



Anti-Social Behaviour Review

Resident Scrutiny Group

RSG PROJECT LEAD: DEBBIE EVANS

FEBRUARY 2022

Resident Scrutiny Group Review: Anti-Social Behaviour - February 2022

Introduction

Abri has a legal responsibility to ensure all customers and stakeholders have easy access to relevant policies and procedures for managing anti-social behaviour (ASB) within its communities. This responsibility falls under The Housing Act (1996) and Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) and is also a regulatory requirement under the Neighbourhood and Community Standard.

ASB is defined by Abri in the Anti-Social Behaviour and Harassment Policy as follows¹:

- a) *Conduct that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, harm or distress to any person;*
- b) *Conduct capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to a person in relation to that person's occupation of residential premises; or,*
- c) *Conduct capable of causing housing-related nuisance or annoyance to any person.*

A person must not pursue a course of conduct:

- a) *Which amounts to harassment of another; and*
- b) *Which he / she knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of the other.*

The impact of the global coronavirus pandemic has seen reported cases of ASB increase significantly on a national scale. For context, the total number of ASB cases recorded for Abri in 2020/21 was 1,245; a significant increase compared to the total for 2019/20 of 725. Noting that there is one more quarter until the end of 2021/22, the total number of ASB cases raised as of 31 December 2021 was 663. This highlights a noticeable decrease that aligns with the easing of lockdown restrictions and broadly a return to pre-pandemic levels.

In February 2021, Abri consulted with customers to identify the priorities they believed the Resident Scrutiny Group (RSG) should focus on for the year ahead. ASB, along with Repairs and Sustainability, was one of the top responses and selected for review. Abri's Internal Audit team conducted an audit of ASB at the end of last year and after discussion with the RSG it was decided that this was an opportunity to do an independent but complementary review. The internal audit focused on internal controls and their effectiveness whilst this review has put a customer lens over this and looked at how Abri's ASB policies and processes are experienced by customers.

The RSG focus group formed to deliver this review discussed the various aspects of ASB and how these affect customers and communities and this shaped the areas of focus for the review as follows:

- Abri's ASB policy,
- Customers' experiences of the policies and procedures in practice,
- Referral services and follow up activities and
- Future plans post COVID restrictions.

¹ This is the same definition as that used in the Crime and Policing Act (2014).

For the purpose of this report, 'party one' will refer to the customer reporting ASB, and 'party two' will refer to the individual the reported case is about.

Overall, the RSG found that Abri's approach to managing ASB is effective when related to legal and regulatory responsibilities. However, they believe that there are several opportunities to strengthen and improve the customer experience, most notably around communication and accessibility of information and support.

Approach

The focus group agreed that individual members would be responsible for specific tasks to contribute to the overall review, broken down as follows:

- Review of the Anti-Social Behaviour and Harassment Policy,
- Customer survey (**Appendix A**),
- Customer case studies,
- A question-and-answer session with Abri subject matter experts and
- Other provider approaches to ASB.

It is proposed that the recommendations made in this report will be assigned to the Head of Customer Partnerships and Group Community Safety Manager with the intention that these will be reassigned to the appropriate roles within the organisation.

Findings and Recommendations

Abri Anti-Social Behaviour and Harassment Policy

1. An initial request from the focus group was to review Abri's current ASB & Harassment Policy to help them better understand Abri's approach to ASB and allow them to focus on areas of high impact to customers.
2. Following review of the policy, the focus group agreed on two statements that they wished to scrutinise further due to their direct impact on customer experience. Both statements were from section 3.3 of the policy and outlined Abri's approach to dealing with ASB, harassment and serious criminal activity. The statements are as follows:
 - A. *Ensure that residents are able to report incidents of ASB easily and that effective early action will be taken wherever possible*
 - B. *Respond quickly to reports of ASB, harassment and serious criminal activity in an efficient sensitive and consistent manner and investigate complaints fairly and thoroughly*
3. The focus group reviewed resources available to them as Abri customers to investigate the ease of reporting an ASB issue. Resources included the Abri website and the customer portals (MyRadian and MyYarlington). Feedback from focus group members was that the website and customer portals present minimal information about what ASB is and how customers can report these issues. Customers are able to fill out a form on the website but there is no explanation as to where this information is sent or how it will be processed.

4. Members believe it is also important that customers understand what will happen after they have reported an issue of ASB or harassment. As part of their review of the website and customer portals, members noted that there was no information or guidance for customers on next steps, only a brief statement of assurance that the case will be referred to the correct person who will investigate the issues raised and try to find a solution.
5. Managing the expectations of customers when dealing with sensitive issues such as ASB is important and should be given priority as part of solid case management. Being open and honest with customers about timescales for their case to be investigated will improve their level of assurance and avoid the unwanted task of chasing Abri for updates. The focus group believes the frequency of contact should be mutually agreed with the case officer and the customer.
6. The focus group agreed that updating the website and customer portals to contain clear, concise, and easy to understand steps on how to report ASB issues and the associated timescales would significantly improve the customer experience and provide a satisfactory level of assurance that the matter will be dealt with appropriately.

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
ASB0222.1	To update the Abri website and customer portal with clear and easy to understand instructions on how to report an ASB issue.	Group Community Safety Manager	31st March 2023
ASB0222.2	To update the Abri website and customer portal with clear and easy to understand details about what will happen once a customer has reported an ASB issue including when to expect an initial response.	Group Community Safety Manager	31 st March 2023
ASB0222.3	To consider increasing the frequency of contact in the initial stages of an investigation, so that customers are contacted by the Case Officer within 24 hours of reporting the ASB incident and to agree a schedule for future contact within the first five days of the investigation.	Group Community Safety Manager	31 st August 2022
ASB0222.4	To update the ASB Procedure to reflect the increases in contact frequency set out in ASB0222.03.	Group Community Safety Manager	31 st August 2022

Customer Survey

7. The group felt it was important to seek direct feedback from customers who have experienced ASB and reported it to Abri within the last twelve months. This would help them to further understand the most common types of ASB experienced and how they feel Abri managed the case.
8. The survey was shared with the Scrutiny Sounding Board (SSB); a group of customers who have specifically signed up to take part in activities that will support the work of the wider RSG. A total of twenty-two members of the SSB completed the survey.
9. Common themes identified from the comments provided by the SSB members were:
 - Timeliness of responding to incidents,

- Being told ‘nothing can be done’ but no alternative support or advice offered,
- Minimal support for residents who do not feel comfortable approaching neighbours about issues due to fear of the response,
- Not wanting to report ASB due to fear of repercussions from the other party involved and
- Not being kept up to date about progress of cases.

Customer case studies

10. Members of the focus group and the Scrutiny Advisor spoke directly with several individuals from the SSB to learn more about their specific experiences of ASB. The following key points were raised through these discussions:

- Colleagues are professional in their approach to dealing with ASB cases, maintaining an empathetic and supportive attitude,
- Interventions such as the use of noise apps, mediation and partnership working with external agencies have improved the levels of ASB within several communities,
- Reporting of ASB cases is not a straightforward enough process and the requirement for evidence is not always achievable,
- There is not enough guidance or signposting to other agencies for issues that Abri are not responsible for, such as littering, dog fouling and communal spaces shared with other associations or private landlords,
- There is not enough support available for customers during out of office hours and
- There is not a consistent enough approach to frequency of contact with customers who have reported issues of ASB.

11. Communication was a standout finding when discussing ASB cases with customers. It is not frequent enough and there is no structure or agreed approach that customers can refer to. Customers feel they spend too much time chasing for updates and would like to see a more defined process to provide assurance that their case is being managed effectively. This feedback further supports recommendations ASB0222.3 and ASB0222.4.

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
ASB0222.5	Consider providing an ASB helpline for customers that can be utilised at times outside of standard working hours. This should provide clear and easy to understand advice on what steps the customer should take next and if they should contact any other agencies such as the police.	Group Community Safety Manager	30 th September 2022

Question and answer session with Abri colleagues

12. The focus group recognised the value that speaking directly to Abri colleagues involved in the management of ASB would bring to their review. A meeting was arranged with the Group Community Safety Manager, Community Safety Officer (East) and Tenancy Compliance Coordinator (West).

13. Prior to the meeting, the focus group agreed a set of questions to put forward to Abri colleagues focussing on key areas of their review. A copy of the questions and summary of the discussions is provided in **Appendix B**.
14. The question-and-answer session proved useful to the focus group and further improved their understanding of the regulatory and legislative obligations that Abri must meet in relation to ASB. A key outcome from the discussion was that it is not clear as to what Abri are responsible for in relation to matters considered as ASB by customers. Details on what types of ASB related matters Abri are responsible for should be made clear and easily accessible to customers and relevant signposting made to other agencies where possible.
15. Members also discussed the importance for all customer facing colleagues to understand the basic principles of Abri's approach to ASB. This will ensure they can offer the relevant support to customers and signpost them to the appropriate procedure should they raise any ASB related queries.

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
ASB0222.6	To create an ASB resource hub on the Abri website and customer portal. This should include detail of what is and what is <i>not</i> classed as ASB as well as details of additional support agencies available to customers. Where an issue is listed as <i>not</i> falling within the ASB category, clear signposting information to the correct agency should be provided where possible.	Group Community Safety Manager	31 st March 2023
ASB0222.7	Consider rolling out regular ASB refresher training for all customer facing colleagues.	Group Community Safety Manager	30 th September 2023

ASB referrals

16. As part of some ASB cases, Abri will support customers with referrals to other agencies, such as victim support, social services, mediation services, food banks and charities. It is important to note that Abri has a separate policy and procedure for dealing with cases of domestic abuse and these have not been taken into consideration as part of this review.
17. Referring customers to external support services can be a significant part of resolution to ASB cases for either party one, party two or in some cases, both parties. By tracking the details of all referrals made, Abri can identify emerging trends in certain geographical areas and further investigate if additional support within the community is required. For example, if through ASB case management Abri identifies an area whereby more customers are being referred to foodbanks or family charities, they can consider providing additional support to the community.

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
ASB0222.8	Consider implementing a tracking system for all ASB cases that have included a referral to another agency as part of the resolution, to monitor any trends in the support required across Abri's geography. This data should then be tracked to monitor any trends relating to the type of support required in different areas.	Group Community Safety Manager	30 th September 2022

Action Ref	Recommended Action	Officer Responsible	Deadline
ASB0222.9	Introduce a pro-active response plan that provides effective support in areas identified as having high levels of one or more type of ASB or support need in the tracking system outlined in ASB0222.8	Group Community Safety Manager	31 st March 2023

Other providers approach to ASB

18. Research was undertaken by one member of the focus group to look at how other registered providers approach ASB. They referred to the websites of similar sized organisations to Abri and reviewed resources and guidance available to customers on ASB matters.
19. The outcomes of the research were reported back to the focus group and the key themes included:
 - A majority of other providers have a dedicated page for ASB that clearly outlines what matters they can deal with,
 - Most providers clearly explain how they will manage ASB cases and create a sense of assurance that all cases matter,
 - Some providers acknowledge that lockdown restrictions imposed by the government due to Covid have had an impact on the number of ASB cases being reported and outline how they are responding to the increase and
 - Abri's approach to ASB on their website does not create a feeling of assurance that matters are important and will be dealt with effectively.

Future plans post Covid restrictions

20. The focus group understands that the global pandemic has had a profound impact on ASB on a national scale. Whilst they recognise the importance of Abri navigating their way through the significant increase in cases, they also believe that consideration should be given to how cases will be managed as restrictions are further eased and the public get used to life post-covid.
21. Members agreed that Abri's current integration project must take priority to allow procedure alignments across the East and West. Through discussions regarding the integration project, the group felt assured that the proposals will support the aim to manage ASB cases more effectively and that this will incorporate considerations around post-covid cases.

Conclusion

The RSG recognises that the significant rise in ASB cases due to the difficult operating environment over the last two years, has impacted Abri's ability to respond to reports of ASB as effectively as pre-pandemic. It is hoped that the improvement opportunities identified by the RSG will support Abri to further build on its objective to effectively manage all cases of ASB and ensure that customer satisfaction with case handling strengthens.

The RSG believes that effective communication with customers plays a key part in the overall experience of managing ASB related matters and looks forward to working with Abri to implement the recommendations made.