



Abri's response to Food Poverty in the Cost of Living Crisis Review Report

RESIDENT SCRUTINY GROUP

NOVEMBER 2023 - MARCH 2024

Resident Scrutiny Group Review – Abri's response to Food Poverty in the Cost of Living Crisis

November 2023 - March 2024

Review Project Team

Involved Residents:

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Abri RSG Team:

Gemma Gray – *Scrutiny Advisor*
Kelly Metani – *Governance and Assurance Administrator*

Involved Staff:

Cita Jagot – *Communities & Involvement Manager*
Steph Stanley – *Community Investment Team Leader*
Robert Tait – *Community Development Officer*
Debra Sullivan – *Data Protection Officer & Barrister*

**please note that there were other Abri colleagues involved, however the above met with the working group*

Introduction

Following the annual Resident Scrutiny Group (RSG) resident survey in February 2023, the Cost of Living Crisis was ranked by our residents as one of the top three priorities for the year. Therefore, it was agreed that this would be reviewed in this year's review schedule.

The RSG acknowledges that during this review the partnership with Silva Housing was approved and the review below has been carried out using data and investigations from Abri, future RSG reviews will include all areas of the Abri group.

The project group discussed the approach for this topic, recognising that this was a very extensive topic that in the current climate was ever changing. It was agreed that the topic was too vast to be able to review all aspects that Abri offer to support residents with the Cost of Living crisis and agreed the following for areas of focus:

- Food Offerings
- GDPR Implications

Within this discussion the group decided that this topic should remain a main theme for future surveys to ensure the continuation of reviewing services that Abri offer to support residents, this was agreed and fully supported by the wider RSG.

Please note that this review relates to Abri, rather than the Abri Group following the partnership with Silva Housing in October 2023.

Approach

A variety of methods were used to ensure that both data and feedback from residents and staff were utilised to provide a balanced and holistic approach for this review.

A session was held with the Data Protection Officer to discuss some of the implications that had been raised prior to the project group meeting. The findings from this can be found below.

Members of the project group met with one of the Community Investment (CI) Team Leaders and Community Development Officers (CDO) to further understand what Abri currently offer regarding food poverty, how this process works and how this supports our communities. During this conversation the group were reminded of the community investment strategy and the 'zones' that had been identified as communities facing some of today's most challenging societal issues.



Urban Dorset	878 homes
Amesbury and Salisbury	1144 homes
Southampton	3116 homes
Portsmouth and Gosport	1302 homes
Bordon, Whitehill, Alton and Headley	2758 homes
Clewer (Windsor)	1249 homes
Yeovil	2917 homes
Chard	1084 homes

One of the most beneficial parts to this review was the results from Abri's Cost of Living survey that was carried out in 2023. The project group found these results were very alarming and discussed at length their concerns for the residents who are affected by the cost of living.

All review recommendations will have the sponsorship of the Executive Director for Operations they will have overall responsibility of the actions and ensure they are being delivered by the assigned delivery officer. The project group will continue to work closely with Abri during the implementation phase to review delivery progress and support if necessary, continuing the voice of the resident throughout the process.

Findings and Recommendations

Food Offerings

Pantries and food larders

In the session with the community investment team the group established what offerings were available to communities within Abri geography, within this they discussed the differences between those that were owned and run by Abri (3) and those that were supported by Abri (9), usually with a financial contribution towards the delivery of the services, there are currently 12 in total. It was acknowledged that majority of these were within the community investment zones, there were also other provisions available that the Abri Tenancy Sustainment Team can signpost residents too. These have not formed part of the review process.

Following the review of the mobile pantries the project group noted that there was the potential to 'miss' some of our most vulnerable or silent residents in rural areas. One area mentioned by the group was rural communities that are outside of the Yeovil & Chard areas, noting that the mobile pantry delivers their service to Crewkerne, however some of the transport links would not

allow residents to access. This was just one of the locations that the group discussed, and acknowledged that there would be many other rural communities across the geography that may not be receiving the services. The RSG recommend to consider consulting with our rural communities to see if there is a need to offer the food pantries in these areas, following this the recommendations to review the routes the mobile pantries take to include them. (FP1123.1 & FP1123.2)

The project group reviewed the '[save on food](#)' section of the Cost of Living Hub on Abri's website. This site is available to all who view the website and has some helpful sections to support residents with the cost of living. It was noted that this was a very useful site though there could be more communication regarding it. Members reported not knowing about the hub available to them and discussed how many other residents would feel the same. Following the feedback from members of the project group regarding some of the information being incorrect / out of date / links not working the RSG recommends to review this regularly ensuring that all information is up-to-date and relevant to residents. (FP1123.3)

Some of the initiatives had a membership fee of £1.00 annually and all offering set numbers of items for certain amounts, on average residents could save up to £15 on a weekly shop. Some were on a referral basis, the group discussed and acknowledged that these may only be made if residents were speaking with Abri to ask for help but noted that our 'silent' residents may be suffering without support. The cost of these items was discussed and agreed that these were very reasonable for those who use them. There was little feedback on those who use these pantries and larders, it was felt that this did not need to be a mandatory survey but potentially a feedback 'form' available for users to complete whenever they had feedback. The RSG recommends to gather ongoing feedback on the services to identify any areas for improvement and allow for more residents voice. (FP1123.4)

Food Vouchers

The group were given an understanding of how Abri are able to offer food vouchers to residents needing support through a referral to the crisis fund. The crisis fund is a designated facility with an assigned annual budget. The fund was established to provide emergency assistance for residents suffering financial hardship, food vouchers forming part of the available support, this support is delivered by the Tenancy Support Team.

As part of the review the project group reviewed both the policy and procedure for the fund. These vouchers can be accessed by all residents of Abri and are issued by Abri's Tenancy Support and Income Recovery Teams. The group understood that there is only a certain amount of money in this fund annually and advertisement of it could mean that due to high demand for support this could be used up in a short period of time. However, felt that there could be more indication of help on the support section of the website under the 'save on food' section. The RSG recommends to consider the addition of a 'more support' section on the website that signposts residents to contact the Tenancy Support Team. (FP1123.5)

GDPR Implications

Part of the review led to discussions regarding GDPR and the implications that may cause difficulties for residents to access the service or Abri communicating the available services. Following this the Abri RSG support team met with the data protection officer to raise the questions the project group raised, in this session the team discussed the implications that colleagues face when delivering or communicating the service. The session helped to gain understanding of how GDPR effects how Abri are able to communicate with our residents on

services that fall outside of 'core landlord service'. The work that occurs regarding the cost of living is classed as outside of this area meaning that the ability to target or directly communicate this to residents changes in line with 'opt-in' marketing.

It is not known what opt-in options there are for residents when selecting optional marketing, and the RSG recognise that residents may find a tailored list of marketing materials more appropriate to their needs and priorities beneficial. The RSG recommends that the 'opt-in' function is reviewed in line with priorities for residents to choose from, for example one resident may want to hear about what support Abri can give to support cost of living and one may be about what's on in their communities – these are both different but can have the same level of priority dependent on the resident. Grouping them together may not be the most appropriate in the current climate. (FP1123.6)

Following this session the project group reviewed the feedback from the team and discussed further the biggest theme being communication of the 'non-core landlord services' that Abri offer. Most project group members reported that they were not aware of the services available to them and how many other residents felt the same, this was also reflected in the CoL survey results presentation the group reviewed. Communication has been a strong theme running through the RSG reviews, improvements have been made in the past years regarding communication but it is felt that there is room for continued improvement. The project group discussed how all colleagues should be aware of the services and support that Abri offer especially those services there to help residents in need. The RSG recommends that there is regular internal communications to colleagues, especially following any significant changes to the offerings or service Abri provide to residents. (FP1123.7)

Review of the 2023 Cost of Living Survey

Prior to the review Abri had carried out a Cost of Living Survey*, the data was analysed and shared with the project group as part of their investigation stage. The group reviewed the results presentation and found the information to be worrying regarding how many of Abri residents were struggling with the cost of living, especially the amount of residents who were going without food in order to pay their rent or other rising bills, from this it was noted that there was a greater number of shared owners than seen in previous years. As mentioned in the above section regarding communication the project group found the survey results aligning with the requirement to ensure that Abri are communicating the available services regarding support on food poverty. One of the stand out comments in the report was *"8% of Abri residents and 7% of Silva residents mentioned help with food. The comments included access to food banks and food vouchers to reduce the cost of weekly shopping and feeding families. Respondents consistently mentioned the rising cost of food and fresh goods, suggesting we could further advertise the food banks available and consider introducing more to our most at-risk areas going forward."*

The RSG recognise that the cost of living crisis is going to be a continuous concern for residents going forward and the importance of Abri carrying out the survey annually to keep gaining understanding on what the priorities are for residents and how Abri can help support them. The RSG recommend to carry out an annual resident survey on the Cost of Living. (FP1123.8)

**Please note that this survey included both Abri and Silva Residents*

Recommendations

Action Reference	Recommended Action	Delivery Officer	Assigned Executive Director	Target Delivery Date
FP1123.1	Consider consulting with our rural communities to see if there is a need to offer the food pantries in these areas.	Communities & Involvement Manager	Executive Director - Operations	June 2024
FP1123.2	Use any data captured to review the routes the mobile pantries take considering rural communities	Communities & Involvement Manager	Executive Director - Operations	June 2024
FP1123.3	To include on delivery plans regular checks on the cost of living hub site to ensure the most up to date and relevant information is available to residents	<Abri Confirming Ownership>	Executive Director - Operations	July 2024
FP1123.4	Create an ongoing feedback form for those who have used one of the food offerings (All offerings by Abri)	Communities & Involvement Manager	Executive Director - Operations	July 2024
FP1123.5	Consider the addition of a 'more support' section on the website that signposts residents to contact the Tenancy Support Team.	<Abri Confirming ownership>	Executive Director - Operations	August 2024
FP1123.6	Consider reviewing the opt-in function for residents to choose what Abri can communicate with them	Comms Team / CI Team	Executive Director - Operations	August 2024
FP1123.7	Consider regular internal communications regarding support available to residents, especially following any significant changes to the offerings or service Abri provide to residents	Communities & Involvement Manager	Executive Director - Operations	August 2024
FP1123.8	Carry out an annual cost of living survey to residents	Business Insight	Executive Director - Operations	August 2024
<i>Prior to submission the project group have worked closely with Abri to ensure that these recommendations are achievable and within scope.</i>				

Conclusion

Overall, Abri's approach to food poverty is a positive one, the delivery of the service has been well received by our communities. However, there is an opportunity to improve some of the process, delivery and communication all of which we believe to improve the overall package and resident journey. The RSG acknowledge the everchanging situation regarding the cost of living crisis and understand that this will affect how Abri can deliver this service but would welcome any future work with Abri should the delivery plans change.