

ABILITY NEWS

Summer / Autumn 2024

Promoting Independent Living



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Welcome by Jeff Skipp, CEO



On behalf of everyone at Ability Housing Association, welcome to the winter edition of Ability News - and best wishes for a Happy New Year.

There has been a lot going on at Ability in the last few months. In this edition, we look at some of the highlights – and how we are working closer with our residents to support them.

We know that, with the ongoing cost of living crisis, high inflation and this January's electricity and gas price increase, making ends meet can be difficult. So, in this issue, you will find useful tips for conserving energy and money saving ideas.

We know that when money is tight, it is easy to get behind with outgoings such as bills and rent. If you have money problems, or you are worried about bills, or paying your rent, please let Ability know and we will do all that we can to help.

You can contact your Housing and Support Officer directly or ring the Ability Contact Centre on 0808 164 7474 and arrange to discuss this with us.

The government have brought in a new law to improve the service housing associations provide to tenants. In this edition of Ability News, we look at what this means for our residents and how Ability is working to boost its offer.

This fits neatly with our new Corporate Plan - Better Together, which sets out how we will grow as an organisation over the next three years. One of the key areas we want to develop is customer engagement and involvement. Over the coming months we will be discussing with residents the best

way to achieve this on an individual, local and Ability-wide level, ensuring they can have a say in this process.

We know that the response times of our repairs contractors has not always been to the standards we would expect. In this edition, Neil Schofield – Head of Property at Ability, highlights how we are working with our contractors to ensure everyone receives a good quality service, delivered on time. He also sets out Ability HA's repair offer and the repair works Ability will carry out for residents.

Damp and mould can be a threat to health if not dealt with quickly and, during the winter months, this problem can increase. Neil Schofield also shows us how Ability deals with damp and mould, identifying the cause of any problems and ensuring necessary repairs are carried out quickly. We are working with our residents to ensure the solutions are long term.

This is just a glimpse of what we have achieved at Ability during the past few months; there is much to do in 2024 to deliver the best possible services we can. By working together, listening, and acting upon the views and experiences of you, our residents, we will ensure we get things right.

Yours sincerely

Jeff Skipp, CEO



Ability Corporate Plan – Better Together

October 2023 - October 2026

Ability's mission today is more important than it has ever been. Disabled people have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and have experienced significant reductions in statutory services and support in recent years, too.

The services Ability provides in relation to accessible housing, intensive housing management support and personalised social care are essential in supporting our residents to maintain their independence. Whilst our contribution of around 650 housing units and 200,000 hours of social care support every year may be small compared to the national need for accessible housing with support – but it is life changing for the people we serve.

Ability's service approach is based on the principles of personalisation and co-production. As an organisation we focus on individuals, providing custom services that give people choice, control and autonomy over their lives. We tailor the support we deliver to the needs and wishes of each of our customers, aiming to tailor our support to help them achieve their aspirations.

Our corporate plan for the next three years focuses on the following objectives:

Providing good quality homes and neighbourhoods

Ability seeks to maintain all its properties to a high standard and deliver a responsive, high-quality repairs service.

There have been issues with this service and we have not always delivered to the expected standard, so we are working with our contractors with a plan for ongoing improvements. This will lead to the delivery of a timely and

qualitative responsive repairs service to all our residents. Over the next three years, we will invest significantly in our existing homes, bringing most energy inefficient homes up to EPC C rating or above. This will save tenants money on utility costs and ensure Ability minimises its carbon footprint. We will also invest £850K in planned maintenance over the next three years, ensuring our homes are well maintained and provide good living environments.

Delivering high quality housing management and support services.

Involving our residents – individually, at the scheme and estate levels and as an organisation – is key to delivering excellent services and the successful delivery of our Corporate Plan. We will ensure residents are fully involved in shaping our services and the direction of Ability Housing.

Recruiting, retaining and developing an engaged workforce.

Only by having great staff can we deliver great services. Since the pandemic we have experienced increased challenges in recruiting and retaining staff in both our Housing, and Care & Support services. We will be reviewing and publishing a people strategy in the first year of our Corporate Plan.

Growing our services and increasing our reach

With less favourable grant terms available to develop new supported housing units, and the challenging recent financial environment, Ability has been unable to have a housing development programme.

However, the Corporate Plan will see Ability dispose of properties when they become void if they do not meet our accessibility standards or if the costs of achieving EPC C or above are financially unviable. This will give us the opportunity to complete small scale developments to maintain the number of supported housing units we offer – and we will seek to reinvest in these schemes for people who require housing, and/or care and support.



Ability Housing Association's Care & Support services operate in a challenging economic environment, and with low financial margins economies of scale are important. We have seen the volume of our Care & Support services decrease over the last two years, primarily due to decisions to exit unviable contracts where local authorities are unable or unwilling to raise fees to a level that constitutes Full Cost Recovery (FCR) and 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.

To maintain financial sustainability and deliver value for money

To successfully deliver our Corporate Plan and deliver on our objectives by 2026, strong financial management and a focus on value for money (VfM) in everything we do will be key. With plans to improve our homes, offer excellent customer services, and develop our people we will require significant investment. The current operating environment is uncertain with economic pressures such as high inflation and interest rates.

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, with no home having an energy rating below EPC D – and all our homes are on target to have a EPC C rating or above by 2030.
- We have co-produced with every resident the service they receive based on their needs and wishes.
- We will 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%, increasing our reach and the number of people who benefit from Ability's services, while increasing our economies of scale that will support the financial success of this part of our business going forward.
- 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.

Ability's Repairs Offer



During the summer, our Property Team carried out a comprehensive review of Ability Housing Association's 'Reactive Repair Service' to ensure our services offer real value to our customers and our organisation. We have identified focus areas and implemented changes to develop services.

Here is an update on the changes arising from that review:

Contractor review and management improvements

We want to ensure the contractors working for us have the right skill, capacity, and organisation in place. This will ensure we can deliver services in customers' homes and communities in the right way.

We are working with our contractors to set out what we expect from our procedures, policies, accreditations, and Health & Safety management.

New contractors

Ability is working with new contractors in several specialist service areas that needed improving. This will help us increase efficiency and reduce the time taken to deliver work to our customers. These new contractors have been screened to ensure they meet Ability's quality requirements.

Repairs process

Ability's Property Team have worked with our contractors to make sure they are all following the same repairs process and are working to the same standards. This is to improve our service delivery and overall efficiency. It also means we can monitor repairs work more closely, improving standards and customer satisfaction, too.

The customer handbook

Ability have put together a handbook to help our customers understand what is included in our repairs offer. It lists the repairs our service covers through contracted delivery partners and the expected timescales for each.



The handbook also contains essential information including the routine work that will take place in customers' homes, such as gas and electrical safety checks; and information and guidance on work that will take place outside of the repairs offer.

Contact centre

During summer last year, responsibility for Ability Housing's Contact Centre moved from our Housing Team to our Property Team. This is because most customer calls to Ability are about their homes and will help us increase our support and guidance in this area.

This means our Contact Centre has increased control of our repairs, which will also boost our efficiency and service to customers.

The Contact Centre is still linked to the rest of Ability – so any customer who gets in touch can be sure their query will be well handled and they will get the right outcome.

Key performance indicators

Ability measure performance on an ongoing basis and we have seen consistent improvement in areas including our repairs over the last six months. We have also introduced new measurements to make sure our services continue to improve, particularly in the areas of quality and customer satisfaction.

Technology improvements

We are working with our system provider to develop our Housing Management System to improve efficiencies, reduce touch points and make the repairs process more automatic and straightforward.

It will mean information is transferred automatically to our contractors, speeding up processes such as booking appointments and completing orders, and making it easier to keep records. We are also looking at other ways customer repairs can be reported in the future.



CASE STUDY: HAMLET LODGE

At Hamlet Lodge we support people with mental health issues to develop independent living skills that enable them to live independently within the community.

In early 2023, the support team became concerned about the appearance of one of our customers at Hamlet Lodge, SM. He didn't look well, and he seemed more anxious and restless than usual.

Staff were concerned that he may have developed health issues from his alcohol dependence over several years. He was encouraged to book a health check with his GP.

At the appointment, we encouraged him to talk about how he was feeling. The GP arranged for blood tests, which revealed seriously high gamma GT enzyme levels, indicating poor liver function. The GP said action was required to lower these levels and

prevent further damage to his liver.

SM's keyworker discussed the support SM wanted to manage his health and anxiety. He really wanted to give up alcohol but needed help and support to understand what he needed to do and why.

We focused on the positive benefits of removing alcohol from his life and – after discussions with SM – made sure we gave plenty of time to remind him of the positive impact his actions would make, and to keep going. The team did some research on



the impact of being dependent on alcohol and shared this with SM, which helped him too. Together, we set goals such as reducing his enzyme levels at his next blood tests. SM stopped drinking alcohol for



the next three months. During this time, his support team listened to him about his challenges and gave him regular encouragement. When he was tempted to have a drink, he was given time with staff to do things he enjoyed such as going on long walks to reduce his stress or having a one-to-one chat.

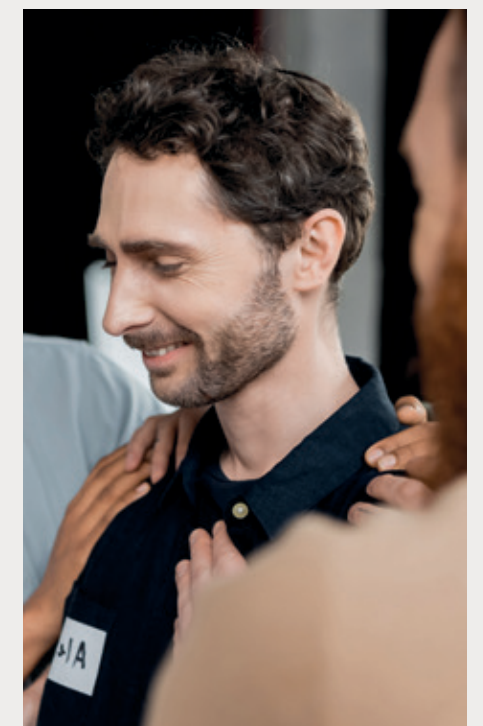
Over the next few weeks, SM's health and self-confidence were improving because of his actions.

After three months, SM had another blood test, which showed his levels were still outside the normal range but showed an encouraging reduction of 50 per cent. His GP congratulated him on the progress and together we set the goal of lowering his levels to a normal level at the next three-month check.

With continued encouragement and praise, SM's next blood test in November 2023, showed that he had succeeded – and his enzyme levels had returned to a normal range.

SM was rightly proud of himself, and his self-esteem significantly improved.

At Ability, we believe in a can-do approach and delivering sustainable outcomes which improve the quality of life to those we serve.



SOCIAL HOUSING REGULATION

The Social Housing Regulation Act – what does it mean for you?

Ability Housing Association welcomes the introduction of the Government's Social Housing Regulation Act. This new law gives tenants more rights and sets out the standards housing associations must meet to ensure the housing they provide is safe, good quality, and in a good state.



This new law ensures complaints are properly investigated and residents get a quick response to issues they raise. In addition, housing associations must engage and consult with residents frequently, keeping them updated on how well they are doing and how they will improve the service they provide.

These measures will:

- Let residents see how well Ability is doing.
- Allow the Regulator of Social Housing to see which housing associations are doing well and those housing associations that need to improve their services to residents.

To monitor how well housing associations are doing against the new standards, they will now have to ask for residents' feedback and report on the response to the Regulator of Social Housing at least once a year.

To help focus on the areas that are most important to residents the regulator of Social Housing has developed quality standards which must be achieved, called the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs).

The Tenant Satisfaction Measures are as follows:

- Keeping the property in good repair: This includes ensuring homes meet the Decent Homes Standard (a minimum government measure); repairs are completed in an agreed time; and residents are asked how satisfied they are with their repairs and the time taken to complete the most recent repair. Residents will also be asked how satisfied they are that their home is well-maintained.
- Maintaining building safety: This is to make sure gas safety checks, fire safety checks, asbestos safety checks, water safety checks and lift safety checks are undertaken regularly.

Residents will be asked how satisfied they are that their home is safe.

- Effective handling of complaints: Making sure complaints are responded to within Complaint Handling Code timescales satisfaction and with the landlord's approach to handling complaints TP09 TP12 Tenant knowledge of how to make a complaint.
- Helpful and respectful engagement with residents: Satisfaction that the landlord listens to tenant views and acts on them; satisfaction that the landlord keeps tenants informed about things that matter to them; and agreement that the landlord treats tenants fairly and with respect.
- Responsible neighbourhood management: the number of antisocial behaviour cases Ability has each year; how satisfied residents are with the way we deal with these cases; and are doing everything we can to achieve a positive outcome. Satisfaction that the landlord keeps communal areas clean

and well maintained and that the landlord makes a positive contribution to the local neighbourhood.

Ability will be reporting each year on the outcome of our resident satisfaction surveys and publishing the results on our website and in Ability News. Residents will be able see how well we are doing and where we need to improve to ensure we provide a high-quality service.

Ability are focused on delivering good quality homes and services for all of our residents. We also know that without asking for and listening to resident feedback we will struggle to get things right first time and meet the Tenant Satisfaction Measures. With this in mind, one of the key areas we want to work with residents on this year is how can we improve our engagement and communicate with you to ensure your views are heard and acted upon.





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This will look at how we improve on three levels, as follows:

1. Individual:

Making sure we tailor our services to meet your needs and provide the right support at the right time. One of the ways we will achieve this is through Intensive Housing Management Plans. These personalised plans ensure you get what you need from Ability and set out, together with you, how we support you to deliver these goals. We will review progress and update the plan with you regularly.

2. Estate and neighbourhood:

We will actively seek to engage with residents who live in an Ability estate, a block of flats or home which are close to other Ability properties. We want to know how we can improve the area in which you live and your local neighbourhood.

We are beginning to improve our six weekly estate inspections undertaken by Housing & Support Officers to make sure residents know when these are happening. We are inviting residents to accompany the Housing & Support Officer on their estate inspection. This will give residents the opportunity to participate and raise any ideas or concerns they have about their home, the estate/flats where they live and their local community.

We hope this will deliver greater opportunities for residents and their local Housing & Support Officer to build stronger relationships and agree service improvements which will make the service we deliver better.

3. Ability corporate planning and scrutiny:

We are developing a customer panel with residents, which help us plan for the future and scrutinise our repairs and housing management performance.

We will work with the Tenant Participation Advice Service (TPAS) to help us establish the best way of involving residents. We will be asking residents for their views on how we can best achieve this in early 2024 and looking for residents who wish to participate in this exciting way forward.

Ability are committed to meaningfully engaging and involving our residents in shaping the services you want and developing together over the coming months and years. This is not about quick solutions, but developing strong partnerships over time leading to incremental improvements, a better understanding of priorities based upon good communication, openness, and trust.



KEEPING COSTS DOWN

Over the last few years, prices have risen for a lot of things – from gas and electricity to food and other essential shopping.

Ability is working closely with customers to help you manage this change. If you are finding it difficult to cope with higher prices, you are not alone. Please get in touch with us to discuss what we can do to help.

Your Housing & Support Officers can discuss any worries you have. They can help you make a budget, and plan for what you need to spend.

They will make sure you are being supported in the right way and have the help you are entitled to.

SAVING ENERGY

Here are some really useful tips to save energy – and money – in your home:

1. Switch off standby

Did you know you can save up to £55 a year by turning electrical appliances like TVs off at the plug, instead of leaving them on standby. You can get a standby saver or smart plug to help you do this.

2. Draft-proof your home

Heat can escape through draughts around doors, windows, floors, and chimneys. You can help stop this happening with draft proofing – and save up to £90 a year.

Here is a guide to draught-proofing - Energy Saving Trust: <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/advice/draught-proofing/>

3. Turn off lights

Turning off lights when you leave a room will save you money – up to £20 a year. Using LED bulbs can help save even more.

4. Take care with washing clothes

Making small changes to how you use your washing machine can save you up to £27 a year.

5. Do less tumble drying

Drying clothes outside if possible, or on a heated clothes rack, will help lower your electricity bills.

6. Swap to the shower.

If you have baths, swapping them for showers can help you save money.

7. Have shorter showers.

Keeping your shower time to 4 minutes or less can save a typical household £65 a year.

8. Don't over fill the kettle.

Only boil the water you need and you'll save electricity.

9. Fill the dishwasher.

Make sure your dishwasher is full before you use it. Using it just once fewer time every week can save you £13 a year.

10. Insulate your home.

Putting an insulation jacket on your hot water cylinder, and insulating your pipes and radiators, can save you money.



More help and tips

The following websites have more advice about how to save money on your household bills:

Saving energy at home:

<https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/energy-at-home/>

How to get government help to heat your home:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/find-energy-grants-for-you-home-help-to-heat>

Getting help from your energy supplier:

<https://www.gov.uk/energy-company-obligation>

Lots of general advice on saving money on energy:

<https://www.moneysavingexpert.com/energy/>

General advice on saving money on energy and other bills:

<https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/everyday-money/budgeting/how-to-save-money-on-household-bills>

Damp and mould

Ability Housing Association launched enhanced damp and mould procedures in 2022. To improve them further, our Property Team have reviewed these this year, adding new working practices and increasing overall expectations.

The key changes are as follows:

1. Reviewing past cases

Ability records all reports of damp and mould and as winter has approached, reviewed all the cases reported during the same period last year (2022/23). Customer visits and assessments have been arranged for these cases to ensure the measures taken were successful and that the problem has not resurfaced. Any homes where damp and mould have returned are once again put through measures to tackle them.

2. Standardisation of work for damp and mould

With the advice of specialist contractors, Ability's Property Team have standardised the repairs and corrective measures to tackle cases of damp and mould in its properties. This means we have assessed all materials used and standardised the specifications for work to upgrade ventilation.

3. Enhanced damp and mould management plans

Ability has reviewed and improved its management plans for tackling damp and mould. Every customer plan will include an assessment of the issue in their property, details of the works needed and the supplier who will carry them out, and details of follow up appointments needed to check that the problem has been resolved. We have updated the information and guidelines we give to customers on this subject, too.

4. Specialist surveying network

Where Ability are notified of significant damp and mould issues and can't find a cause, we will refer these to our surveying partners. By working with these accredited experts when needed, we can get help to our customers and rectify these problems quickly.





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 16th January 2024)

- Sally Reay (Chair)
- Rinat Abdrasilov (RA)
- Lynsey van Aswegen (LvA)
- Jai Dosanjh (JD)
- Mandy Dunstan (MD)
- Kimberley Ellis (KE)
- Vimal Gaglani (VG)
- Tim Jennings (TJ)
- Dominic Wallace (DW)
- Dritan Uka

Executive Directors

- Jeff Skipp, CEO
- Marcus Andrews, Director of Resources & Deputy CEO
- Lucy Sivasundram, Director of Operations (Housing)

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

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