



Scrutiny Group

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR SCRUTINY REVIEW

FINAL REPORT

November 2013

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1. Introduction

In the period June – August 2013 a small team from the Scrutiny Group scrutinised Soha Housing's approach to preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB).

This service was selected for scrutiny because:

- It is part of Soha's corporate plan – objective 4 Helping build strong, sustainable communities
- The issue was raised as important by tenants in the 2012 STAR survey
- Draft legislation (ASB Bill 2012) was part of the Queen's Speech.
- Soha has a fairly new ASB database (named TAGISH)

2. Key findings

The scrutiny set out to:

- establish if Soha's ASB strategies, policies and procedures are on track to deliver the two year corporate plan objective
- see if the scrutiny group can suggest improvements
- check that Soha is meeting the regulatory standards.

The team concludes that Soha is meeting the regulatory standards and is probably on track to deliver the corporate plan objective. There are, however, areas where we would like to see improvement and we make a series of recommendations in section 4.

3. Detailed scrutiny findings

We present our key findings in two sections, what we consider to be the current strengths of the service and the areas where we believe improvements could be made.

3.1 Strengths of the service

Performance

The management reports produced by Soha and the Southern LSVT benchmarking club reports show Soha's results as quartile 1 and 2 except for resolution which was quartile 4. Soha has only recently begun to measure satisfaction and has a new Key Performance Indicator (KPI) target of 82%. Recent figures given to the Group show an 80% satisfaction rate in the year to July based on 42 recently closed cases.

Partnership working

When conducting interviews with both South and Vale Council and the Thames Valley Police's ASB Officer it was apparent that they had a very good relationship with Soha and the Neighbourhoods Team. Soha's staff

regularly attend meetings and both organisations said that there was a much better contact with Soha than with any other social housing provider in the area. The Police Officer produced information showing the Neighbourhoods Team attended 98% of meetings last year and when not attending because of holidays communicated by email prior to the meeting.

When the scrutiny team interviewed Soha's Neighbourhood Officers, they were very positive and said they were working well with their partner agencies. They were also working with the Neighbourhood Officers of other organisations especially where, like at Great Western Park, they were working on estates with residents of other housing associations. Sovereign Vale was a housing provider particularly commended.

The risk assessment processes used by the police and Soha are compatible and this helps when moving cases between the two organisations and can also be used when cases go to Court.

The team asked the police officer about the forthcoming changes to the law and he told us that Soha was being proactive and planning ahead to meet these changes. He had already been asked to speak to housing staff.

The scrutiny team was interested to learn that the police ASB officer is able to take strong action in anti-social behaviour cases involving privately rented houses. Police have the power to close a property within two days and shut it for three months, which can be extended to six months. Previously this sanction only applied in cases of drug dealing. We feel that this will help tenants feel safer as many of our estates now have privately rented homes following right to buy.

Preventative work

A member of Soha's staff has been working in the community with partner agencies on preventing ASB. Projects have included the Community Action Plans at Great Western Drive, Fleet Meadow, Gainsborough Road and Medhill Drive and the Boot Camps in conjunction with the Police, Youth Services, Fire and Community Workers. This latter project resulted in qualifications being gained by the young people taking part. The scrutiny team was impressed by work that has been done.

3.2 Areas for improvement

There were, of course, areas for concern.

ASB database

TAGISH is the computer system used to record and produce reports on ASB. While the Group appreciates that this system was chosen with value for money in mind it appears to cause problems and frustration for the staff using it and throws up frequent error messages. Coincidentally it did this when the Group were being given a demonstration. Whether this is inherent to the system or needs attention from Soha's IT department is not clear.

ASB management by Berinsfield Community Business (BCB)

The STAR Survey Report December 2012 under Neighbourhood Problems says, “Tenants in Berinsfield in particular feel the problems are more severe than tenants from other areas.” We explored possible reasons for this as part of our scrutiny.

We found several areas of inconsistency between Soha and BCB which could lead to Soha tenants receiving a different level of service depending on where they lived.

- Training given to BCB housing officers on ASB management does not seem to be as comprehensive as that given to Soha staff
- Berinsfield residents often report issues direct to Soha staff rather than to their local officers and BCB officers may pass cases over to Soha staff for various reasons. In any case, Soha officers are expected to deal with the more serious cases. With no single, consistent procedure being followed for case handling, we are concerned that there may be communication failures. It also increases the workloads of Soha staff
- TAGISH is not used by BCB staff. They have a different method of recording ASB cases and there is no consistency in recording which means that BCB figures are not included in benchmarking data

ASB case management

- **Reporting.** We have had anecdotal reports that people who phone in to complain about ASB are sometimes told merely that someone will “have a word” with the person who appears to be causing a problem. It seems that such reports are not logged as ASB cases and this is likely to mean that Soha does not have a true picture of the incidence of ASB.
- **Action planning.** It appears that when an officer visits someone who has reported ASB they do not fill in an action plan then and there, agreeing with the complainant (and perhaps witnesses) a course of action with timescales. We were shown examples of the letters that the Neighbourhoods Officers send to the complainant after the visit but we do not think that they contain enough information. CIH Practice Briefs – Respect: delivering the ASB Charter for Housing – Managing ASB cases, page 32 advises the use of action plans.

Recording and reporting the full costs of ASB

We asked for information regarding the cost of forced entry by police to Soha properties (for ASB) and the associated legal costs but were told that it was not possible as they are grouped together with other items under one cost code.

We feel that Soha should be able to produce this information for management purposes and to share with tenants and would suggest changes.

Funding preventative work

The existing partnership arrangement will cease at the end of the financial year and there does not appear to be any funding provision for community projects in the future. The funding that community projects received from Soha's Excellence Fund has been missing for the last few years.

Our partner agencies are facing cuts and the scrutiny team is concerned that this might have an effect on how Soha's residents experience ASB. For example, the area for the Police ASB officer has doubled, his area originally covered South Oxfordshire District but now this has merged with Vale District, and he has no extra staffing for this.

Value for money – legal advice

We were told by a source external to Soha that Soha uses legal firms from out of the area for court cases and that they were not always up to the standard tenants would expect. We were given an example of a recent Section 21 hearing which should have been a formality but which was adjourned because Soha's solicitor was so badly prepared. Out of area advisors will also have greater travel costs.

We did not ask the Neighbourhoods Team for details but if this information is correct, it would be a matter for concern.

4. Recommendations

Following our scrutiny review we make the following recommendations:

4.1 Attention should be given to the problems with TAGISH and training should be given to BCB staff in its use.

4.2 Investigate funding streams to fill anticipated gaps following the cuts in funding for our partner agencies.

4.3 Introduce action plans to be completed with complainants and signed by the complainant and Neighbourhood Officer.

4.4 Ensure that the law firms used in eviction cases provide full value for money.

4.5 Soha to make changes to its cost codes to enable the costs associated with ASB issues to be easily produced.

4.6 We were very impressed with the handling and knowledge of ASB cases in the Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust and suggest that Soha might like to consider sharing good practice with VAHT. (They did indicate to us that they would like to forge links with Soha.)

4.7 Consider completion of HQN Respect toolkit to check Soha complies with best practice in its ASB delivery. This process should include the BCB staff

5. Methodology

This review was carried out using the following information and activities.

- Considerable reading of documents from Soha, HQN, CIH, Housemark, external partner agencies and other housing providers.
- Interviews with
 - Richard Peacock, Chief Executive
 - Maureen Adams, Director of Customer Services
 - Jo Douglas, Service Manager
 - Emma Bartholomew and Nicola Hansen, Neighbourhood Officers
 - Alice Hutchins, BCB
 - Toto Abakwiye, Neighbourhood Officer
 - Jackie Logan, RI Officer
 - Tracie Gilbert, VAHT ASB Manager
 - Tracey Edwards, Senior Neighbourhood Manager, VAHT
 - Gerald Prior and Bertie Doy, Tenants' Forum Portfolio Holders
 - PC Bob Steel, TVP ASB Officer (South & Vale)
 - Simon Hill, Environmental Protection Team Leader (South & Vale)
 - Mandeep Mann, Shared ASB Co-ordinator (South & Vale)

The scrutiny review team was:

- Carole Burchett
- Andy Dunsmore
- Rich Stevens (team leader)

6. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the staff of Soha, BCB, Thames Valley Police, South and Vale Council, Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust for being so open with us and helping us to complete this review.