

ABILITY ANNUAL REPORT

2022-23

Promoting Independent Living



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Welcome by Jeff Skipp, CEO and Sally Reay, Chair

It has been a busy year for Ability Housing Association.

With the Social Housing (Regulation Act) becoming law in July 2023, we have been reviewing ways we can further improve our offer to residents and ensure our services meet and exceed the new requirements. A key area has been how we involve residents at an individual, local and organisational level and during the coming year we will be working with the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) to make sure we get this right. Involving residents in defining their own support and including their views and wishes in our future plans will be a key part of this approach.

We have reviewed our housing management service and in particular the support we offer to tenants to sustain their tenancy and remain valued members of their community. To achieve this, we have enhanced our housing support plans to allow our Housing and Support Officers to better tailor the support we give individuals, maximising their independence.

During the year we experienced a drop in the quality of the repairs service provided by a large repairs contractor. This was because they struggled to recruit and retain skilled tradespeople, which meant repairs took longer to complete.

To make sure residents' repairs and void works were completed in a reasonable time, we asked other repairs contractors to work with us. Our main contractor has resolved the issue and is now able to deliver repairs to the timescales we require. We will be continuing to monitor the performance of this firm closely to ensure a good quality service is delivered to residents.

Meanwhile, our Care & Support department has delivered high quality services as judged by the

Care Quality Commission and local authority contract monitoring. Our customer survey demonstrated satisfaction with our services above 90 per cent in all areas.

We have been looking to increase the number of services we deliver across the south east of England and have been accepted onto a number of local authority framework agreements. This will give us the chance to develop and increase the number of services we provide for people with a disability.

During the year, the Ability board also agreed our three-year corporate plan, Better Together. This identifies how we continue to improve in how we engage with residents, provide the best possible service, and support people to maintain independence and live in high quality homes.

We will also be looking to grow our care and support services over the next three years, increasing the number of people we support across the south east of England.

Yours sincerely

Jeff Skipp, CEO

Sally Reay, Chair



Housing, property and asset management

Ability Housing owns and manages 650 properties (plus some office accommodation) across 31 local authority areas in London and the South East, from Hastings to Bournemouth and Essex to Oxfordshire. We provide accessible housing for people who want to live more independently and focus our service delivery and improvement plans on achieving this.

HOUSING

There are five key commitments made in the Customer Strategy, as follows;

1. We will communicate well and resolve problems
2. We will ensure the good state of your home
3. We will provide a supportive, proactive, and responsive Housing Management service
4. We will have meaningful engagement with our customers
5. We will provide a supportive and personalised service to our customers



The year to 30 September 2023 was year two of the implementation of the Customer Strategy. The aim has been to further enhance our Intensive Housing Management (IHM) Offer to customers with a hardship policy in response to help customers cope with current cost-of-living challenges.

We have focused on ensuring that every Ability customer has the chance to develop with us a personal IHM Support Plan. All our customers were offered an IHM visit, to agree with them the frequency of contact and level of support required with our Housing and Support Officers.

We completed tenancy audit visits on 83 per cent of our properties, checking their condition to address any repairs issues, or manage concerns as part of the IHM Support Plan.

App-based technology has also been introduced to the housing team to make the completion and recording of routine

inspections, such as estate and property inspections, more efficient.

With Ability's Contact Centre now its second year, we have aimed to improve the quality of services to customers and the effort needed to use them, with several measures. These include reporting on Contact Centre performance, monitoring call waiting times and numbers of abandoned calls, and aiming to respond to all calls within 30 seconds. We have also given customers additional contact options, including requesting automatic call backs, and reviewed how they can contact us through the website.

We have changed the structure of our Housing team to give focused support for managing rent arrears, and to help customers access the financial support they are entitled to for paying rent and service charges.

This year, Ability launched an Asset Management Strategy for the next five years. This aims to clarify the fundamentals for delivering the high-quality homes and levels of service our customers need, in the right locations, and at an affordable price to the business. These are:

- Sustainability
- Maintaining our homes
- Legal compliance
- Stock rationalisation
- Development

We set out to identify homes which had an EPC C or lower, with the goal of improving this rating as soon as possible.

Ability reviewed our repairs offer, ensuring that it allows us to maintain our homes to Decent Homes Standard, while responding to individual needs of our customers that stand outside the offer.

We explored how customer engagement can work for Ability at an individual, local and corporate level, with a view to relaunching a customer engagement strategy in the next financial year. This will include running a Tenant Satisfaction Measures Perception Survey in the most accessible way possible to our customers, providing us with the information we need to shape our services and continuously improve.

Property

Since the introduction of a new repairs and maintenance contractor, we have been refining processes to ensure these services continue to improve in terms of quality and meeting targets. This includes reviewing and updating the skillsets required by the Contact Centre team to ensure that all calls are dealt with in the right way, and working in partnership with the contractor.

Our response to damp and mould has also been reviewed. We have clarified responsibilities for the management of any cases, increasing the role of housing frontline staff.

In our planned maintenance programme for this year, we completed four kitchen and two bathroom replacements, four complete window and door replacements, three full heating system upgrades, and thirty four boiler replacements.

We have defined our core geographical operating areas as part of our Asset Management Strategy and set out the conditions under which we would consider disposing of some of our properties.

Quality Management

The app-based system we have introduced to our Housing team ensures consistency in how estate inspections are carried out and measured. Property-

based inspections are also completed in this way, making them more efficient and allowing post completions to be conducted on voids and repairs.

We are reviewing IHM Support Plans routinely as part of our 1-2-1 process to ensure identified needs are being met effectively.

Our Housing and Property teams produce monthly KPIs, which are verified and discussed with the Operations Director. This allows any concerns to be identified in the data, and responsive action taken before the figures are then presented to SMT each month.

We have introduced a monthly directorate review of learnings from complaints to ensure they help improve the delivery of our services.

Meanwhile, a fortnightly voids and lettings meeting is held with Ability's operational leads. This ensures that sourcing applicants and void lettings have clear oversight - and has helped improve our void turnaround.

Staffing

Recruiting the right people with the skills, knowledge, and values we need is essential to the delivery of top quality services. We are continually reviewing and updating our approach - ensuring, for example, that our induction process and ongoing support for housing staff helps them be successful in their roles and helps us retain them.

We have reviewed our training offer to promote personal development opportunities for colleagues and provide professional training opportunities to support their progression, too.

Ability is committed to supporting and developing our people to the highest standard.



Case Study

Samantha

I have been an Ability Housing Association Customer for 14 years. I started living in one property and found I needed better access to the local services that were supporting me, so I asked for a change. Ability were able to move me to another property in Havant, where I still live today with my two cats.

Since being here, I have accessed many services. Solent Mind have made a really positive impact on my mental health and I am gaining coping techniques to manage day to day.

I have built up a good relationship with the local police officers who supported me in the community during a mental health crisis. They have helped keep me safe and sourced further support for me.

When I had a damp and mould issue in my home recently, Ability Housing's Property team acted, and visited to ensure the works were being completed, noting any other issues that needed attention. Neil, Ability's Head of Assets, went above and beyond what was expected to resolve this.

I have part-time employment with Lion Commercial Cleaning, where I have worked for 10 months. This is a big achievement for me, and my employer works with me to support my mental health needs. I am treated very well, and I would highly recommend them if you are considering employment in this area.



It is a nice feeling to be working as it gives a purpose to my week.

A long time ago, I was told by a psychiatrist I would never work again – I am very happy to have proved them wrong. As they say, "You don't know until you try".

Samantha

Samatha's Housing & Support Officer

I have been Sam's Housing & Support Officer since September 2022. We have built a good rapport with Sam, and I have been able to gain a better understanding of her housing and support needs.

I make sure I provide good communication and set boundaries, which Sam needs because not understanding what is going can trigger severe anxiety for her.

I am in contact with Sam most weeks, for reasons from planning my next visit to come and discuss support with her, or to talk about some recent positive news.

I have supported Sam in ways from raising concerns to third parties, providing references for volunteering, and completing referrals to external agencies such as mental health services. I make sure she has support when needed.

I have spent time with Sam discussing conflicts with neighbours and other visitors to help her to understand social situations and raise complaints when they are needed.

It's great to see Sam in part time work. She is very driven to give anything a go. I am really looking forward to hearing about her next achievement.



97%
Electrical certificates



100%
Gas Safety certificates



40
Number of properties let



101
Number of reports of antisocial behaviour



PERFORMANCE KPIs



2,910
Number of completed repairs



89%
HSO estate inspections

COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

42 stage 1 complaints,
14 service requests,
and 71 compliments



92.6%
Overall compliance



99.6%
CO Detectors



6,885
Number of calls received in Contact Centre



100%
Number of calls resolved on first contact

Our Intensive Housing Management Service Offer

The Intensive Housing Management (IHM) service offer can be all or one of the following:

- Develop and agree an IHM support plan annually (at a minimum)
- Help with completing housing benefit claims and reporting any subsequent changes;
- Providing advice and assistance on any bills and debts relating to the home;
- Helping our tenants to understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to the tenancy agreement;
- Always taking a sustainment first approach to any tenancy breach;
- Referring or signposting our tenants in finding required support from other agencies and working with other agencies as required
- Ensuring that the tenant is maintaining a safe and secure environment at home, and advising as needed;
- Liaising with other Ability staff on behalf of the tenant as agreed; and ensuring that any repairs and rent issues are resolved;
- Assisting with low level anti-social behaviour issues or any other concerns our tenant may have with their home or environment;
- Helping with moving on to alternative accommodation as appropriate;
- Helping to settle into your home at the beginning of a tenancy;
- Advocating on behalf of customers to promote and sustain their wellbeing.

Our Housing Support Officers help us deliver our IHM services. They cover very small 'patches' of no more than 120 units to provide a high intensity of support.

This is backed up with specialist benefit advice and property maintenance support should a customer need it.

Complaints and Learnings

What learnings have we taken from complaints?

The number one reason for customers complaining to Ability in the 2022/23 financial year was related to the time taken to complete repairs, with contractor-related issues being the second.

As a result, significant work with our contractors to improve our repairs service to customers was carried out. This has included reviewing the process from the point at which we triage the repair, the information collected to support this process, the issuing of the repair to contractors, and the subsequent delivery of the repair. We identified and implemented improvements which are now embedded in service delivery.

In addition, we have reviewed how we communicate with customers, with specific focus on our repairs and the role of the Contact Centre in this process. We have ensured processes are in place and resources are available to support this function effectively going forward.

Service improvements have also been made with the Housing team to ensure the failures that were identified as part of the complaints process are addressed, and our team are appropriately trained and supported to deliver good quality services to our customers.

Breakdown of Reasons for complaints

- Care and Support provision **6.2%**
- Communication failure **3.1%**
- Contractor issue **28.1%**
- Policy decision **1%**
- Housing Management Service failure **9.4%**
- Repairs timescales **47%**
- Service charges **3.1%**

Care & Support

Ability Care & Support delivers services in four local authority areas in the south-east of England, supporting our customers to live independently in the community.

<p>95.92% Ability staff help me feel safe in my home</p> 	<p>DELIVERING HIGH QUALITY SUPPORT SERVICES</p> <p>Our annual Care & Support customer satisfaction survey showed more than 95 per cent of customers were satisfied with the service they received.</p> <p>Full results are as follows:</p>	<p>97.28% Staff know what's important to me and how I like to live</p> 
 <p>97.96% There is some flexibility in the way I receive my support</p>	 <p>97.96% Staff listen to me and I'm comfortable discussing & planning my support with them</p>	 <p>95.92% If I'm not happy, I know who to talk to</p>

(Of the 228 surveys sent, Ability received 147 responses, equating to a 64.47% return rate)

Based upon the views of customers, we have developed service-specific development plans, which seek to improve the support customers receive.

As measured by our performance indicators and quarterly quality audits, all our services have performed to a high standard this year. This has been validated by local authority quality monitoring, and all our services registered with the Care Quality Commission have retained their 'good' ratings.

We have focused outcome centred support, maximising the control and choice each customer has over their lives, and developed our person-centred planning tools. We have rolled out strengths-based training in care and support services, focusing on the person's strengths and talents.

To recruit, retain and develop

During the year we have reviewed our recruitment and retention processes and focused on re-launching our 'refer a friend' scheme. We have increased the number of manager and staff engagement events, communicating and involving staff in the development and continual improvement of our services. We have promoted recruitment and retention with initiatives including:

- Staff engagement check-up: confidential all staff survey combined with face-to-face focus groups facilitated by Investors In People (IIP), which led to us maintaining our IIP accreditation with improved scores across all engagement indicators.
- Enrolment in the Disability Confident Scheme.
- Attracting, retaining and showing value to staff by paying above the National Living Wage, and working in partnership with Local Authorities to achieve this. We benchmark salaries in our Housing & Property teams to ensure our people are paid in line with market rates.
- Promoting wellbeing resources available to all staff with Simply Health schemes; providing resources for staff on topics including menopause, gender identity, and neurodiversity, and practical advice on financial wellbeing, and physical and mental health, including face-to-face counselling.
- Implementing buddying arrangements with new and newly promoted managers, boosting their occupational support network, role comfort and confidence.
- Celebrating success: good performance valued and praised in line with Ability Positive behaviours with performance appraisal processes, including formal reviews of training and succession plans.
- Reviewing and updating core people policies including whistleblowing, embedding our values in inclusive frameworks that welcome feedback.
- Reviewing and updating our family friendly and flexible working policies

All our managers and senior support workers have completed our "Lead to Succeed" management development programme, and we have rolled out new training and development opportunities to all staff, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to excel in their role.

To grow our services and increase our reach

We have aimed to develop our services through organic growth and new contracted business. We have achieved organic growth by allocating accommodation to people with higher support needs. This has helped people who would have lived in more institutionalised settings to live more independent lives.

Our new business approach includes applying for local authority framework agreements and direct purchasing systems (DPS). We have been accepted as an approved provider by several councils, with other applications pending. We expect to increase our reach by extending our services into new areas in the south east of England in the year ahead.

To maintain financial sustainability

The largest challenge to financial sustainability in care and support is securing adequate local authority fee increases, at a time of high inflation and significant increases to the National Living Wage (NLW) hourly rate.

Ability seeks to pay our care and support workers above NLW rates - which this can only be sustained if local authority annual rises are in line with both wage and broader inflationary increases. Local authorities in England are clearly under financial pressure - however, without sustainable inflationary increases, we and all other care and support providers will struggle to sustain the viability of care and support services.



Care & Support Case Study

Customer X has a mental health diagnosis of bipolar, PTSD and anxiety. He had been struggling with his mental health for nine years when he was referred to Ability's floating support service in Hillingdon.

When we first met him, he felt unable to manage any part of his life, had very little confidence and his parents did everything for him. This included his laundry, cooking, cleaning, answering mail, arranging appointments, managing money, and supporting him with medication.

He had lost his confidence after being assaulted and robbed in a nearby park. He was frightened to leave his house which resulted in his dad giving up his job to take care of him.

His support worker helped him to build his confidence by

accompanying him on walks in the local community, to the local gym and supporting him to get in touch with voluntary groups, such as MIND. Over time, Customer X gained the confidence to manage his own correspondence, started learning to cook and he became motivated to start thinking about seeking employment and moving out of his parents' house.

Ability referred him to a supported living property and helped to move in, and to set up his benefits and utilities. He is being supported to manage his tenancy to build on his independent living skills.

Since moving into Hayes Park Lodge, Customer X has made new friends and is increasingly independent. He has attended a cooking group and started to prepare basic meals for himself, and has also gained part time employment.

Customer X says:

"I would sincerely like to express my heartfelt thanks to Ability housing for their mental health support, providing my family a way out when I had no other resources. Words cannot express how comfortable Ability Housing MHFS made me feel about the situation we were facing.

"They were heaven sent. My support worker Margaret came to my family home and we talked like we had known each other for years. I had been praying for a way to rectify my issues and this came like a blessing in disguise. I absolutely love Margaret's demeanour – she is patient, caring, and friendly. She was my angel, and God sent them to me. Thank you!"



Recruitment

Investment in staff

Recruitment in health and social care continues to be a challenge across our sector nationally. Ability's HR team has a dedicated recruitment resource who solely focusses on onboarding new staff. They share our mission to support and enable our customers in line with their goals, through values-based recruitment and interviewing techniques.

The result of this work is that most of our support worker posts are filled with permanent staff, and our use of agency workers has been reduced to an all-time low. We will never compromise the quality or safety of our services, and always work with our preferred partner organisations to guarantee this when we do need to source agency workers.

The management and coaching skills of our team leaders is key to the quality of our services. This year we have continued our commitment to providing bespoke management and leadership training courses for people managers at all levels.

In addition, all staff have the opportunity to undertake vocational learning to support their continued personal development.

We are proud to retain staff who build meaningful supportive relationships with our customers and this is sustained by Ability's people offer, which includes: pay rates in line or above National Living Wage; generous pension and life assurance options; supportive management structures; comprehensive training and development opportunities; 24/7 access to employee support and advice services and a health care cashback scheme, which allows staff to claim back the costs of their own healthcare appointments.

At Ability we recognise the importance of work life balance in supporting staff wellbeing, and this year have refreshed our family policies and our approach to flexible working to support that balance.

Our plans for the future

Ability Housing Association's new corporate plan - Better Together sets out our key objectives to September 2026. These are:

- Provide good quality homes and neighbourhoods.
- Deliver high quality Housing Management & Support Services.
- To recruit, retain and develop an engaged workforce.
- To grow our services and increase our reach.
- To maintain financial sustainability and deliver value for money (VfM).

Good quality homes and neighbourhoods

Ability seeks to maintain all its properties to a high standard and deliver a responsive and high-quality repairs service to our residents. There have been issues with this service, meaning we haven't always delivered to the expected standard. Accordingly, we have worked closely with our contractors to put an improvement plan in place, which will see the delivery of high quality and responsive repairs service to all our residents.

Over the next three years, we will invest significantly in our existing homes, bringing our most energy inefficient homes up to EPC C or above, saving tenants money on utility costs and ensuring Ability minimises its carbon footprint, too.

We have a £850,000 maintenance investment planned for the next three years, ensuring our homes are well maintained and provide good living environments for our residents.

Our Housing & Support Officers (HSOs) will undertake a property MOT every year and offer ongoing visits for residents who require more support, ensuring repairs are reported and fixed quickly. HSOs carry out estate inspections every six weeks ensuring landlord health and safety compliance and to review the general condition of the estate.

HSOs will invite residents to accompany them on estate visits, providing opportunities to engage and discuss any ideas or issues residents wish to raise.

Housing management and support

Involving and listening to residents is key to delivering excellent services and the objectives of our corporate plan. We are committed to meaningful engagement with our residents individually, at a scheme and estate level, and as an organisation. We will ensure residents are fully involved in shaping the service they receive and are involved with Ability's future planning.

Our staff

With the increasing challenges in recruiting and retaining housing and care and support staff, we will be publishing a people strategy.

Growing our services

There are less favourable grant terms available for new supported housing units, which together with the challenging financial environment, has meant it hasn't been viable for Ability to have an active housing development programme.

However, during the course of this plan we will be looking to dispose of properties when they become void, if they do not meet Ability's accessibility standards or the costs of achieving EPC C or above are too high.

When these disposals happen, we aim to re-provide the units within our core areas, by recycling grant to develop additional supported housing. We are committed to considering the viability of all our housing schemes for conversion to Ability Care & Support

We have seen the volume of our Care & Support services decrease over the last two years, mainly due to exiting unviable contracts where local authorities are unable or unwilling to raise fees to a level that constitutes Full Cost Recovery (FCR) or being unsuccessful when re-tendering for an existing contract.

We are committed to growing our Care & Support services, increasing our reach, and supporting greater numbers of disabled people, while increasing turnover and generating greater economies of scale.

Delivering value for money

To successfully deliver our corporate plan and our objectives by 2026, strong financial management and a focus on value for money (VfM) in everything we do will be key. Against a challenging financial background of high inflation and interest rates, our plans to improve homes, maintain excellent customer services, and develop our people will require significant investment.



Better Together

By 2026 Ability Housing Association will be able to demonstrate that:

- We provide high-quality homes for our residents with a timely and qualitative repairs service. We have invested significantly in our properties, and no home has an energy rating below EPC D, with all homes to be at a rating of EPC C or above by 2030.
- We have co-produced with every resident the service they receive based on their needs and wishes. We have engaged with residents in their neighbourhoods to improve the local area and agreed with them a local plan to be implemented.
- We have relaunched our Customer Committee, involving residents in the development of Ability's organisational strategies and plans, evaluating our performance and service delivery.
- Our Housing & Support Officers are both proactive and responsive, supporting residents to maintain independent living and achieve their aspirations.
- Our Care & Support services have delivered high-quality co-produced support focused on the needs and aspirations of the individual, ensuring everyone has choice and control over the support they receive and the life they lead.
- Our workforce is well-managed, engaged, and trained to deliver high-quality services and outcomes with our residents.
- We have grown our Care & Support business by 20 per cent, increasing our reach and the number of people who benefit from Ability's services, while increasing our economies of scale to support the financial success of this part of our business.
- We have reinvested money from homes we have disposed of to create more opportunities for people to receive supported housing and care and support from Ability in our core areas of operation.
- We are financially strong, with management decisions based on robust data and information. We will be efficient and effective, ensuring our resources are targeted, delivering high-quality services to the people we serve.

FINANCIAL COMMENTARY AND CHARTS

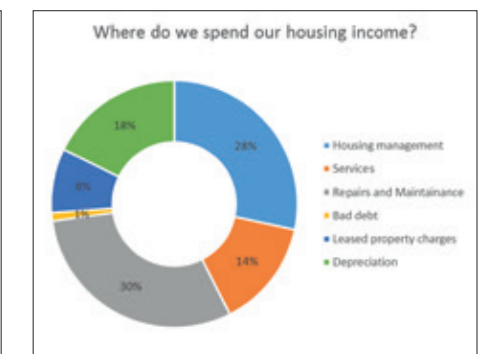
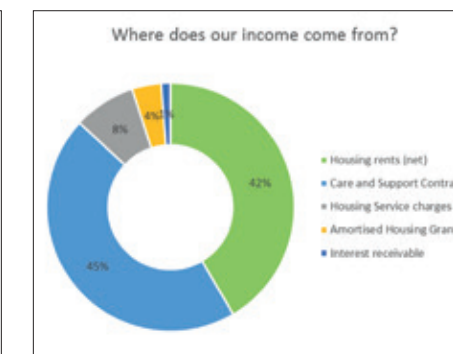
The year was a challenging one for Ability, with high levels of inflation remaining and a government cap on increases to our rents. We also faced significant cost pressures relating to repairs and maintenance as we commissioned additional contractors during the year to ensure repairs and void works were completed on time and our residents received the required quality of service.

Our turnover increased by 3.4 per cent to £10 million, due mainly to increases in rent and service charge income, driven by inflation. Our Care & Support income fell by 2 per cent, following the closure

of one of our services. We benefitted from higher interest rates and earned more on our cash savings.

In terms of expenditure, our operating costs increased by 4.8 per cent to £9.8m, and our operating margin remained modest, at 2.2 per cent of turnover, down on the previous year's 3.1 per cent. Both changes are largely due to the necessary increase in our spend on repairs.

Despite the challenging year, Ability's asset base and liquidity remain strong, and we are in a good position to continue to deliver high quality homes and services long into the future.





COMMITMENTS

VALUES

We engage actively for feedback

We listen actively to our customers, colleagues and partners to help improve what we do and how we do it.

We value differences

We respect and value the individuality of each person.

We focus on ability not disability

We focus on what each person CAN-DO.

We demonstrate integrity

Our culture is one of openness, honesty and personal accountability.



BEHAVIOURS

Seek first to understand

I will listen actively to ensure I have the best possible understanding.

Think: CAN-DO

I will focus on what is possible and think about what I CAN-DO.

Give a positive response

I will work with you to agree a positive outcome, without excuse or blame.

Personal ownership

I will take full responsibility for making sure the agreed outcomes are achieved in good time.

Board Members

(as at 30th September 2022)

- Sally Reay
- Dominic Wallace
- Jai Dosanjh
- Mandy Dunstan
- Tim Jennings
- Rinat Abdrasilov
- Dritan Uka
- Lynsey Bradshaw
- Vimal Gaglani

Executive Directors

- Jeff Skipp, CEO
- Lucy Sivasundram, Director of Operations (Housing)
- Marcus Andrews, Director of Finance (January 2023)

Auditors, solicitors & bankers

- Auditors: Beever and Struthers
- Solicitors: Devonshires
- Bankers: Barclays Bank PLC

Registrations

- Company number: 01261380
- Charity number: 271547
- Registered with The Regulator for Social Housing for England & Wales, Number LH2174

Report production team

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- Copy Editor: Dominic Weaver, Twelve
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