developing the details

We commissioned staff teams to develop two-year action plans, targets and budgets.

We discussed the prioritisation of the objectives with 25 residents at an in-person workshop.

our values-based goals for the next five years

For the first time, we have structured our strategic plan around our organisational values. This decision emphasises just how central these values are to who we are and who we aspire to be.

Our values define us, inspire us, and guide the choices we make. As we look ahead, we want these values to continue to shape our actions and decisions.

Our goals are grouped under six themes:

- *we exist for everyone who needs a home*
- *we are mutual*
- *we are committed to residents*
- *we are open and honest*
- *we are invested in local communities*
- *we are here for the long term.*

These goals, set out over the following pages, show how we will put these values into action over the next five years.



our goal:

In five years' time, a broader range of people in our communities will have access to good-quality, affordable homes. These homes, and the people who live in them, will help our communities to continue to thrive.

- we will increase the supply of affordable homes by building 200 homes a year. We will use local data and work in partnership with others to ensure that we build the right mix of properties to meet the varied and changing needs of our communities
- we will seek to influence planning policies so that homes delivered through s106 planning gains can be let at a social rent; and we will actively explore all funding and partnership models that will enable us to expand the supply of social housing available locally
- we will broaden access to our homes by changing our criteria for who we can let properties to (where this is in our control) and by developing a wider range of offers for people in housing need locally, including younger people, those in the private rental sector and shared owners
- we will work closely with our local authority partners to ensure a mix of households is offered housing in each area, so that all those unable to rent or buy homes at market rates have a chance of being able to access housing through us
- we will make the best use of our current homes by creating simple processes and attractive incentives that support people to 'right-size' their homes, and so reduce under-occupation and overcrowding. We will work with local authorities to ensure that those able to afford our higher rent properties can access them
- we will respond to the high level of demand for temporary accommodation by being flexible about how we provide homes for short-term lets. We will work closely with local authorities to minimise the number of households who they have to place in B&B accommodation.

We exist for everyone who needs a home

our goal:

In five years' time, Members, residents and staff will have even greater power to guide and shape Soha; and being a mutual will increasingly influence how we work.

- we will develop new and creative ways to engage with a wider range of residents, ensuring that those involved in identifying issues, making decisions and creating solutions are representative of all our residents
- we will make sure that the way we buy goods and services brings greater social, financial and environmental benefits to our local communities
- we will give local communities greater decision-making power over local plans and budgets
- we will take decisions on our partnership and community spending with Members, staff and residents; and will increase participation in decisions about Soha's budgets and priorities
- we will ensure that Soha Response employees find empowerment whilst establishing the new service, and that their experience guides us as the service develops
- we will protect the genuine voice of all staff as they continue to influence how we run our services, and provide opportunities to contribute meaningfully to decisions on budgets, structures and policy.

We are mutual

our goal:

Throughout the next five years we will ensure that our service offer supports successful tenancies by being high-quality, relational, respectful, flexible, and clear on people's rights and responsibilities.

- we will continue to develop a flexible, responsive housing management model that enables residents to seamlessly transfer from temporary to permanent tenancies without needing to move home
- we will build and, where needed, fund stronger partnerships with local agencies that can provide specialist advice and support to residents
- we will continue to secure homes that are suitable for our residents, whilst supporting tenants to sustain their tenancy where needed
- we will successfully set up and transition to Soha Response to deliver a direct repairs, maintenance and investment service that will be in the top 25% of housing associations for tenant satisfaction
- we will provide clear information on people's rights and responsibilities – what residents can expect from Soha and what they are responsible for – and how we will comply with all regulatory requirements and consumer standards.

We are committed to residents

our goal:

In five years' time, residents will have access to the information that they need, in a variety of formats. We will be transparent and share how we are learning and improving as an organisation.

- we will provide easily-accessible information on our service offer, so that residents can understand the support we can offer and where the limits of that support lie
- we will continue to improve communication around repairs, using resident feedback, as Soha Response continues to grow
- we will improve access to *MySoha* and our online services to make it easier for residents to find the information that matters to them
- we will regularly publish data on the performance of our services, and share what we are learning as an organisation and how we have acted in response to complaints and feedback we have received
- we will continue to listen when residents explain how they would like us to communicate with them, and do the best we can to fulfill those wishes.

We are open and honest

our goal:

In five years' time, residents will be part of more connected and resilient communities, and will have more power to bring about positive change where they live.

- we will get better at understanding what is important to people in our communities and support small-scale, resident-led initiatives that build the community assets that people want
- we will enable people to have a greater say and play a more active role in what goes on in their community, including by supporting community land trusts and other locally-led efforts to build new homes
- our Locality teams will continue to support residents to strengthen their relationships with neighbours and local organisations, contributing to vibrant and resilient communities
- we will further develop our Localities approach by organising more aspects of our work in a place-based way, helping us to be more visible in and connected to our communities
- we will mirror our Localities approach in our approach to repairs, as Soha Response continues to recruit local people who work in and around our communities.

We are invested in local communities

our goal:

In five years' time, we will increasingly be providing the homes that will meet people's housing needs and aspirations into the future. Our homes will be looked after and maintained to a high standard.

- we will assess which of our current homes will meet future housing standards and local housing needs, and will take decisions about where adaptation, refurbishment, regeneration or sales are the best way for us to provide the homes that will meet people's housing needs and aspirations in the future
- we will ensure Soha Response allows us to plan for the long-term maintenance of our homes, to gain control of our supply chains and to create training and apprenticeship opportunities for people in our local communities
- we will ensure that all Soha-owned homes meet EPC C minimum energy efficiency criteria by 2030, and that we are on track to be net zero carbon by 2050
- we will invest in the technology that will enable us to understand the performance of our homes and support high-quality decision making
- we will prioritise the buying and developing of new homes that will be fit for the future in terms of their energy efficiency, environmental impact, accessibility and adaptability.

We are here for the long term

enabling change

We will invest in the technology, systems and processes that will enable us to continually learn and improve our service offer.



investing in technology

- by 2030 we will have selected and be underway with upgrading our core housing systems to best in class, with improved functionality for both staff and residents. This will include a successor to QL and a new Financial Management and reporting system
- by 2027 we will have implemented a compliance system to hold all building health and safety data and streamline reporting
- we will make the most of technology to make it easy for residents to engage with us on their own terms, to deliver best in class interactions for all resident service areas
- we will ensure that we take advantage of the opportunity of in-sourcing our repairs to improve real time information for residents on when they can expect repairs to be done, and when to expect operatives to visit
- we will modernise and digitalise systems, enabling staff to easily offer the best service to residents and improving our data management processes.

enabling change

We will invest in the technology, systems and processes that will enable us to continually learn and improve our service offer. We will focus on growing a culture that nurtures staff and supports excellence.



constantly learning

- we will strengthen a culture of learning and continuous improvement by investing in staff capabilities, making space for staff to reflect, and supporting teams to improve business processes
- we will build integrated systems that support automated and streamlined services, and generate meaningful data that helps us to continually learn and improve our service offering
- all staff with responsibility for the delivery or management of housing services will have completed their Chartered Institute of Housing training.

enabling change

We will focus on growing a culture that nurtures staff and supports excellence.



strengthening our culture and ways of working

- we will continue to prioritise people over tasks and deliver our services in a way which is both fair and personalised. We will systematically review how our different services are designed, to continually improve residents' experience
- we will develop our systems so that they serve people, not the other way round – giving staff and residents useful information in real time. We will continue to support staff to create their own solutions to issues, trusting them to make wise decisions
- we will intentionally develop relationships between teams to ensure residents experience Soha as a joined-up team
- we will strive to be an excellent place to work; a place where staff care and feel cared for, are able to grow and develop, and are supported to be effective
- we will continue to develop relationships of high trust, growing our skill in giving and receiving feedback, enabling us to help each other grow and address conflict in a healthy way
- we will ensure our culture and values are embedded through robust induction and continued management focus on positive behaviour expectations.

preparing for the future



Over the next five years, Soha will need to monitor, understand and respond to any significant shifts in our external environment.

In order to help us plan well, we have dedicated time to identifying key trends that could impact us and exploring potential scenarios we may face in the years ahead. This proactive approach ensures we are prepared to adapt and navigate uncertainties while maintaining focus on our key priorities.

There are record levels of homelessness. More than 178,000 households in England were assessed as homeless in 2023-24, up 12% from the previous year. In early 2024, 117,000 households were living in temporary accommodation – accommodation that is often damp, overcrowded and lacks basic appliances. The cost of providing this accommodation is crippling for many councils, with total spend topping a staggering £2.2 billion.

House prices remain unaffordable for many. In 2023, the average house price in south Oxfordshire was £446,000 and average full-time earnings were £40,500. This means that, on average, full-time employees needed to spend 11 times their earnings to buy a home, putting home ownership out of reach for many people living in the communities where we operate.

More families are trapped in expensive and low-quality private rental properties. Nearly one in five households in England are living in private rented accommodation. Homes in the private rented sector are more likely to fail the Decent Homes Standard than any other tenure and they also cost more. On average, private renters spend 33% of their income on rent compared to 27% for those in social rent properties and 22% for homeowners.

Economic and political instability has increased financial pressure for all. The UK has experienced high levels of volatility in recent years as global events have fuelled record-breaking inflation. Inflation peaked at 11.1% in October 2022 - a 41-year high. Rapidly rising food and energy prices have placed immense financial pressures on individuals, households and businesses.

Changing demographics means big shifts in housing need. The population of the UK is projected to increase from an estimated 67.1 million in mid-2020 to 69.2 million in mid-2030, putting ever more pressure on our housing stock. Over the next 10 years, the ONS predicts that there will be a larger number of smaller households, particularly made up of people from older age groups.

Climate change is causing more extreme weather events. The UK is already seeing the effects of climate change in more frequent flooding, more extreme rainfall and rising temperatures. Our housing stock is not prepared for these changing conditions. Meeting this challenge will require significant investment in retrofitting existing properties, changing standards for new builds and adopting new approaches to urban planning.

Locally, waiting lists are growing. Together, OCC and SODC have almost 7,000 people on their housing registers. At the current rate, it would take six to seven years to house everyone on these lists even if no-one else joined them. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in the number of households on those lists that have an urgent need, are Statutory Homeless, or are living in homes severely lacking in facilities.

These trends underscore the urgent need for more social housing and for a range of truly affordable houses to prepare for the future.

scenario planning 2025-30



four scenarios and Soha's responses

To enable us to plan well for the future, we have done some scenario planning where we think ahead about what choices we will make dependent upon what happens externally.

First we identified two factors that we believe will have the most impact on our residents, communities and on Soha in the next five years:

1. our ability to cover our costs, access finance and borrow money at affordable rates to build new homes – our financial headroom
2. the stability of our external operating environment.

Second we used these two factors to map out and explore four different future scenarios, thinking about how Soha could best respond to each one.



scenario 1:

- stable, agreeable external environment
- healthy financial headroom

What is the context?

- a stable external operating environment as international tensions diminish – with a favourable impact on supply chains
- government initiatives to address the housing crisis prove highly effective, incentivising house building and more effective use of existing homes
- housing associations have access to good finance: rent is stable, interest rates have fallen, capital and revenue grants are available; strong progress towards net zero carbon targets
- positive outlook for the NHS, welfare system and employment.

What is the impact on Soha's business environment?

- financially we are in a very healthy position, with high levels of assurance for the long term
- closer and more strategic relationships with local authorities give us much more control
- resilient local communities and services support each other so Soha's support can be increasingly targeted and personalised.

How would Soha respond?

- we implement an ambitious and varied development programme, meeting housing needs identified by local people
- we roll out creative new approaches to meeting housing need, broadening our current offer – Soha is now the landlord of choice for those currently in the private rented sector
- we accelerate our progress towards net zero carbon targets, through improving existing homes and new builds
- we invest in technology and ensure our procurement, investment and employment policies, and decision-making processes reflect our status as a mutual housing association.

scenario 2:

- stable, agreeable external environment
- diminished financial headroom

What is the context?

- the economy recovers well and there is a growing sense of optimism
- whilst facing challenges, public services are improving in their ability to meet citizens' needs and communities are flourishing locally
- however, the government places greater regulatory demands on housing associations and introduces rent caps. Together, these increase our expenditure and limit our income.

What is the impact on Soha's business environment?

- whilst there is greater stability externally, Soha's costs have risen sharply, rental income has slipped and sales receipts are significantly below anticipated levels
- the costs associated with Soha Response have spiralled and other unexpected costs arise, especially ones where remedial action is required in a short time frame
- there is an increase in the cost of building new homes, meaning we secure fewer homes for our money and borrow more
- these factors contribute to our diminished financial headroom.

How would Soha respond?

- we identify the implications of the above changes early and make wise decisions to bring us greater financial control
- in order to reduce costs, we review our development and net zero carbon targets
- operating with sufficient foresight, we manage to avoid a fragmented development programme, maintaining partners' confidence in us.

scenario 3:

- chaotic external environment
- healthy financial headroom

What is the context?

The external environment remains highly uncertain, with unsettled economic conditions at home and abroad

What is the impact on Soha's business environment?

- local people and residents are under increased financial and health pressure due to unforeseen challenges – incomes are low, taxes are high and overall the situation feels precarious
- residents need Soha's active support so as not to fall into crisis
- our financial headroom remains healthy due to a high proportion of our borrowing being on fixed rate
- affordable housing and housing more generally is still a government priority, but a lack of public finance means the government is struggling to deliver on its ambitions to address the housing crisis.

How would Soha respond?

- we continue a healthy development programme, building homes which meet local needs
- we take opportunities to make wise investments that help us to become more efficient and responsive to residents e.g. by automating processes
- in this uncertain environment, we look for any emerging opportunities to acquire new properties, land or suppliers. We actively explore new ways to provide additional housing
- we take our responsibilities as an anchor local organisation seriously, by continuing to invest in and support staff, and explore new community development horizons. We invest in key partners to help them meet growing needs
- whilst others find their capacity for longer-term thinking inhibited by immediate concerns, we capitalise on our ability to be able to plan for the longer term through a range of initiatives and partnerships.

scenario 4:

- chaotic external environment
- diminished financial headroom

What is the context?

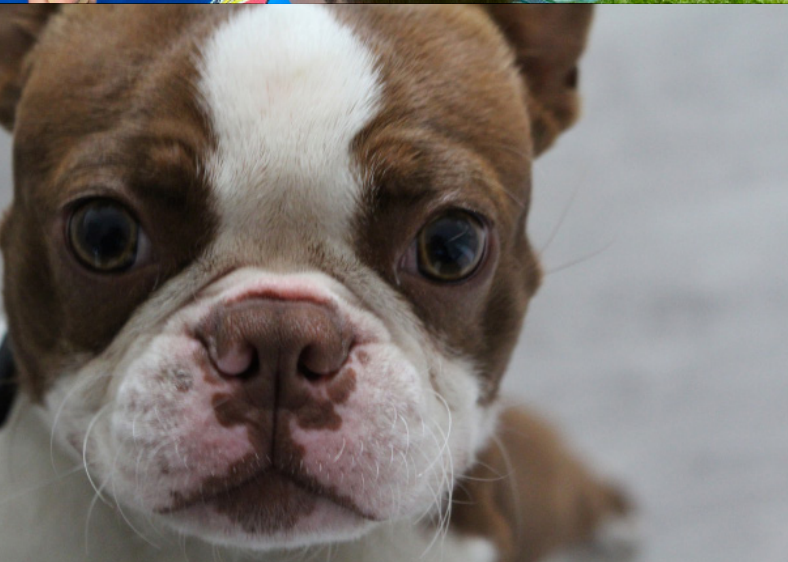
- international unrest is having a significant impact domestically
- unemployment has risen, society is increasingly polarised and inequality has grown. Homelessness is on the rise and the health service – including mental health services – cannot cope with growing demand
- due to rising costs and unfavourable economic conditions, the government has not achieved its housing targets
- housing associations struggle to access finance due to the high cost of borrowing and the lack of any significant government grants for development or to meet environmental standards.

What is the impact on Soha's business environment?

- housing waiting lists grow as people lose their jobs and homes; high demand makes private renting even more expensive
- national housebuilding rates decrease, leading to fewer s106 opportunities. Diminished financial headroom means we cannot make the required improvements to our homes
- pressure builds to fill in the gap public sector partners leave due to diminishing resources. Arrears grow due to residents' poor financial health and anti-social behaviour increases. Staff morale drops due an increasingly adversarial relationship with residents.

How would Soha respond?

- our priority is delivering a core service to existing residents in their homes. We stop development and focus on how we can help to meet residents' short-term needs
- we explore measures to save costs including extending component lifecycles and reviewing service standards
- we use this as an opportunity to think creatively about how we maximise people's income, grow local businesses and do all we can to provide opportunities to local people, especially through Soha Response.



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