



# Customers First

Housing Services Strategy









# Executive summary

During my career at Abri, I have always been proud of our work to create communities and empower lives. The opportunity to act as a custodian of a great organisation and to contribute to the future development of our mission is my career ambition. In short, I believe completely in our journey and our potential. I know absolutely through experience that great housing management, delivered by empowered people emotionally invested in their work, changes people's lives for the better.

However, with humility we must recognise that 2020 and 2021 have been especially difficult for many of our customers. Their direct feedback is that during the pandemic we have become remote and less locally focused and that our core housing services need to improve. This in all honesty is difficult feedback to hear but listen we must. I passionately believe we now have a real opportunity to build on Abri's substantial investment in our people and systems since our merger in November 2019 and through great people, we can create that local connection vital to great service. Our ambitious corporate plan means we can look forward with real optimism. For me personally this moment is the once in a career opportunity - the chance to lead, collaboratively deliver Abri's new customer-focused service and to empower the next generation of leaders and housing professionals – creating our communities and custodians of the future.

We know that the basic building blocks of customer satisfaction are a secure, well-maintained home, backed up with a highly effective housing management and repairs service. We also know that effective partnerships with our local authority partners, statutory and voluntary agencies are vital to improving the lives of our residents and our communities. If we combine these steps with clear communication and knowledgeable people on the ground who are empowered to make decisions in the best interests of our customers, then we will give customers what they want and expect: great service.

So, we will implement a new housing management approach that re-establishes a powerful sense of local ownership and accountability for improving services to customers, homes, and neighbourhoods. This programme will put our frontline colleagues right back at the centre of our organisational design.

We will reconnect with communities, local partners and elected representatives. Above all, we will listen and better communicate our approach and the challenges we face and unashamedly tell our story of making a positive difference to people's lives and to our communities.

In 2022/23 we will focus on creating a repairs and maintenance service that is consistent with our customers' expectations. Alongside this, we will through our learning and development and Housing Professional of the Future programme, continue to shape, develop, and support our housing management team, prioritising empathy, housing knowledge, and a desire to get the best outcomes for our customers.

We are unashamedly going back to the basics. Why? Because that's what our customers have told us they want and expect. We want our customers' experience with Abri to be positive and empowering from start to finish. We are committed to being Top 10 in our sector for customer satisfaction within the life of this strategy.

**Ralph Facey, Executive Director - Operations**



# Context

The strategic operating environment for our services continues to be challenging and subject to change. Increased consumer regulation from government, as well as ever increasing customer expectation, requires a corresponding shift in service design and delivery. We are not the only housing provider in our geographical area and others will also seek to meet these increased expectations. We must therefore futureproof our business by delivering a distinctive service model that is agile and delivers the consistent high-quality service standards that attract and retain customers. Our services strategy will drive our response to the proposed (from 2023) new consumer standard and focus on:

- **keeping our properties in good repair**
- **maintaining building safety**
- **effective complaints handling**
- **respectful and helpful tenant engagement**
- **responsible neighbourhood management.**

2021-22 has seen substantial preparatory investment in a 'One Abri' housing management service, which has delivered a simplified management structure better integrating repairs, housing management and community investment services. 'Optimum Abri' has delivered operational efficiency savings totalling £3.4m per annum. New, long-term partnerships have been established for the supply of materials with enhanced social value contributions and Abri has made a substantial investment in both its technology and people.

All of this has provided essential foundations for service improvement. However, an unprecedented operating environment, with the challenges of Covid, recruitment and materials supply has seen customer satisfaction significantly impacted across the sector. From our listening sessions with customers the call for an improved 'core service' is clear.

# What do our customers want?

In November 2021, we asked our customers what they thought of our service. Alongside a large-scale consultation with our independent living customers, we held several 'listening sessions' across our operating area. The themes that emerged were clear – frustrations with the repairs service, poor 'block' condition (1,070 blocks are home to 7,782 households – 23% of our homes), the need to improve the environment around our estates, and to strengthen our local focus and better 'join-up' our repairs, housing management and community investment services.

It is crucial that we respond to what our customers are telling us. Therefore, we will implement a new housing management approach that re-establishes a powerful sense of ownership and accountability for individual customers and their homes. We will redesign our operating footprints to unite legacy 'East and West', HomeCare and housing management operating areas. This is a programme that will put our frontline colleagues right back at the centre of our organisational design.

- **Our new service will feel different - we want our customers to feel empowered, heard, and directly involved in how we shape our services. From a colleague perspective our teams will be rooted in local communities and will connect with empathy, professionalism, and care.**







# Our strategic objectives

## We will:

- reshape our monitoring and reporting of satisfaction. During 2022/23 we will drive improvement and prepare for the requirements of the Regulator's new national satisfaction survey regime from April 2023. (This will - for all landlords - combine the results from 12 proposed 'perception' survey questions with 10 housing management and safety metrics)
- achieve top quartile satisfaction with our peers by April 2023 (all landlords of 25,000+ homes in the South East, South West and London)
- achieve top decile satisfaction with our peers by April 2025
- achieve top 10 sector performance by April 2026.

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## How will we achieve our goals?

Knowing what people want is integral to our success. Only by better understanding our customers' expectations can we hope to meet and exceed them. A great customer experience will run as a golden thread through the organisation starting from our corporate strategy, through our values and into our individual objectives. Given the challenges of our operating environment we will increasingly use data analysis and 'instant customer feedback' to guide our approach and better focus our work to secure the loyalty of our customers.

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## We will:

- listen better by creating new area panels to better hear our customers' voice at a local level, and account for performance and prioritise improvement
- enhance our contribution to local strategic partnerships
- streamline how we gather our customer data, so it is accurate and practical with no duplication.
- use data in a meaningful way to support Abri's business decisions
- implement our live customer feedback portal to obtain robust behavioural and preference data ('micro data') to influence how we provide services
- better tailor support solutions to customer groups that need additional support.

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## Accordingly, there are three strategic pillars to our refreshed Customers First strategy:

1. Strengthening our local focus and our housing management approach
2. Modernising our HomeCare service
3. Refocussing Community Investment and Resident Involvement

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# Strategic pillar one:

## Strengthening our local focus and housing management approach

We know from customer feedback that we need to better 'join-up' our housing management and repairs services and unify our areas of operation. Abri's digital and R&D investment has enabled the mapping of the principal drivers of dissatisfaction, for example: block condition, damp and mould, anti-social behaviour, arrears (financial pressure), deprivation indicators and fuel poverty. We will use this data to create new Abri operating areas that will unify our operating model, enhance our locality focus and over time improve property and estate condition.

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### We will:

- improve our call centre's initial response, scheduling and feedback loop, to provide a better, more consistent and joined-up experience for the customer
  - establish new 'unified' Abri operating areas in 2022 for our housing management, HomeCare and community investment activities. Teams will manage 'patches' of c600 units with a requirement to spend more time in our communities, engaging with customers and assessing property and estate condition
  - introduce an Abri-wide rolling 5-year cyclical maintenance programme, undertaking priority communal decorating, flooring and external improvement work during 2022-24. This will follow the completion of an in-depth condition survey of 830 blocks across Hampshire, Wiltshire and Berkshire by May 2022
  - create an Abri-wide grounds maintenance and cleaning service (in two phases) that improves quality and enhances value – with integration of our Berkshire and North Hampshire stock by April 2024
  - enhance our 'see something say something' approach to include estate condition, in line with the Regulator for Social Housing's proposed satisfaction reporting regime
  - refocus front-line staff resource, creating greater community accountability (for example through monthly joint inspections and 'patch surgeries') supported by Abri's single system investment and associated 'central support'.
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# Strategic pillar two:

## Modernising our HomeCare service

Abri has made significant foundation investment in our HomeCare service during 2021/22. So far, this has contributed £3m per annum to our Optimum Abri efficiency objectives, including creation of a 'single systems' digital framework, restructuring and harmonising trades staff terms and conditions, and creation of a new materials procurement framework that will increase supply chain resilience and add significant social value.

However, lockdowns, material scarcity, Covid-related absence and recruitment challenges in 2021 have impacted customer satisfaction. Our investment to date presents a unique opportunity to improve services by focussing on 'ease of use', frictionless transactions and web technology advancements to introduce 'trackability' and 'reliability'. We will increase customer engagement and satisfaction, emphasising Abri's social value and community business ethos - reliable, trusted, empathetic and kind. Cumulatively this approach will improve how it feels to be a customer of Abri – secure, well-looked after, listened to and valued.

Our ongoing systems development work is vital to this future. We need to focus on 'good now – brilliant later', leveraging the basic benefits of unified working followed by much smarter evolution of the system. But we also need to continue our step-change technological investment to ultimately achieve what many commercial businesses pursue as their ultimate destination - a Single View of The Customer (SVC), for service, and a Single View of our Assets (SVA). Above all, promoting a strong emotional connection to Abri is vital – colleagues will feel proud to be part of a modernised service (for example: good fleet, tools and training, user-friendly systems etc). This emotional connection to both our history and our modern future isn't common in repairs services in our sector – it's not just nice to have, it will be a "must have" in a future where the employment market for construction, maintenance and green-skills is likely to be super-heated.

Customer feedback from listening sessions, complaints, and our responsive work in 2021 demonstrates that the scheduling link between repairs, cyclical and planned maintenance can be improved. We must better leverage the 'see something, say something' aspect of 400+ colleague 'surveyors' out in our communities to identify issues earlier. Culturally, this strategy refresh re-orientates the business, empowering frontline colleagues to drive this change via our new operating areas.

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### We will:

- enhance our customer portal in 2022 to deliver 'driver' status updates, allow customers to manage their own appointments and allow us to highlight when planned maintenance upgrades are due. This presents a great opportunity to involve customers, providing a platform to hear their voice in terms of user experience and to improve through the development of, for example, customer testing panels
  - renew our outdated van fleet (over a three-year lease renewal cycle to 2026) to take advantage of emerging green technology and roll out a network of green recharging points on our estates
  - enable HomeCare colleagues to charge their vehicles at our office, local depot or at home by 2024
  - improve the balance of day-to-day repairs to planned and cyclical investment, and improve the link between repairs scheduling and stock data to better identify where components are failing 'early'
  - implement an 'automatic van stock replenishment system' and material delivery framework by 2025 (not just cheaper, better too – the right stock for the right job, completed right first time)
  - implement intelligent stock level technology by 2024, allowing our supply partners to text operatives when materials for booked jobs are available. In time our materials supplier partnerships will enable us to replenish our vehicles overnight
  - create a 'welcome to your home' offer for new rented customers during 2022
  - better equip our voids team with 'bespoke material packs' by 2024, with our supply chain delivering the required 'palette' to the property in advance of the work.
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**This strategy refresh reorientates the business, empowering frontline colleagues to drive this change via our new operating areas.**



As part of our Housing Professional of the Future programme, we will recruit, train, and develop our staff to provide the customer-focussed, agile and empowered human resource. Abri needs to deliver a truly 'modern' service with customer needs and satisfaction at its heart.

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**We will:**

- establish access to accredited courses for our residents (for example: electrical, gas, green retrofit and housing management) to provide a pipeline of potential employees for the future by 2023
- focus on growing apprenticeships and invest in developing existing trades staff (to combat market availability and wage growth factors), with an equal and opposite investment in nurturing, protecting, and retaining expertise/corporate memory and knowledge, and a dedicated programme to develop longer-tenure key colleagues
- develop labour mobility responses to tackle changes in demand and respond to development growth pipeline and short-term employment market factors (for example: recruit in the West to cover Bristol and Southampton).

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# Strategic pillar three:

## Refocussing Community Investment and Resident Involvement

Our Community Investment strategy of employment, empowerment, health and well-being activities in our most deprived areas has positively promoted community cohesion and Abri's stakeholder perceptions during an exceptional public health crisis and economic downturn. The effective partnerships we have developed will continue to be vital to Abri's success.

But, improving satisfaction requires re-focusing a greater proportion of existing resources to traditional resident involvement activities and to reposition this work at the centre of our housing management service. For example: developing and demonstrating 'locality focus' and accountability, listening better, increasing choice, communicating improvement timescales, and setting shared priorities, joint estate inspections and 'you said, we did' communication.

We know that proactively managed environments, with clean, safe, shared spaces and well-maintained communal areas can create places that people feel good about. By focussing on those shared spaces, as well as the fabric and quality of our homes, we can gain our customer's trust, create community pride, and enhance wellbeing.

We also want to tackle some of the inequalities we can see across our geography – some communities are disproportionately disadvantaged, and we think we can change that. Consistent with our stated aim to 'go where the need is greatest', we have defined eight Community Investment Zones where strong local partnerships are in place responding to local need. We will continue to target resources and investment and amplify our work with local delivery partners to improve outcomes.

By prioritising our employment service, focusing on supporting our customers to access better employment opportunities, gain new skills and explore their full potential, we can help customers take back financial control of their lives. Paired with a strong focus on empowerment activities, working alongside customers to ensure they have a real say in how their communities develop and thrive, we can actively play a part in the government's 'levelling up' agenda, creating communities where people want to live. We believe in the power of communities and will continue to listen to our customers about how to support, maintain and develop the places in which they live.

Re-energising our resident involvement activities will ensure that Abri continues to deliver what our customers want. Hearing the customer's voice is pivotal to delivering housing services that are relevant, necessary, and informed by real life experiences of living in an Abri home.

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### We will:

- review our resident involvement options in 2022 and create a new housing services panel for each of our operating areas and a new forum for our shared ownership customers
  - link our services strategy directly to our asset investment strategy, using an independent survey to define a major programme of improvement of shared spaces, making dedicated year on year investment into improving these important parts of community life
  - create new pathways into employment, giving at least 2,500 customers opportunities to take back financial control of their lives during the life of this strategy
  - actively exploit synergies with the emerging green economy through our Greener Futures Partnership and other collaborations while developing further opportunities within our wider supply chain
  - continue to secure external funding on behalf of our customers to benefit their communities, supplementing Abri's own £3m per annum investment with an additional £2m over the life of this strategy
  - create new and demonstrably more effective management responses to the issues that reduce community wellbeing, such as ASB, litter and poorly maintained shared spaces
  - redirect existing resources to actively sustain the tenancies of those who are most vulnerable to the effects of fuel poverty and other rising living costs
  - embrace all the guiding principles contained in the Regulator's proposed new consumer standard
  - explore the future growth of our high-performing supported housing service
  - build an online 'Customer and Community Hub', signposting to community and 'self-help' services that reduce social isolation, extend support and help to those customers who need it most.
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# Summary and Conclusion

A dramatically different operating environment necessitates a strategic refresh and enhanced focus on core housing management and repairs services, 'listening' and improving the condition of our homes and estates. This provides a unique opportunity to deliver Abri's strategic mission of creating communities and empowering lives. In delivering this strategy we will unashamedly be going back to basics.

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## We will:

- re-position the frontline colleague back at the centre of the business, supported by excellent data, systems, tools and support networks
  - listen to our customers more carefully, hear their voices and action the changes they want
  - build strong links with local strategic partnerships and amplify effective local service delivery approaches
  - structure our housing team to give clear accountable ownership for homes, estates and schemes, where a named person is responsible and answers to our customers
  - improve our customer service centre to resolve more calls at the first point of contact
  - make HomeCare a centre of excellence in terms of quality and service, prioritising ease of use, trackability and reliability
  - use our bespoke Housing Professional of the Future programme and targeted learning and development to improve service, enhance our connection with elected representatives and to create our custodians of the future
  - operate a 'see something, say something' culture of zero tolerance for anything that is not consistent with Abri's standards
  - radically improve our approach to both transactional and corporate customer communications
  - ensure that customers get off to a great start in their home with the right void standard, welcome pack and service
  - ready ourselves for the future, understanding the impact that changing demographics and tenure types will have on our service design.
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