



Window

Opening a window into our lives with Ability



Meet our new customers in Reading

Inside

News

Wendy has a new home in Reading



Peer support

Aroona is enjoying peer support group activities in Hillingdon



Moving on

We say goodbye and thanks to Carron

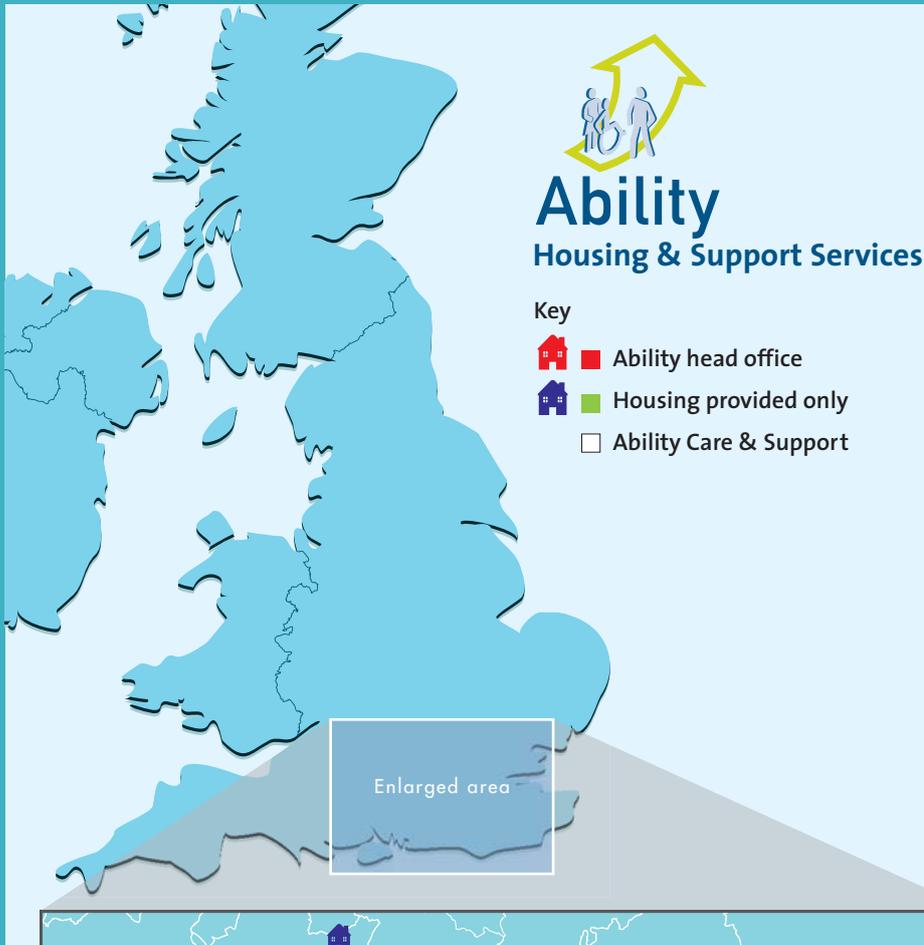


Flying high

Paul takes his first parachute jump



Where we have customers



We work in **33** local authority areas

We have **698** homes



Stories in this issue

- Phoebe Cusden House is in **Reading p3**
- Genesis House is in **Staines p3**
- Leith Close is in **Slough p4**
- Our first peer support group is running in **Hillingdon p5**
- Sean Browne lives in **Havant p7**
- Wishbone Way is in **Woking p8**
- Prospect Lane is in **Havant p8**
- Paul Swift lives in **Uxbridge p9**
- Robbie Mason lives in **St Albans p9**



New homes in Reading

10 customers have moved in to our new supported living flats in Reading.

Phoebe Cusden House is home to customers with learning and physical disabilities, mental health and complex needs. Customers get round-the-clock support.

On Friday 31 March, we held an official opening and invited Cllr Mohammed Ayub to be the guest of honour.

Customers and their guests joined us for tea and cake at Cedar Court care home, which is just next door.

Wendy is pleased with her new home. She says: "My favourite thing about my flat is everything! I love having my cat Oliver with me. He's 13. Ability support me and they're great. They're so funny. I call them silly sometimes, and they laugh and I laugh."

The service is named after Phoebe Cusden MBE who was a former Mayor of Reading.



A plaque for Genesis House

Ramon is showing off the new plaque he designed to welcome guests to Genesis House in Staines.

Genesis House customers asked if they could have £45 to pay for a sign from the Improvement Fund. The Customer Panel were pleased to say, "Yes!".

If you would like an improvement for your service, why not ask your housing or support worker to put in a request?

Care & Support

Ability Care & Support has had an eventful 6 months.

The good news is that we opened a new supported living service at Phoebe Cusden House in Reading.

However, this January, the Care Quality Commission decided that 2 of our services need to improve. We have been working hard ever since to draw up action plans to make changes. We intend to get a good or outstanding rating next time around.

All our other registered services have been rated as good by the Care Quality Commission. In October, our services in Hillingdon were rated as outstanding by the local authority.

Rita Asamoah has joined us as Director of Care & Support and Christina Harben took the new position of Quality Lead. They will help us make sure that you receive consistently high quality services from Ability.



Housing

We reviewed the work of the housing team over the past year. We are now bringing in changes to improve our service.

When we asked them about their work, the team said they wanted to make more difference to customers' lives. They were also finding it difficult to handle repairs issues.

Following the review, we drew up a new plan for housing management and we will soon have 9 supported housing assistants and a new housing manager to run our new-look service.

The plan also includes special training for the team, covering the key areas of our housing work.

The team will also get more feedback from customers in future, so that we can keep improving our services. Some customers are now coming on estate inspections. We will also hold meetings to explain how we plan to tackle problems.

In future, the team will run rent surgeries and a housing roadshow. We will produce videos about our housing work.





The best thing about Leith Close is that I got my freedom!

I'm Pablo. I help to support Peter and Stephen at Leith Close in Slough.

I am so happy to be here. I do my own thing and I am independent.

Living at Leith Close in Slough gives Peter and Stephen much more independence – and they are both delighted.

Peter values his freedom

Peter says that living at Leith Close couldn't suit him better.

He says: "When I came here, I settled very easily. Everybody and the staff cheered me. They make me laugh.

"I can't complain. They help me with my medicine. We have a chat. They make me happy and make me feel 10 years younger.

"When I lived in a home when I was young, there was no freedom. Here I go to town, London, Langley and Windsor by myself. I feel safe. I tell staff what time I'm coming home. I carry my pocket phone. I carry an identity card and money on me.

"The best thing about Leith Close is that I got my freedom!"

I'd like to live here for ever!

Stephen is really happy with his new home in Leith Close – but it took a bit of getting used to.

"I settled here on the 12th June 2017. I used to live with my family and in other places in supported housing.

"On the first day I started staying here, I felt scared, frightened, anxious. Now I feel happy. I feel safe because we've got the intercom. I will use it in an emergency only.

"Staff help me with medication, hair washing, cooking, and they come in to make sure I am ok, and they do it brilliantly. I have told them to leave me alone if I get panicky. It just happens and they listen to me. All of them. The other clients have also been kind to me.

"I can't believe I am here. This is the best place for me. I am so happy to be here. I do my own thing and I am independent. Everything is incredible.

"Here it's much better than where I come from. Where I was before, there was a flight path and there was a lot of noise from the planes. I am getting used to the trains here. They don't bother me.

"Thank you for a lovely home. I'd like to live here for ever."

Peer support in Hillingdon

Customers say the new peer support group in Hillingdon is a great success.

The Hillingdon group now has 10 members and gets support from 5 Ability staff members.

Peer support groups bring people together to organise their own activities. In a peer support group you get to go out. You make friends. And you can share your skills and experience.



Aroona: I'm becoming more sociable

"I've been involved in going on the trip to Kew Gardens, which was lovely, and also going to a Chinese buffet. They were absolutely fun. I really like Chinese and I really enjoyed the beautiful garden.



"The best aspect of peer support is meeting people and relating to them. Being able to

empathise with them and being able to encourage each other – and just make people aware they're not alone."

The trips have helped Aroona "to become more outgoing, more sociable", she says, as well as to be "a bit more energetic and confident".

Aroona hopes more people will join in. "We can start categorising people's interests. Say, if there are 10 people who want to do swimming and 10 who want to do an art class – they're not alone."

She would definitely recommend joining the group to a friend.

Lisa: It's helped my depression

Lisa has been battling with quite severe depression. She says that peer support is making a big difference in her life.

She is now going out every week on outings and joining dog walkers in the park. She recently enjoyed a Chinese buffet lunch and is looking forward to a bowling trip.

She says: "It's the inspiration of being with others. I think it's helped my depression, which is really important.

"Everyone is really quite understanding and I feel quite comfortable.

"I'm surprised at how comfortable I've felt."



A trip to Kew Gardens for Hillingdon Peer Support Group

Benefit changes: how they

Moving from Disabled Living Allowance

Many of our customers get Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to help with their mobility or care costs.



If you are under 64, you will get a letter asking you to come to an assessment for the new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) instead.

You may need help to fill out your application form. You can also take someone with you to your appointment, so you feel supported. Your support worker is an ideal person for this.

Sadly, many people get a rejection letter after their PIP assessment. This is because the Government is trying to pay benefits to fewer people.

If you get turned down for PIP at this stage, try not to get too anxious.

Your support worker can help you appeal the decision. Many people win their appeal at a Benefits Tribunal hearing. At least 6 people out of 10 may get their benefit back at this final stage.

We know it can be worrying to go through the PIP process. It can take a long time. But you can count on our support.

Going through a PIP appeal

Carron was on DLA and she thought she would always get this benefit.

“Then I got a letter saying all change,” Carron recalls.

“I got my Mum to sign the forms, because I can’t – I’m dyslexic. They agreed to give me money, but I only got £87 a month.

“It was diabolical, because I’ve got bills to pay. I was getting over £400 a month before – so I lost a lot of money. I was so upset.”

With help from Ability’s Nikki Elvin, Carron appealed the decision. Carron says: “Nikki came with me and she was absolutely brilliant.

“We ended up saying that, yes, I did go to college, but I am dyslexic and I do have learning disabilities and I can’t manage writing or reading.”

After putting Carron’s case, Carron and Nikki were asked to wait outside.

“When I came back in, yep, I got it all!” says Carron. “I said to Nikki, ‘You’ve made my day!’, I was so over the moon.”

Carron’s advice to other customers is – if you can’t do your form, get help from your Support Worker, Citizens Advice or another charity.

“Don’t do it on your own. You might not do it properly and you might lose your money.”

If you can’t do your form, get help from your support worker or a charity.



affect Ability customers

Universal Credit

Universal Credit will replace all six of the benefits shown below.

New claimants who are single already apply for Universal Credit.

In some areas, couples and families making a new claim also have to apply for Universal Credit.

However, most of our customers have been claiming benefits for a while. This means you still get benefits like Housing Benefit and Employment & Support Allowance.

The Government keeps delaying when they will switch existing claimants to Universal Credit. The expected date is now between July 2019 and March 2022.

We will let you know if this changes.



I tried to get out of this mess, but it was quite hard.

How Sean sorted out his debts

When your income is low and you aren't great at budgeting, you can quickly run up debts – as Sean Browne found.

"My bills got so high – I'd never seen bills go over £1,000 – and I tried to get out of this mess, but it was quite hard," he says.

Sean's support worker Nikki Elvin recalls: "Sean had run up about £4,000 in debts, with most of it on four mobile phones." Sean admits he also let his electricity bill get very high, by using too much energy.

At this point, Nikki stepped in to get Sean the support he needed from the Step Change charity. Step Change help by making a debt management plan. They contact everyone you owe money to and get them to agree to you paying it back in small regular amounts. Then you pay the whole amount to Step Change, who pay all your bills.

Sean is pleased and relieved after sorting out his debt problems. "My electricity bill is down to £60 and I don't use so much now.

"I just have my phones to pay now. My money is back where it was. I don't have to keep taking all my money out for bills."

If you need help with debts, don't despair. Your support worker really can help. You can find also out more about Step Change at www.stepchange.org

Benefits change for under-35s

From 1 April 2018, Housing Benefit and the housing element of Universal Credit will change for most people under the age of 35.

The new rules will affect people who signed their tenancy or licence agreement after 1 April 2016 (or 1 April 2017 if you live in a hostel).

What this means for you

Some Ability customers under 35 won't be affected. For example, if you get the highest or middle rate care component of DLA (Disability Living Allowance), or if you get the daily living component of PIP (Personal Independence Payment).

If you are affected, from 2018, your Housing Benefit will not be based on how much rent you actually pay.

The council will calculate your benefit in the same way as for someone

renting privately. They will use the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate.



If you live alone, you will only get the 'shared accommodation rate'. This is meant to cover the cost of a room in a shared house. It won't cover the cost of a studio or one bedroom flat.

If you live with a partner or with your family, your award will assume you pay a low rent. The rent on your home may cost more than this.

What Ability will do

Before next year, we will check which customers will be affected. We will make sure you get the support you need to cope with the change.

If you have any worries, you can always talk to your support worker.

A new home for Julie (and George the cat)

Julie moved to Wishbone Way in June 2016, along with her much-loved cat. She used to live with her twin sister in a bungalow.

“I had another floating support provider, but they weren’t very good. My care manager told me about Wishbone and I came to see what it was like. As soon as I saw it, I really liked it – it’s big and clean and the people I met were nice.

“I brought all my things with me from the bungalow and enjoyed laying them all out however I wanted them.

“I really like living here, because there’s always support when I need it, or if I just want a chat. I have support every day if I want it.

“I have a cat called George – he’s a rescue cat and is about 3 years old. I was allowed to bring him with me and he loves it here too.

“Living here helps me to be independent and make my own choices. I like doing crochet, colouring and listening to music.

“I also love horror films. I feel happier here, having my own space, and I get on with all my neighbours.

“I sometimes have support with cooking, but mostly I do it on my own. I made a slow cooker sweet and sour

I really like living here, because there’s always support when I need it.



chicken dish recently. It is mostly timings I need support with when I cook, so the slow cooker was great.”

Carron moves on from Prospect Lane

Carron Cleversley has moved on to her own one-bedroom flat – after spending many years as an Ability tenant.



I got involved with everything – with the Customer Panel meetings and the Q-Team.

“I’m now in a one-bed flat on the second floor, in Buckingham. It’s a lovely area and I’ve got a lovely neighbour,” Carron says, after her move from our Prospect Lane service.

Carron is very happy to be living more independently at this stage of her life. “I don’t want a key worker, because I want to be independent myself. But I have got someone who is going to help me go out to clubs and stuff like that.”

Carron first became an Ability customer after hearing about our services because two of her cousins were living with us.

“I couldn’t move into the same service, but I was put into a shared house in Hayling. I was there for three or four years,” she says.

Carron represented the Q-Team when they won an award for ‘Excellence in tenant inspection’ last year.

Carron became unhappy and moved back to her Mum’s for a while, before being offered an Ability flat in Prospect Lane. “I was in that flat for 10 years,” she says.

Carron would recommend Ability to other people. “1 is for your independence. 2, you know you’re safe – you know you’ve got staff if you need them.

“Not only that, I got involved with everything – with the Customer Panel meetings and the Q-Team. So I was even interviewing staff for jobs.

“If it wasn’t for Ability, I wouldn’t have been doing anything. I was so proud they asked me and in the end I did a lot for them. It was brilliant!”

We want to say a big thank-you to Carron for all the work she put in. We wish her well for the future.

Paul jumps from 10,000 feet

Care & Support customer Paul Swift made a tandem parachute jump in March – despite being afraid of heights.

Paul decided “to do things I wouldn’t normally do”, while he was in remission from serious health problems.

Paul explains: “After I came out of mental hospital, I went into care homes and I did Cancer Research voluntary work. Then a month after I stopped volunteering, I got cancer. It was Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.

“I went into remission in 2015 and I finally got my own place in 2016. I thought, ‘I’ve got to do something’. So, I flew for the first time – to Scotland. Then, this year, on March the 2nd, I jumped out of an aeroplane at 10,000 feet!”

Paul chose a tandem jump on the advice of his doctor. For this sort of jump, your harness is strapped to a professional parachute jumper.

“I was more nervous in the plane than when I jumped out,” he recalls. “You’re in the plane and they are showing you on the altimeter that you’re at 4,000

feet. Then when you’re sitting on the edge of the plane and there’s nothing under your feet – just sitting there and looking down – you think, ‘Are you really going to do this?’

“I had a full minute of freefall and I’m was moving at 125 miles per hour. I never realised how much baggy skin I had on my neck – in the video they took, it looked like ripples in the water.”

Paul paid for his jump himself and raised money for Hillingdon Mind. He has been an Ability customer in Uxbridge since February.



This year, on March the 2nd, I jumped out of an aeroplane at 10,000 feet!



Radio interview with Robbie

Robbie Mason from our St Albans service took part in a BBC Radio broadcast in December. He was helping to promote his band’s Christmas single.

The presenters of the Ouch disability talk show wanted to hear all about the making of ‘Christmas as a Punk’ – and about the Electric Umbrella music charity that Robbie is involved with.

The words and music were worked out by the group. They then recorded it at the Abbey Road Studios. Several famous musicians also took part.

Robbie loved that it was punk. He told the Ouch presenters: “It’s fantastic music. It’s just to do with anarchy. People don’t give a damn about anything, so they want to get everything across by expressing about punk, which is really good!”

Robbie said he really enjoys going to Electric Umbrella. “We get to hang out. We get to use instruments and just sort of have fun. Basically, that’s how I can sum it up. It’s about having fun. And learning different things about different people. It’s so exhilarating. It’s really good.”

You can see the music video at: <http://punk.electricumbrella.co.uk>



It’s so exhilarating!

Our care & support survey

PFA Research Ltd carried out a survey for us.

PFA Research asked our care & support customers 5 questions about the support we provide. They asked for comments too. In total, 221 customers returned completed surveys.



The questions we asked

1. Are you happy with the support service you get from Ability?

✓ 89% (203) said **yes**

Some customers wish their carers didn't keep changing.

2. Does Ability help you feel safe?

✓ 86% (195) said **yes**

3. Do Ability staff treat you with respect?

✓ 92% (205) said **yes**

4. Does Ability support you to be more independent?

✓ 85% (189) said **yes**

5. Would you recommend Ability to other people who need support?

✓ 92% (205) said **yes**

My Ability employee has enabled me to lose over 2 stone by taking me out on walks.

I feel that Ability provides me with a safety net when I have any problems that are outside the scope of the psychiatrist.

Ability has helped me to live independently for the first time and has supported me throughout. I do not think I could have achieved this without Ability's assistance.

The staff are really nice and very professional. The flat is really good.

Everybody I have dealt with at Ability has not only been helpful, but very friendly, so much so we've very often had a good giggle together.

Knowing that staff here are on hand to provide me with help, makes me feel more confident and happy in my surroundings.

I will be leaving Ability this year. I have enjoyed my time here. Thank you.

Change to repairs



From 14 September, our repairs service is changing and we won't be using Morgan Sindall any more.

We are now getting advice from experts at Just Housing Group, because we want to find a better way to provide you with reliable repairs, based locally to you.

We did talk to Morgan Sindall about this first. But together we decided to end their contract early.

The number to call for repairs is still 0800 085 3035.

Until 14 September, Morgan Sindall will

take your call about an urgent or emergency repair.

But from 14 August, Wendy at Just Housing will take your calls about routine repairs.

We are making this change because we want to give you a better repairs service. Customers said it was the area of our work that most needs improving.

If you have any questions, please talk to your Housing Service Officer or your Housing Assistant. Or phone the office on 01784 490 910.

Keeping you safe from fire

Everyone at Ability was very upset about the big fire at Grenfell Tower. Grenfell Tower was a council block in west London.

After the Grenfell Tower fire, the Government asked every council and housing association to send information about their homes.

We told the Government that none of Ability's homes are in tower blocks with dangerous cladding.

Your safety is very important to us. We keep to fire safety rules and we carry out regular fire safety checks.

- All your homes have smoke or other alarms.
- All our services have fire safety doors and exit signs showing how to leave the building in a fire.



- Our staff check all shared areas to make sure that fire escape routes are kept clear.

On this page, we explain how you can help to keep everyone safe.

Keep your belongings inside your home

If you live in a flat

You must not leave anything you own in shared areas. Leaving things in corridors, stairways and entrances is a safety risk.

- They can cause a fire.
- They can make a fire more serious or spread more quickly.
- They can get in the way of people trying to escape from a fire.
- They can make it harder for fire fighters.

The landlord that owns your building is

responsible for keeping shared areas clear. To keep people safe, we may take away any items we find.

If you share a house

If you live in a shared house, you must not block the fire exits or leave anything you own in corridors or stairways.

If you have a balcony

You must not keep barbecues, or other items that catch fire, on your balcony.



Smoking rules

Smoking in communal areas is against the law.

If you share with other people, we don't allow you to smoke in your private space either.

If you have a flat, we prefer you not to smoke indoors.

When you do smoke, please be very careful to put out your cigarette butts properly and clear them up after you.

Fire safety tips

Avoid starting a fire

- Don't smoke indoors and never smoke in bed.
- Keep matches away from children.
- Don't leave lit candles alone.
- Don't sit too close to a fire.
- Don't overload electrical sockets.
- Don't cook when you're too tired, or after drinking alcohol.
- Never leave pans unattended.
- If a pan catches fire, try to turn off the heat. Don't throw water on to it – you might start a fireball.
- Check everything is safe before you go to bed. Close doors, switch off electrical items that don't need to be on at night.
- Avoid charging phones overnight.

Be prepared for a fire

- Check your smoke and heat alarms regularly. Your support worker can help.
- Make sure you know the escape plan at your service.
- Make and practise your own escape plan if you live in general needs housing.
- Keep your door and window keys nearby.

In a fire

- If your home is affected by smoke or fire, don't try to put it out. Get out and close the door. Call 999.
- If you can't get out, go to the safest room and use towels to block any gaps.
- If the fire is elsewhere and you live in a block, call 999 for advice.
- Follow any advice our staff give you.
- Never use the lift in a fire.



Are rent cuts good news or bad news?

Last year, the Government told housing associations they must cut most of their rents for each of the next 4 years.



The Government decided not to include supported housing in the first year. Instead, in 2016-17, we were only allowed to raise your rent by inflation (the rate prices are rising) +1%.

Rent reductions for supported housing started in April 2017 and will apply for 3 years.

The new rules do not apply to care

home rents. Or to some services where customers get a very high level of support.

What this means for customers

If you live at most of our services, your rent will reduce by 1% in the year beginning on 1 April 2017. It will also reduce in each of the next two years.

1% is a 1p saving for each £1 we charge.

Rent cuts sound like good news for tenants. However, most of our customers get Housing Benefit. If Housing Benefit pays your rent, you won't see any extra money.

The Government has made this change because it wants to spend less on Housing Benefit.

What this means for Ability

Over 3 years, the rent cuts will reduce our income by a large amount.

We use your rent money to pay for

the homes and services we provide, and to pay our staff.

With less money, we will have to be even more efficient. But we may also have to cut some services.

Less money also makes it more difficult for us to produce new homes.

What we will do

We will find ways to save money.

We will make sure we look after your home and provide the most important services.

We will try to make sure everyone pays their rent on time and in full.

What you can do

Help us to sort out your Housing Benefit claim as quickly as possible.

Always pay your rent and other charges on time!



How to get in touch with us



01784 490 910



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By post



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