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OUR THIRD ANNUAL REPORT TO OUR CUSTOMERS



Welcome to this third Annual Report for customers of Ability.

If you are a regular reader you will know that we want to put customers at the heart of everything we do. That is why I am spending much more of my time getting out and visiting our housing developments and support services.

One of the things I have learned from listening to customers is that not all of your views and feedback reaches the people who make decisions about your services. I want to change that.

That is why we have appointed a Customer Engagement Co-ordinator. Her name is Maddy Cox. Maddy's job is to make sure that ALL your feedback, whether it be from a Customer Panel meeting, a local group, survey, complaint or compliment, is used to improve your homes or services.

We want every one of you to feel that you can provide feedback in a way that suits you. We also want you to feel that your views are listened to and acted upon.

In this report, you can read more about Maddy's work and about the improvements we have been making to your homes and services this year.

I am looking forward to meeting more of you in 2013.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "David". The signature is fluid and cursive.

David Williams
Chief Executive

YOUR HOME

You told us how important your home and repairs service are to you, so we have been working hard to improve this service offer.



THIS YEAR

We reorganised our customer service centre to provide a dedicated repairs call service. This means you can speak directly to the team who will be dealing with your repair and who make sure our contractor is alerted on the same day that you contact us.

The repairs service has continued to improve through the year, but we know we have further to go. We measure how long it takes to complete repairs and this is how we did:

Completed within our published target times:

94% of emergency repairs (out of a total of 465) completed within the target of 24 hours

81% of urgent repairs (out of a total of 741) completed with the target of 7 days

92% of routine repairs (out of a total of 1219) completed within the target of 28 days.

We do a weekly random telephone survey of 10% of customers who have had a repair carried out; this year to date 96% of you told us that you are satisfied with the work.

This year we also:

- built another 43 new homes; all our new homes meet the “Ability Standard” that customers agreed with us
- replaced 63 gas boilers with new energy efficient ones
- carried out gas safety checks in 100% of our occupied properties
- installed carbon monoxide detectors in all properties where there is a gas supply.



NEXT YEAR

We will carry out a comprehensive programme of planned maintenance that includes replacement heating, windows and doors, electrical testing and upgrading where necessary and external decoration. We will also review our Adaptations Policy.



YOUR TENANCY



We listened to your feedback and we understand that for many of our customers having your own home is a very important factor in enabling you to live more independently.

THIS YEAR

We let 86 properties. Of these 43 were new properties, 1 was acquired and 42 were properties that became available for re-letting.

Our target for letting properties is 28 days but we only achieved an average of 39 days. This is mainly because we have to make sure that the property is suitable for a household nominated to us. We visit all new customers to discuss their requirements before making a decision and sometimes need to see several households for one property.

We haven't yet done a formal survey of new tenants but our Housing Services Officers contacted all new tenants shortly after they moved in. Overall feedback has been very positive and it enables us to identify any matters that our new tenants might need some assistance with.

We collected more rent this year than in previous years and have exceeded our target. This ensures that Ability can continue to afford quality services for its tenants.

“I feel safe here in my own flat and I love having my own kitchen and bathroom”

Christine, Merton

NEXT YEAR

- We will do a formal survey to capture feedback from all new tenants to see how we can improve their experience. We will discuss the survey results with the Customer Panel.
- We will be offering advice about the impact of the Welfare Reforms and will try to offer guidance to anyone who is experiencing hardship.
- We will be talking to the Customer Panel about our rent policy and how we can keep our rents affordable.



Wendy Crichlow, Chair of the Board's Customer Services Committee, listens to Customer Panel members' views

YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY

When we reviewed our “Ability Standard”, customers told us that your number one priority was to feel safe and secure in your home.



THIS YEAR

We completed two security projects, one in Croydon and one in Reading. Tenants there tell us that they now feel much safer in and around their homes.

We have been working on a third project where there has been a very high level of vandalism mainly caused by people from outside the area. We will be improving security and making the communal spaces safer by changing the design.

NEXT YEAR

- We will carry out more security works as part of our planned maintenance programme to bring older properties up to the Ability Standard. This will include putting better locks on doors and windows, installing door viewers and replacing doors and windows where necessary. This will be the second year of our three year programme of safety and security improvements.
- We will review our Pet Policy to ensure we promote responsible pet ownership.
- We will continue to monitor estate services such as gardening and cleaning to ensure communal areas are well maintained and pleasant.
- We will continue to work with police, other housing providers and local agencies to ensure all anti-social behaviour is tackled promptly and effectively and that communities are supported and strengthened.



YOUR SUPPORT

Care & Support customers have told us that you want to be able to make your own decisions and to manage your own lives. We are therefore looking at new ways of providing our services to help you live more independently.

THIS YEAR

- We established Ability Care & Support as a separate division of Ability. This helps us to focus more clearly on services for customers who need care or support and to provide more personalised services.
- We registered with the Care Quality Commission in more areas so that we can provide personal care to more customers who want their care from Ability.
- We launched **yourAbility**. This service is designed to offer even more flexible support to customers who have personal budgets. **yourAbility** now has over 30 customers in five local authorities areas. Customers using the service have already given us very positive feedback.
- We worked with customers to produce more of our documents and communication materials in *Easy Read* format. You can now get *Easy Read* versions of support plans, this annual report, "Window" and other service documents.
- We introduced a menu of local customer engagement activities to give you the opportunity to give us your views and feedback in more ways that suit you.
- We involved some of you in the selection of local Ability Care and Support staff.
- We held 'welcome events' for our new customers in Croydon and Merton.

NEXT YEAR

Over the next 12 months we will focus on developing our engagement activities. With the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator we will promote and encourage active participation in all our services. From the feedback gathered we will work with the Customer Panel to review and decide how best to implement service improvement suggestions.

WELFARE REFORMS

This article tells you about two very important welfare reforms due to be introduced from April 2013.



1 The “Bedroom Tax”

This may affect you if your household has a “spare” bedroom. For example, if you are a single person or a couple and you have a two bedroom home this reform may affect you (unless for example you have a carer sleeping over and using the spare bedroom). If you are a couple with one child or even two children of the same sex in a three bedroom home this may also affect you.

What does this reform mean?

If you rely on housing benefit to help with your housing costs then from April 2013 you may not get the proportion of benefit that relates to your spare bedroom. In practice this could be about 14% of your total rent. For example if your weekly rent is £100 then you could lose £14 from your benefit and you will need to find that shortfall from other income.

We will be contacting our tenants who we think may be affected by this reform. If you are worried and think you may be affected, you can contact your housing services officer who will try to offer you more advice and information.

2 Changes to the Council Tax Benefit

All local authorities have to introduce a new eligibility scheme for council tax benefit from April 2013. Some local schemes may remove the 100% benefit currently awarded to households in receipt of full housing benefit. This will mean you have to meet the cost of at least some of your council tax bill from other income. Schemes details will probably not be published until January 2013.

It is important that you look out for details of your local scheme from January 2013 so that you know what your liability will be. We will put information on our web site later this year so please check our Welfare Reform update: www.ability-housing.co.uk

VALUE FOR MONEY

We always try to make sure we get good value for the money we spend.



THIS YEAR

- We achieved real cost reductions in the delivery of support services and limited other cost increases to below the rate of inflation. 
- We agreed extra payments to our repairs contractor if they achieve exceptional levels of performance and quality. We call this an “incentive”; we also have penalties if they fail to perform to agreed levels. 
- We invested more in planned and preventative maintenance. This should mean we need to carry out fewer repairs in the future. 
- We invested more in energy improvement to keep homes warm and keep your heating costs as low as possible. 
- We set up a service improvement group to look at ways to achieve better service and value for money. 

NEXT YEAR

- We will develop a new value for money strategy in consultation with your Customer Panel. 
- We will continue our efforts to reduce costs. 

We will also use our newly appointed customer engagement co-ordinator to seek your views and feedback on the value for money of our services.

FACTS & FIGURES

- In 2011 we spent the equivalent of £620 per home on planned maintenance
- In 2012 we increased this to £1,053 per home
- We provide over £5 million of care and support services every year.

GOVERNANCE AND FINANCE

The Customer Services Committee was set up by the Ability Board to ensure customers are at the centre of the work we do.

THIS YEAR

The Customer Services Committee met to consider the next steps in customer involvement and scrutiny. To help make our plans happen we appointed a Customer Engagement Co-ordinator, Maddy Cox (see page 9).

The Board reviewed the new regulation requirements in this area and discussed ways to achieve better outcomes for customers.

Financial Results: We achieved our financial targets for 2012 and set a budget for 2013 which keeps to our long term plans. This means we are sure that we have the money we need to build more new homes and to make all the improvements to homes and services that we have told you about.



NEXT YEAR

Through the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator we will work more closely with the Customer Panel and develop its role and involvement to ensure we focus on providing good outcomes for customers.

This will include involving Customer Panel members more in holding the Ability board to account and in resolving the most difficult complaints.

We will continue to champion excellent customer service amongst our staff and Board members to foster the “can do” attitudes which are so important to delivering a customer centred approach.



Dee, one of our tenants who recently moved into our new flats in Cedars Avenue, Merton

YOUR INVOLVEMENT

This is one of the ways you can get involved with Ability. The Panel is made up of Ability customers who have expressed an interest in helping improve Ability's services and they also provide regular feedback to us.

**THIS
YEAR**

There are 11 members on the Panel who are a mix of tenants and support service customers from different areas across the south east.

More members

To make the Panel even more effective we encouraged more customers to join. From our advert in the summer edition of Window we have gained 3 more members.

Some Panel members suggested that they would prefer to be involved in discussing either Housing or Care & Support issues (not both). This proposal will be developed at the next Panel meeting.

Training and support for Customer Panel members

To help Panel members take a more active role in the design and review of our services we want to offer training. We will be working with Panel members to help them decide which training will help them most.

Panel representative in the Customer Services Committee of the Board

One of the Customer Panel members attends this committee twice a year. His role is to represent all customers in the review of feedback and agree improvements going forward.

Involving customers in solving complaints

We have appointed a dedicated Customer Engagement Co-ordinator, Maddy Cox (see opposite). She has taken over our complaints process and will be talking to the Customer Panel about this and working with them to get their views on the best way of handling complaints.

Involving more customers at a local level

During the year we tried to improve the ways that you can get involved with Ability at a local level and give us your feedback.



Here are some examples:

A notice-board with supply of post-it notes - you write your idea or suggestion on a post-it and stick it on the board. Ideas are reviewed monthly with feedback given to the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator.

Service meetings

Regular informal meetings to discuss local issues and debate 'thought cloud' suggestions.

Complaints Update

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We had a total of 45 complaints over the last 12 months.

These were mostly about:

- Your Housing 38%
- Your Support 62%

What have we learned?

Many of the complaints found problems with our communications and the attitude of staff dealing with the problem.

What are we doing about it?

- All complaints will be co-ordinated by Maddy Cox and the Customer Panel will be more involved in monitoring complaints and recommending improvements.
- We will continue to train all staff to deliver excellent customer services and to take responsibility for resolving problems.
- We will continue to work with our repairs contractors to deliver an effective and responsive service.

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Over the next 12 months we will:

- develop the role of the Customer Panel and increase members level of involvement in our activities and service delivery
- ensure feedback mechanisms are in place throughout our services and responses are fed back to managers to action
- through the Customer Engagement Co-ordinator, monitor complaints, identify trends and opportunities for improvement.



Customer Engagement Co-ordinator

Maddy Cox has been working for Ability since April 2010. She started as a Housing Support Worker in one of our services in Surrey for people with mental health issues so she already has a good understanding of Ability and the services we provide.

In her new role Maddy will be responsible for developing customer engagement in both housing and care and support services. She will work with the Customer Panel members to help them get more involved in the design and delivery of our services and in making sure their views are fed back through the organisation.

Maddy will also oversee complaints handling and analysis to ensure customers get a prompt and effective resolution. She will produce reports to help us identify any trends in customer complaints and opportunities for improvement.



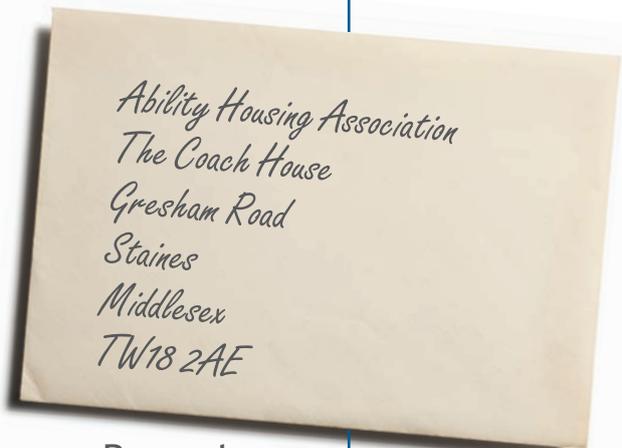
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