

Written Evidence – Abri (PTC0010)

As Abri Group, one of the largest housing providers in southern England, we have a customer base of 80,000 people. During the pandemic we have seen many challenges arise among the communities in which we work, but also the inimitable resilience of those places. We have seen residents take the lead where they live to help their neighbours and support their area. Our services – and services across the entire housing sector – have seen a high demand. We want to support communities to thrive, and with that in mind we welcome the opportunity to respond to your inquiry: the long-term impact of the pandemic on towns and cities.

Considering the nature of our organisation, we have provided responses to section one, housing and green spaces, and section two, the changing nature of employment. In the first section we've provided a general response and in section two a question/answer response.

Housing and green spaces

The pandemic has impacted people in many ways. During this time, and specifically during periods of lockdown, access to external open space (both private and public) and adequate, flexible space inside homes to provide opportunities for homeworking or comfortable personal and communal living space, has been critical for health and wellbeing.

We recently sought feedback from customers on our new design standards and adequate space within homes was a top priority for them. In response, adopting nationally described space standards as a minimum is something that we're looking to do on all sites. We believe this should be encouraged to ensure consistency across the built environment.

Within the home, the pandemic highlighted the need for space for people to work securely with facilities and adequate broadband connectivity (similar to the requirement under the Code for Sustainable Homes). At the same time, the importance of adequate space for families to come together, to share meaningful family interaction, was further highlighted. Equally, we believe that the need for private space, to be able to separate work and living functions within the home, was brought into sharper focus as being incredibly important.

During lockdown the essential need for good air quality and adequate daylight and sunlight was also emphasised. This feeds into health and wellbeing, which is something we prioritise when looking at the design of new homes. We believe that being indoors during the pandemic has further highlighted the need for good air quality and adequate daylight and sunlight. This also relates to the energy efficiency of homes and reduces the need to minimise over-heating. We think adhering to good practice in these areas will ensure health and wellbeing are provided in new homes.

The pandemic showcased the importance of community cohesion; access to green space to do so safely and exercise is a crucial part of this. Through our design brief we're focussing on ensuring greater provision of good quality external green space. We believe this can be provided within developments as part of a larger scheme. Or we would look to develop schemes with access to good local facilities and green space provision as part of our initial site evaluation. We think this should become an important criteria for all new homes.

The changing nature of employment

We'd like to begin by highlighting that when it comes to employment we are often dealing with the unknown. For example, the jobs market has recently taken a surprising turn with a large number of vacancies appearing – which was unexpected.

To answer the inquiry's questions in this section we've utilised our knowledge of the employment landscape and coupled it with our experience supporting 80,000 customers with job support and training. If there is anything you'd like to talk to us further about, please do get in touch using the details provided below.

1. How will the pandemic change the nature of employment? And what will be the long-term impact of this change on towns and cities?

We believe the long-term impact of the pandemic on towns and cities, in regard to employment, is that unemployment will remain high. At the same time, we believe young people, people with limited skills, and those furthest from the labour market, will be impacted the most. We also think there will be an increase in demand for specific skills, for example technology and interpersonal/people skills, as well as a move to 'green jobs'.

The way people work has changed significantly, and we expect that to continue with remote and at-home working. The long-term impact of that shift on towns and cities could include less customers at shops and cafes and offices not being utilised in the same way. The latter could lead to business closures. Additionally, a move from office spaces to remote working could impact mobile caterers (such as sandwich vans), cleaning staff and landlords of co-operative workspaces as footfall and need is less.

During lockdown some jobs were unable to continue due to safety measures; with this in mind we don't expect all roles to recover in the same way, and this could have a long-term impact with people potentially having to re-train or explore new employment options.

2. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?

The increase or decrease on inequalities within towns and cities will likely be dependent on business sectors area to area, for example manufacturing, retail

or tourism. We also expect access to training to upskill (or 'level up') to be a factor when it comes to a decrease or increase in inequality. Towns and cities that generally experience high levels of tourism could see an increase in demand for services due to staycations, which could possibly impact house prices and the affordability of an area. In turn, it could become more difficult to recruit people into roles; hospitality being a sector already impacted by the pandemic with employers finding it difficult to recruit people as establishments reopen.

We also think there will be a rise in insecure employment, by which we mean low-paid work and temporary contracts. Employees in work like this generally have less access to training and development opportunities, as well as career progression. We believe this could increase inequalities in towns and cities where there are high levels of this type of employment.

Another consideration is limited access to good broadband services in more rural areas; this could impact remote working for some people living in these communities, compared to those living in cities. Transport infrastructure is also important to consider as the amount of people traveling between places is expected to lessen significantly – this could see some services suffer and a reduced service in response.

We believe that the effect of the pandemic on employment will increase inequalities in towns and cities. Specifically, we think that people already displaced from employment pre-pandemic will find it more difficult to access opportunities as we recover due to employers generally favouring candidates with work experience and recent roles on their CV.

3. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?

From monitoring the job market, and the pandemic's impact on employment, it appears that towns and cities in the north of England have been impacted more than cities such as London in the south. However, with the rise of remote working and less people commuting into cities like the capital, there could be an economic impact on transport, hospitality and housing.

Since the pandemic began and a large-scale shift away from offices to remote working, we believe there has and will continue to be a high level of unused office and retail space. We think this could pose an opportunity for positive repurposing of existing buildings like these towards independent businesses, pop-up shops and similar. This could benefit communities in towns and cities, providing spaces for their businesses to grow and thrive.

We believe that high streets will experience a long-term impact from the pandemic, with an increase in people using online shops and services. We've already seen this impact, with national and regional businesses going into administration as consumer spending moves towards online offerings. At the same time, during lockdown there was an increase in people shopping 'locally' and there is potential that this could continue.

4. What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any change in the nature of employment?

We believe there will be a need to address issues and barriers to employment and quality jobs at a local level. This means a collaborative approach to addressing issues around access to and cost of training opportunities, as well as affordable childcare and other similar challenges. We also think it would be beneficial to reduce the divide between highly skilled/highly paid occupations and less skilled/poorly paid work as this tends to increase inequalities.

We think the Skills for jobs white paper could be built on to bring together leaders, employers, colleges, universities, and training providers to work together and focus on addressing what is needed to level up their local area. Additionally, providing young people with high-quality access to careers planning services, starting at primary school age, would be beneficial. This could increase awareness of future jobs and skills required.

5. How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in employment?

We think it would be useful to review what has worked already, lessons learned, research on future work forces and impact of the pandemic on young people to shape responses moving forward. Additionally, it might be beneficial to continue or introduce schemes similar to furlough for retail workers as well as other hard-hit sectors to support recovery. In terms of reducing inequalities, providing subsidised computer equipment to increase access to digital platforms for those currently without it, would help connect people to opportunities.

1 July 2021