



Communications Review

Resident Scrutiny Group

RSG PROJECT LEAD: DEBBIE EVANS

SEPTEMBER 2022

Resident Scrutiny Group Review: Communication

Introduction

Effective communication is essential to maintaining a positive relationship between Abri and its customers. The Resident Scrutiny Group (RSG) has identified in previous reviews and through consultation with other customers, that Abri does not always get this right.

In 2021, the RSG completed a review of the Abri Repairs service which resulted in several recommendations being made which linked directly to communications. For the purpose of this report, it is important to note that these recommendations are being managed through the repairs review process and will not be considered as part of this review.

The Communications project group discussed an approach to narrow down what is naturally a vast topic. After reviewing customer feedback and considering member experiences, the areas of focus for the review were agreed as follows:

- Methods of communication
- Accessibility of alternative types of communication
- Tone of language used in written communication
- Length of communications
- Communications with different customer groups

Overall, the RSG found that Abri is effective when communicating matters that are considered important to customers but has identified several areas where improvements could be made to further enhance the customer experience. The RSG has made ten recommendations to address these.

Approach

The project group acknowledged that the ongoing Single Systems project is a significant enabler for Abri's ambitions to improve the customer experience and align with the updated Housing Services Strategy, Customers First. A part of the development of Single Systems is to roll out a new integrated customer portal and therefore the existing customer portal has been excluded from this review. A future review will be scheduled for the new portal when appropriate. This review is focused on written communication with customers including letters, emails, and text messages.

The project group selected two letters from Abri that were sent to customers within the last six months: the annual rent increase letter, and a letter informing customers of a change of company name for direct debit payments. The group had each discussed the content of at least one of these letters with other Abri customers outside of their responsibilities as RSG members and agreed that this was a legitimate reason to review these specific letters in more detail as case studies for this review.

To maximise the opportunity for direct customer feedback, the project group agreed to conduct a survey with the Scrutiny Sounding Board (SSB) and RSG members. The survey asked some generalised questions about Abri's communications with customers and included questions relating to the two case study letters. The survey was sent to 380 customers, with a total of 118 taking part. The results of the survey can be found in **Appendix A**. The results provided useful statistical data, but the supporting narrative included valuable insights into

customers' perceptions of Abri's communications. These findings were reviewed fully by the project group and have contributed to the recommendations made.

The recommendations in this report have been assigned to the Executive Director of Strategy, Business Insight & HR and Executive Director of Operations who will assign these to the appropriate roles within the organisation to deliver.

Findings and Recommendations

Methods of Communication

The project group was interested to understand how Abri communicates with its customers and whether these methods align with customer preferences. There are certain issues that Abri must communicate with customers in writing, including matters relating to rent and legal responsibilities. However, for more generic matters, Abri communicates in several ways including email, newsletters, customer portal, telephone, and social media.

The survey included a question relating to customers preferred methods of communication. Over 55% either agreed or strongly agreed that Abri communicates with them via their preferred method of contact and nearly 29% neither agreed nor disagreed. This illustrates there is an opportunity to improve the volume of customers contacted via their preferred method of communication. Abri currently records a customers preferred method of contact on several internal systems, notably those that were in place as legacy organisations. The RSG understand that the accurate recording of data will be addressed by the launch of Single Systems and that this specific data will be transferred via this project. To ensure that Abri continues to proactively engage with customers via their preferred method of contact, the RSG recommends that new customers are asked to confirm their preferred method of contact as part of the tenancy sign up process and that Abri colleagues record this data accurately on the appropriate system (COM0922.1). This will improve the customer journey through subsequent interactions. The RSG understands that collecting this data for existing customers may be less straight forward and recommends that Abri explores this opportunity to decide if it is a viable exercise.

The project group also discussed recognising the difference between customers legal names and names that they prefer to be known by. Abri does not currently record this information which has caused some level of dissatisfaction with customers who prefer to be known by a name that is different from that used for identification purposes. The RSG recommends that consideration is given to creating a suitable place for this information to be recorded as part of the Single Systems project which will enable Abri to address customers via their preferred name (COM0922.2). The RSG further recommends that new customers are asked to provide this information as part of the tenancy sign-up process (COM0922.3). For existing customers, the RSG recommends that customer facing colleagues are made aware of this new reporting function so that they can update the information on the appropriate system when required (COM0922.4).

The length of time it takes Abri to respond to customer queries, regardless of the communication method, was a key theme of the survey responses and view of RSG members. Currently, the Service Level Agreement (SLA) for customer response times varies between legacy organisations, as per the below:

Method of Contact	Legacy Radian	Legacy Yarlinton
Telephone	2 Working days	5 Working days
Email	10 Working days	5 Working days
Webchat	2 Working days	5 Working days
Portal	2 Working days	5 Working days
Letter	10 Working days	5 Working days

Due to the difference in response times, this does mean that customers receive a varying level of service dependent on where they live. Customers feel that 10 days to receive a response is too long and can result in some making repeated contact to chase their query. Abri currently resolves approximately 80% of enquiries at first point of contact and where issues must be escalated, customers are advised of when to expect a response in line with the above SLA's. The RSG understands that there are plans contained within the Single Systems project to align response times across Abri's full geography and that these will be prioritised and communicated effectively with customers. Therefore, an additional recommendation has not been raised as part of this review.

Lack of ownership of customer enquiries is another area where customers feel that Abri can make improvements. Customers feel they are spending too much time chasing Abri for responses and there were numerous examples where on following up a previous enquiry with Abri, the enquiry process was started from scratch and referred to a different colleague to progress. To support colleagues to provide a great customer experience and ensure the aligned SLA is met, the RSG recommends that all colleagues using the CRM (customer relationship management) system should be encouraged to capture accurate notes including clear detail of the customer's query and what was agreed with the customer in terms of response expectations (COM0922.5). This will ensure colleagues asked to respond to the enquiry can do so effectively and within the agreed timescale. Where timescales are not able to be met due to lack of appropriate information or colleague availability, an Abri representative should advise the customer of this and agree a revised response date. The RSG further recommends that senior managers undertake spot checks of records to ensure team members are including sufficient information and re-directing enquiries appropriately (COM0922.6).

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
COM0922.1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask customers to confirm their preferred method of contact as part of the tenancy sign up process and record this on the appropriate system. 2. Consider if a retrospective exercise to capture customers preferred method of communication for existing customers would add value and be viable. 	Executive Director Operations	31 st January 2023
COM0922.2	As part of the Single Systems project, consider creating a reporting field to record if a customer has a preferred name to be known by. Inform	Executive Director Strategy, Business Insight & HR	30 th June 2023

	colleagues as part of Single Systems training that this field exists and include it in any training manuals created to support colleagues.		
COM0922.3	Include an option for customers to confirm their preferred known by name as part of the tenancy sign up process and record this on the appropriate system.	Executive Director Operations	30 th June 2023
COM0922.4	Ensure that customer facing colleagues are made aware of the new preferred name reporting function so that they can update this information on the appropriate system when required.	Executive Director Operations	30 th June 2023
COM0922.5	Senior managers to reiterate to team members the importance of recording accurate notes including the specific details of a customer query and what was agreed regarding next steps with a customer following an enquiry to ensure this can be followed up effectively.	Executive Director Operations	31 st January 2023
COM0922.6	Senior managers to undertake monthly spot checks of records to ensure team members are including sufficient information and re-directing enquiries appropriately.	Executive Director Operations	31 st March 2023

Case Studies - Letters

Members of the RSG and the SSB were asked to provide feedback relating specifically to two letters sent by Abri within the last six months; the annual rent increase letter and a letter relating to the company name change regarding direct debit payments. Over 47% of respondents agree that Abri's communications are appropriate in length, but some feedback suggests that customers found the rent increase letter too long and 'wordy'. Direct feedback from customers was that when letters are considerably long, they do not read the entire communication, and even more so when the content uses bigger words or references that customers are not familiar with. There were also comments that some customers found the letter and amount of information overwhelming. The RSG recommends introducing an approach that where appropriate, headline facts are contained at the beginning of written communications so that customers understand the content and key messages quickly (COM0922.7).

The RSG recognise that Abri aims to ensure all communications are written in plain English and free from jargon. Over 57% of customers agree that Abri's communications are clear, concise, and easy to understand. However, within the rent increase letter the project group noted use of text that could be perceived by some as subjective. The standout

example was: “*Some customers may notice a slight increase in their rent.*” The project group received feedback that use of the word ‘*slight*’ was not felt to be appropriate in a letter of this nature and whilst the RSG understand that this word was most likely used to provide a level of assurance to customers, to some this was perceived as Abri being out of touch with what a 4.1% increase could mean to some customers, with individual circumstances varying significantly. The RSG recommends establishing a core group of customers to review key communications and work with Abri to identify potential subjective language and to ensure the communication is user friendly (COM0922.8).

The project group noted that neither of the letters reviewed provided details of how customers could access the content via other formats, such as large font, braille, audio, and alternative languages. The RSG was advised that Abri does record the need for alternative methods of communication for those customers who declare these requirements. However, recognising that customer needs may change as a tenancy progresses, the RSG recommends that Abri proactively promote access to alternative formats and how these can be obtained to all customers (COM0922.9).

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
COM0922.7	Include key headline messages at the start of appropriate communications so that customers have immediate understanding of the purpose of the communication	Executive Director Strategy, Business Insight & HR.	31 st January 2023
COM0922.8	Establish a core group of customers to review key customer communications to identify the use of potential subjective language and also ensure the communication is user friendly	Executive Director Strategy, Business Insight & HR.	31 st January 2023
COM0922.9	Ensure all communications reference accessibility to other available formats that Abri offers and how these can be obtained	Executive Director Strategy, Business Insight & HR.	31 st January 2023

Customer Groups

There was feedback advising that some households receive two copies of the same letter when two parties are named on a tenancy agreement. The RSG has to date been unable to establish why this happens and recommends that if it is not for legal purposes, processes are updated to reduce this to one letter per household.

The survey results revealed that shared ownership and leasehold customers feel that they do not receive the same standard of communication as rental customers. It was confirmed that there are different approaches to communication with customers dependent on their tenures. This relates directly to the services that each tenure type is entitled to and therefore, communications regarding matters such as maintenance will not be shared with shared ownership or leasehold customers as they are not entitled to these services. All tenure types do receive the same communications regarding broader matters such as

rent/service charges, covid, new strategies and customer consultations. The RSG recommends that Abri considers consulting with shared ownership and leasehold customers to better understand demand for increased engagement (COM092.10).

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
COM0922.10	Consider consulting with shared ownership and leasehold customers regarding engagement levels and their needs.	Executive Director Strategy, Business Insight & HR	31 st March 2023

Conclusion

Overall, Abri's approach to communication with its customers is effective when dealing with most matters. However, there is opportunity to strengthen this by engaging further with customers on their communication needs and preferences.

The recommendations contained within this report have been proposed to ensure that Abri continues to effectively communicate with customers whilst also making sure that all factors are taken into consideration when notifying customers of important changes or matters. The RSG believe that keeping communication clear, concise, and appropriate and always ensuring that the main message is not lost will enhance the customer experience and strengthen Abri's relationship with its customers.