

Soha Membership model - An Overview

Soha changed its Rules, Standing Orders and policies in 2017 to open up shareholding membership to tenants (including shared owners and leaseholders).

This move reflects a strong ethos of involving and listening to tenants and a system of Co-Regulation which has been in place for some years. This includes a Tenants' Forum, a Tenant Scrutiny Group, who report directly to Soha's Board, and a Tenant Audit Group who report directly to Soha's Audit and Risk Committee.

Starting with the purpose and values

Soha is a charitable housing association, registered as a Community Benefit Society with the FCA and a Registered Provider with the HCA.

Its vision is to be a leading community housing association where residents and staff shape a sustainable future and it has established four values:

- Put people first
- Achieve more together
- Look for opportunities
- Have high standards.

The membership and governance model developed by Soha reflects these priorities and values, underpinning the culture with an appropriate structure. This overview highlights key elements of the structure and documents which are reviewed regularly.

The mutual model in larger housing associations

Soha's membership model builds on learning from the Community Gateway and Rochdale models of shareholding membership. We are grateful to both associations for sharing details of their governance arrangements which have helped to inform the development of Soha's model.

Since Preston City Council developed the first Community Gateway Association in 2005, there have been a number of new housing associations formed on similar lines, including Watford (Watford Housing Trust), Braintree (Greenfields Community Housing) and L.B. Lewisham (Phoenix Community Housing). In addition, a number of Welsh Community Mutual Housing Organisations follow a similar model. In 2012, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing was formed and became the first housing association to have both tenant and staff shareholding membership. Merthyr Valley Homes, an existing LSVT, amended its rules and became a tenant and staff mutual in 2016.

Guaranteeing Tenant Involvement

The most important feature of Soha's new model is that it is based on the principle of ensuring that tenants can achieve the degree of influence or control that they want over their housing, the wider environment and the services they receive. The **Community Empowerment Strategy (CES)** is the key document in establishing how tenants and the wider community have a developing role (not just a set of rights fixed at one point in time). The fundamental principles of the model are encompassed in the Soha's rules which can only be amended at a General Meeting of the membership.

Membership

Shareholding membership of Soha is open to tenants and leaseholders (including shared owners). The Rules permit employee members up to a limit of 15% of the total membership. However, this is not currently an active membership category. Membership can also be offered to others in the community

(for example current and past Board members). Membership is not automatic, it has to be applied for and the application process and approval route are set out in the **Membership Policy**. This also sets out the role of members, specifically that they have guardianship of Soha's values and direction and a key role in influencing policy, shaping service delivery and monitoring performance. They ensure accountability of the Board and executive to residents.

Members' representative body

Soha's rules establish a representative body for members to ensure their voices are heard in the formation, improvement and review of policies and monitoring of service performance. Currently, this role is fulfilled by the Tenants' Forum. A Membership Commission, made up of 3 Forum members and 3 tenants who are less involved, are developing a proposal for a new body to be established by September 2018.

Board

Control of the association ultimately lies with the Board which is responsible for directing the affairs of the association. Soha's rules set out that a number of tenants must be included in the Board. The Board is accountable to the shareholding membership and the members' panel ensures transparency of decision making. The **Board recruitment and selection policy** sets out how Board members are recruited to ensure Soha has the right balance of skills on the Board. Rule changes recommended by the Board to the General meeting are voted upon by the membership who also approve appointments of new Board members and appoint the auditors. The **Board remuneration policy** sets out how Board pay and expenses are established and paid.

Rules

The rules are based on the NHF 2015 model rules, with amendments similar to those of the Community Gateway model, in particular around the role of the Community Engagement Strategy. The main principles are:

- Tenants are the largest group on the Board but not a majority. They are drawn from the wider membership and go through a selection process similar to that of independent Board members.
- There must be a strategy in place to promote community engagement, including how members and others are involved in making decisions about their services and landlord. This strategy is reported to the AGM and requires approval from the membership.

Standing Orders

The **standing orders** set out how the Board manages its affairs and devolves its responsibilities to the officers of Soha and to Board committees. They include extracts from the Rules where this is helpful.

Community Empowerment Strategy (CES)

The CES will be developed in partnership with members and the Board must present a report on it to the AGM for approval. The first strategy will be produced for the AGM in September 2018. The CES will be the framework for the provision of membership opportunities for influence, accountability, scrutiny, participation, training, funding and support, and implementation of the rules.

Summary

Soha's rules now ensure tenants are influential in the general running of the organisation, and in a position to prevent rule changes which would or could reduce the level of influence or undermine Soha's values. Major changes, such as mergers, would need to be agreed by the membership. This model enhances transparency of decision making and it is our belief that similar models have led to an inclusive culture, strong performance and high levels of customer satisfaction, whilst enhancing community cohesion and increasing the confidence and skills of our residents. We believe that its application to Soha will strengthen the culture and ethos of partnership working to achieve the best for tenants and communities.