

COVID-19

initial lessons learnt





 **Hyde Susan Stockwell**

Chair, G15 COVID-19 Lessons Learnt Group
Chief Customer Officer, the Hyde Group

"We want to help the social housing sector to be better-prepared for future shocks, so we can continue to provide homes for those in society who need them most."

Introduction

For the social housing sector, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the subsequent lockdown, presented significant challenges. Our customers are some of the most vulnerable people in society and they are likely to feel the health, economic and societal effects most keenly, both now, and for some time to come.

The G15, like other organisations, were able to call upon their business continuity plans to manage the financial and operational impacts. However, we also had to continue to ensure homes were safe and had to meet increased demand for services, including providing the specialised care and support that our customers rely upon, often on a daily basis.

Tough decisions had to be taken; services were scaled back or moved online and others had to stop entirely; developments were put on hold and most of our staff had to switch to working remotely. Communicating these changes to our customers, and to our staff, was a crucial aspect of our response.

The G15's COVID-19 Lessons Learnt group, established as the lockdown in England began to be eased, provided a forum for members to share their experiences during the pandemic. While we all took slightly different approaches, there were many similarities, enabling us to collectively identify what worked (and what didn't) and the positive outcomes were generated. We also discussed the long term implications for our organisations and our customers.

We hope this report, which summarises the outcomes of those discussions, demonstrates the value of the homes and services housing associations provide - particularly in the worst of times. We also hope it serves as a practical guide for other housing associations and to help the sector as a whole be better-prepared for any future spikes in coronavirus infections (or, for that matter, any major shock), so that together, we can continue to provide sustainable homes and communities for those in society who need them most.

On a personal note, I would like to thank everyone who joined the meetings for taking an active part in our lively, open and very informative discussions. I was delighted that everyone was willing to share their experiences (and what they had learnt) during the coronavirus pandemic. This shows how collaboration between the G15 members can help improve the way housing associations support their customers and it is why my organisation, Hyde, is committed to playing an active role in groups such as this one in the future.

Business Continuity Planning

While all of the G15 members had business continuity plans (BCPs) in place before the coronavirus pandemic, it is fair to say plans had not been a priority and tended to focus on local issues (such as an office being closed for a time due to a fire or cyber attack), or a significant proportion of staff not being able to work due to illness.

Some members had started planning for the possible impact of COVID-19 in January and February but the rapid, and widespread, changes to operations and services caused by the lockdown meant BCPs had to be revised at short notice, often without thorough testing and validation. For example, while some had trialled individual teams working from home, they had not, understandably, tested having 99% of staff working remotely.

Everyone established a COVID-19 group to implement and manage BCPs during the lockdown. Some members suggested that having a 'Gold, Silver and Bronze' hierarchy (Gold being strategic, Silver, tactical and Bronze, operational) allowed decisions to be taken much more quickly, without senior management approval, making plans more agile and responsive to changing Government guidance and customers' needs, something that many members look likely to consider in the future.

Some common themes emerged during our discussions: maintaining the safety and wellbeing of our customers and staff; considering the changing needs of our customers; adjusting to remote working en masse; service delivery; and communicating and engaging with both our customers and staff.

Overall, the G15 members surveyed

AGREED
their BCP had been
100% effective



Keeping our customers safe in their homes

Keeping residents safe in their homes was obviously our priority before lockdown and so maintaining repairs services, with residents self-isolating, was a key consideration during the pandemic.

All G15 members continued to provide emergency repairs and health and safety-related compliance work (such as fire safety inspections, boiler servicing and electrical work) and some also managed to provide essential repair services, albeit at reduced levels. With caretaking teams and estate managers classed as essential workers we were also able to keep communal areas clear and bin stores clean. Of course, all of these services were backed by new risk assessments and method statements designed to protect operatives and residents.



Supporting our most vulnerable residents

Our most vulnerable customers include residents in sheltered and supported housing. With most scheme managers working remotely, collectively, the G15 made made tens of thousands of welfare calls to residents who were self-isolating, to enable to continue to provide emotional, as well as practical support, such as deliveries of food and medicine. Our teams also prioritised daily cleaning of communal areas, to minimise infection risk.

Members reported that Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), particularly noise nuisance, rose considerably during lockdown. Switching to using telephone, text and WhatsApp did enable our teams to manage issues, although we agreed that these services are best delivered with employees on the ground.

We were also acutely aware the lockdown created new challenges for people experiencing domestic abuse. An important aspect of the information and communications to customers therefore included signposting for more help, such as confidential helplines and safe spaces.



Case study

The Hyde Group: The Flying Squad

Hyde's Flying Squad was established to address the challenge of workload fluctuations as a result of COVID-19, matching employees with spare capacity to over-stretched teams. Thirty-one members of staff were drawn from across the business, from the Customer team to the Risk and Governance team. They were allocated to Resident Services, Income, Customer Operations, Digital, Hyde Foundation and Stakeholder and Investor Relations.

Between mid-April and the end of June, the Flying Squad provided more than 1,100 hours of support, with a peak in May, avoiding the need for temporary staff (and the associated costs).

"It's been a great learning experience and highlighted the struggle people go through to pay their rent on top of feeding their children."

As well as helping ensure services were maintained, staff benefitted from having the opportunity to learn new skills, broaden their networks and to gain more understanding of other parts of the business, particularly frontline teams. Additionally, the teams that were helped out benefitted from working with people from other parts of the business, with different skills and perspectives.



"The flying squad enabled members of my team to gain a better understanding of other parts of Hyde in a more 'hands-on' role. It was a very positive experience and a great use of staff time."

Providing financial support and advice

A significant proportion of the G15's households are in lower income brackets; many of our customers are employed in some of the most hardest hit sectors of the economy (often on temporary or 'zero-hour' contracts). This meant financial worries would be at the forefront of people's minds.

Along with taking calls from customers, all G15 members took a proactive approach, identifying those they felt were at risk and contacting them to provide reassurance, and to work with them to ensure they could continue to pay their rent. Advice ranged from reviewing finances, to helping customers apply for benefits (often people were applying for the first time) and providing access to employment and training. The primary aim was to ensure customers maintained their tenancies and kept a roof over their heads.



Case study

Network Homes: Moving resident engagement online

When Network homes rolled out Microsoft (MS) Teams in 2019, as part of its *Innovative ways of working* programme, it was envisaged as a collaboration tool for employees, with limited external use. COVID-19 changed all that, with collaborative working software playing a vital role in resident engagement throughout the lockdown, when all face-to-face activity had to be paused.

Network Homes launched its new business objective, *Strengthening residents trust in us* at the beginning of 2020. A survey in March revealed residents wanted integrity and openness from Network Homes, and would like to have more ways of giving feedback via digital surveys.

It was therefore important to maintain, and even increase, activities during lockdown, so the Resident Engagement team moved resident panel meetings, pop-up engagement events and resident training sessions onto MS Teams too.

The first virtual resident panel meeting took place in April and went extremely well; there were a few teething problems but training was provided to panel members, so most were able to take part without issues. Network Housing has since held the July meeting online and hosted its first virtual pop-up event for all residents in June.

More events are planned, including resident meetings at some of Network Homes' larger schemes; more pop-up events; and a series of themed meetings giving residents the opportunity to discuss issues such as equality, diversity and inclusion, community and sustainability. The Resident Engagement team is also organising virtual event to engage with harder-to-reach residents. The success of its approach has led Network Homes to commit to using a blend of face-to-face and virtual events for residents in the future.

Key priorities during lockdown

- Health and safety of customers and staff
- Communications
- Continuity of service.

Overall, the G15 members surveyed

AGREED
their BCP had fully delivered
to customer expectations



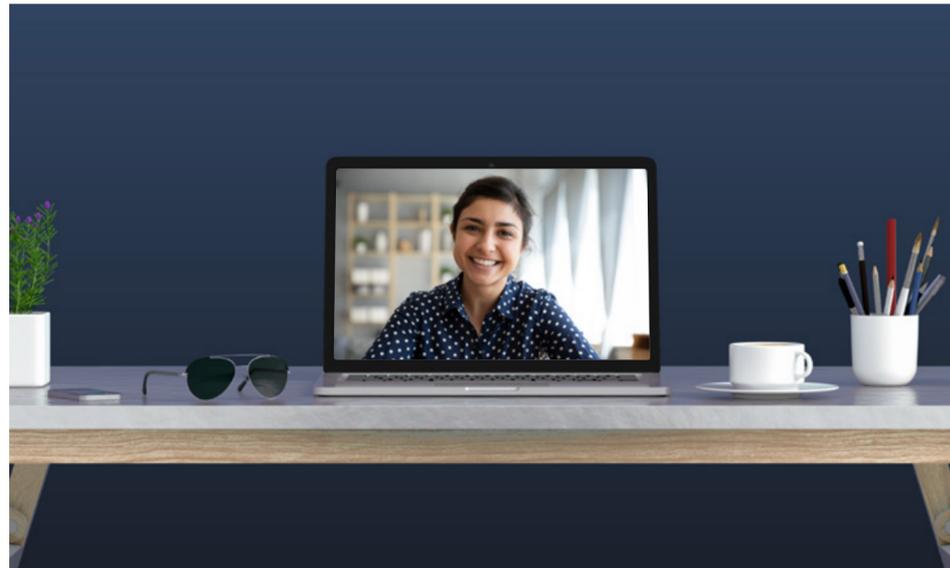
Maintaining customer services

Many G15 members have begun adopting digital platforms for customer interactions in recent years, as we encourage our customers to 'self-serve'. This certainly brought benefits during lockdown. Customers were able to find answers to common queries on our websites, make online and telephone rent and service charge payments and use online forms to report ASB and request repairs, for instance.

A few G15 members launched customer portals, such as MyAccount, in the past year, that are integrated fully with their systems and work across all types of devices. These allow customers to log into their account to check their balance, make payments, view, download and print their rent and service charge statements, and update their contact details.

Other initiatives adopted included remote viewings of properties via Skype and the use of apps to enable tenancy agreements and other paperwork to be signed, then returned to via email, removing the need for face-to-face meetings.

As a result, all G15 members said that customer services were largely unaffected, once IT and telephony issues were resolved, with teams working from home. We expect these initiatives will become part of the G15 members' overall customer service offering in the future, as we continue to put customers in control.



Case study

One Housing: Switching staff and customer training online

One Housing built on the success of its digital wellbeing programmes at the start of lockdown, moving all its staff and resident training programmes online from the end of March, allowing it to continue to provide support and remain focused on delivering its core purpose and services.

One Housing had been focusing on increasing the performance and wellbeing of its teams for some time before the coronavirus pandemic and wanted to maintain this focus, despite the restrictions under lockdown. So, after a couple of weeks of running hour long live webinars for staff on Zoom that concentrated purely on 'hot topics' and wellbeing, the performance element of training was slowly reintroduced, to bring back some sense of normality.

Using digital platforms meant training sessions were shorter, more focused and more frequent, reaching a larger number of staff than would have been possible with classroom training.

Live webinars were impractical for some staff, however, particularly for customer-facing teams, so sessions were recorded and e-learning content provided to be accessed when it suited individuals. This flexible approach, with blended learning, proved successful, with increased engagement in training.

One Housing also felt it was important to continue to offer customer training during lockdown, particularly courses supporting mental and physical wellbeing.

Customer training was launched at the start of June, once their needs were understood and it had been established how best to meet them, while also ensuring a digital platform was appropriate.

"I thought the session was very relevant. It was good to talk with others from around the organisation about their experiences during lockdown."

Daily hour-long sessions were held via Zoom on a variety of topics, from mental resilience, to physical exercise and employment skills. Sessions proved very popular, as most customers could commit to one hour and because the subject matter varied enough for them to be able to pick and choose which training they wanted to attend. It also meant those customers not living near One Housing's main training sites in Camden and Tower Hamlets could attend, without having to pay for travel.

"I found the training very useful, helpful and informative. The information was appropriate now, as we continue to deal with COVID-19, and will be useful in the future."

Customer training was made available to some of One Housing's partners, including Camden Pathways, which supports Camden residents in homeless hostels, and other housing associations.

One Housing says the initiative has increased the engagement of attendees, and improved the quality of training they receive, and estimates it has saved about 30% on training costs, compared with traditional classroom courses.

Remote working and staff engagement

All G15 members had trialled teams working from home before the lockdown, which enabled them to identify most IT issues in advance and resulted in a (largely) seamless transition to working from home. Importantly, 'bandwidth' was increased to improve reliability, to cater for more users, to provide additional support to frontline staff and to cope with the anticipated increase in customer contact via digital channels. However, the most important aspect of remote working was providing emotional and social support to employees (see engaging and communicating with staff section).



Case study

Southern Housing Group: Mobilising staff volunteers to support vulnerable customers

"My first call with the tenant didn't go so well. He seemed distracted. But then I realised I'd interrupted his favourite television quiz! I learned it was better to call in the mornings, but not too often. He preferred our occasional (socially-distanced) face-to-face chats when I ran an errand for him. It was easier for him to hear me and we got much more out of it."

Staff volunteer

Southern Housing Group (SHG) staff volunteers helped around 450 households during the coronavirus pandemic, providing practical and emotional support throughout lockdown.

Employment skills officers in SHG's Community Investment Team were tasked with coordinating staff volunteers, as well as allocating financial support from a £250,000 Hardship Fund, set up to help anyone impacted by the virus who did not have friends or family to help.

The team called more than 3,000 residents identified as potentially being vulnerable – including care and supported housing residents and the over-70s – to see who might need help, whether it was because of a loss of income, of if they were shielding, disabled or unable to leave the house. While many people said they did not need extra help, 453 households did take up the offer of support.

"I wanted to thank you for being there for me when COVID-19 started. You have been exceptional helping me with my shopping and checking in on me nearly every day over the phone – I would have otherwise felt helpless; I feel cared for and safe."

Initially, the 70 volunteers went food and essentials shopping (paid for by the Hardship Fund), picked up prescriptions and phoned residents to see how they were – the aim was to be personal and respond to what people really felt they needed. In some areas the support was channelled through community support groups.

Over the course of the lockdown, the Hardship Fund also paid for mobile top-ups, so residents could keep in touch with family and friends, as well as gas and electricity top-ups. This was later extended to wellbeing items, including books, CDs, knitting wool, puzzles, board games and art supplies for children.

Wellbeing calls continued as the lockdown eased, although the need for support decreased. About 10% of the Hardship Fund had been spent by the end of July. The fund is now turning towards supporting local foodbanks struggling to respond to the increase in demand and will continue to be used to support residents in the event of a significant economic downturn in the months to come.

The volunteer scheme has been successful on a number of levels: residents have had access to free support, staff have got to know residents better, and volunteers have gained new skills and experience, which they will bring back into the business.

Overall, the G15 members surveyed

AGREED
their BCP had fully delivered to employee expectations



Property and development

All of our development sites were closed at the start of the lockdown but by June they began to re-open. The G15 members worked closely with their contractors, development partners and supply chains to ensure Government guidelines were adhered to, so that work could restart safely. With fewer site workers, we expect completions will be delayed, with a knock-on effect on the availability of homes in the short to medium term.



Learning points

- BCPs should cover business response (operations, finances etc); customers' needs (safety, wellbeing, financial support); communication and engagement with customers and staff
- BCPs should be reviewed regularly, at least annually. During a major incident, be prepared to change plans on a regular, and sometimes daily, basis, to reflect changing Government guidelines
- Test and validate BCPs against different scenarios to identify gaps and consider worst case scenarios. Specific risk registers can help assess and mitigate impact
- Establish a crisis response group to manage day-to-day response and delegate authority – a Gold, Silver and Bronze approach enables decisions to be made, without having to seek approval from senior management.

Our biggest achievements

- Successfully shifting to working from home
- Introducing new technology for customers and staff
- Minimising disruption to customer services.

Customer communication and engagement

Customer communication and engagement underpinned everyone's response to COVID-19. The aim was to reassure, and frequently update, customers on changes to government guidelines, which often meant we had to change services at very short notice (or pause them completely).

One of the biggest challenges was consistency of messaging, due to rapidly changing Government advice. Appreciating that customers were often bombarded with conflicting information and speculation from both reputable, and less reputable, sources, it was very important that we ensured any information we provided was fact-checked and linked directly to primary sources.

All of the G15 members said that digital platforms were indispensable in this regard, enabling us to update information quickly and easily, 24/7, and to target communications, in terms of both topic and audience. Customer insight played an important role – communications tended to be based on incoming inquiries to our customer teams and from conversations we had with customers.

Many members found one of the most effective methods of communication was text messaging. Customers tend to have their phones with them most of the time and texting was faster, and more direct, than emails. Visits to COVID-19 web pages went up considerably after a text was sent out.

We also found that telephone calls were a great tool, particularly when communicating with older customers, who are often not online (or do not have an email address). Having conversations with real people helped our teams connect better with customers and, in turn, helped us to resolve issues much faster.

However, the pandemic did highlight the importance of data, privacy and permissions – we all agreed how important it was to ensure that we have both the means, and the permission, to contact customers in as many ways as possible, to ensure messages get through to them.



Case study

Optivo: Creating resilient residents

Optivo used its customer data during lockdown to identify residents that potentially needed additional help, as part of its *Resilient Residents Programme*. Over 13 weeks, the team made more than 63,000 telephone calls to its most vulnerable customers, providing financial and employment advice, plus helping older residents tackle loneliness and isolation and to get practical support, including access to food and medication.

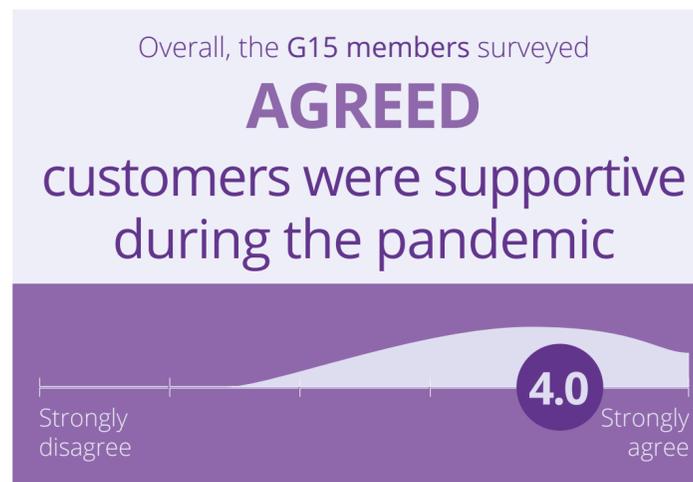
Optivo realised many of its customers were going to struggle financially as a result of coronavirus, demonstrated by the nearly 7,500 visits to its money and advice web pages in first few weeks of lockdown. The team made nearly 49,000 income, welfare and job support calls and helped with 1,800 new Universal Credit claims – up 176% year-on-year. Additionally, more than 500 residents were given employment and training advice.

“Thanks to your encouragement I am now on an online course with South Thames College. The team has been in touch regularly and it’s good to feel supported.”

It was also clear many older residents would be adversely affected by the lockdown. The over 70s would have to self-isolate and nearly 10% of residents have no family or friends support. Optivo made nearly 15,000 telephone calls to its most vulnerable senior residents to check on their welfare, to ensure they had access to food and medicine and to combat isolation and loneliness. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 90% of those called saying they were reassured by the calls and welfare checks.

Optivo also worked with six local food distribution hubs, providing access to food for hundreds of households. It provided online support for young, vulnerable residents, delivered activity packs to home schooling parents and organised additional telephone support for victims of domestic abuse.

The focus has now turned to the long term effects of coronavirus on residents' finances and employment. And, while telephone calls will continue to be the primary mode of contact, Optivo is now looking to increase online and digital support to its customers.



Case study

A2Dominion: Coping with COVID Compendium

A2Dominion's *Coping with COVID Compendium* provided the latest advice, that was accurate and clear, for both customers and staff, along with easy access to the right guidance, throughout lockdown.

A2Dominion published 21 online articles, some covering the ever-changing Government (or other) guidance, and some written in response to questions received from customers through the Contact Centre.



A key aspect of the strategy was ensuring customer and staff knew what information was available and where they could find it.

The articles covered a range of issues, from rent rises to domestic abuse and student accommodation policies, each with a clear summary of advice, together with links and signposting to further information. Articles were 'fact-checked' before publishing and linked to prime sources of information, from reputable sources.

They also gave frontline staff a simple, accessible and efficient way of getting information to help them to answer customer queries. This was particularly helpful with staff working remotely, which made it more difficult to discuss issues with colleagues.

A key aspect of the strategy was ensuring customer and staff knew what information was available and where they could find it. A2Dominion used online news articles and digital noticeboards that acted as 'front page links', giving short summaries of advice and contact details of where to find more information. Digital notices also reflected issues that arose during the lockdown, such as an increase in noise nuisance and ASB.

With more than 5,600 individual page views and an average time on each article of more than a minute, the Compendium was clearly an information source that customers liked and trusted.

Communication priorities

- Being consistent in our messaging
- Fact-checking all information
- Reassuring customers we were there to help
- Keeping customers up-to-date on how services were changing with the latest government advice.

Learning points

- Messages to customers should be clear, concise and consistent
- Information should be fact-checked and link to primary sources of information
- Customer insight and feedback is an essential tool in deciding what messages are needed, when and to whom
- Tailored communications help reassure and support customers and improve customer relationships
- The tone of voice should be informative and personal, not corporate
- Digital platforms are indispensable; use websites, emails, texts and social media, but ensure that you have permission to contact customers in as many ways as possible
- Do not discount 'traditional' communications, such as the telephone and face-to-face (where possible), which are important when communicating with older residents and can help resolve issues much faster.

Most successful customer communication tools

- Website
- Text
- Phone.

Communicating and engaging with staff

Supporting staff, many of whom were affected personally by the pandemic, and maintaining morale and mental wellbeing in a 'virtual' workplace, was a crucial part of the G15 members' response to coronavirus.

Ensuring internal communications were consistent with external communications was important. We needed keep staff up-to-date with changes to our services and ways of working and internal communications often informed the conversations frontline staff had with our customers.

We all realised early on that we should not try to 'tell everyone, everything': we had more success with shorter, simpler messages that signposted staff to more information, reinforced through team briefings to ensure we reached all our employees.

It was everyone's priority to promote a feeling of being together as one team, despite being separated physically, and ensure that the social and 'fun' aspects of work were not forgotten.

So, as well as intranet sites, virtual team meetings and email, some G15 members used private social networking platforms, such as Yammer and Workplace by Facebook, to promote a sense of community, combatting loneliness and maintaining levels of engagement and motivation.

This was backed by 360° communications between staff, managers and leadership teams. Senior staff from many of the member organisations were encouraged to post video blogs and hold live Q&A sessions, enabling staff to ask questions and give feedback. Everyone found it was important to be honest with staff: if senior management did not have an answer, it was better to say so, rather than avoiding a question.

Some members also provided online guides and helplines to help staff deal with parenting, home schooling, work-life balance, stress, isolation and anxiety during the lockdown.

Case study

Peabody: People magazine connects staff

Peabody included a slightly more traditional approach as part of its staff communications activity during the coronavirus pandemic, launching a magazine, *People*, which was posted to every employee at home.

Peabody realised that employees would miss interaction with their colleagues the most during lockdown and that a softer, more human, approach to staff communications was needed, alongside more 'corporate' news published on the intranet.

Additionally, opportunities for online engagement with staff delivering frontline services directly (accounting for more than half of the workforce) were limited. A print magazine mailed directly to everyone at home was a great way to connect with those spending little time on line and a great way to create a sense of unity.

People's editorial team was drawn from across the organisation. It met on Microsoft Teams, and developed content and stories to include, to ensure the magazine was truly 'by the people, for the people'.

The first issue, published in May, celebrated staff, sharing their personal stories, as well as giving lifestyle and wellbeing tips such as keeping fit, cooking and growing food. It also came with a free gift of seeds for staff to grow at home. The next issue is due to be published in the Autumn.

Most successful staff communication tools

- Intranet
- Email
- Virtual team meetings
- Private social media platforms, eg Workplace by Facebook, Yammer.

"93% of staff said they felt supported by colleagues during lockdown."

A G15 member

Case study

MTVH: Communicating, connecting and creating content

The MTVH Communications Team's mission during lockdown was to allay both customers' and staff's fears about the pandemic by listening and responding to people's concerns, delivering clear messages and keeping everyone connected.

The team was split into three: the Response team, MTVH Connect team and the Stories team, each with a remit to develop new ways of engaging with colleagues and keeping up morale so they could continue to deliver high quality services to customers.

The Response team addressed COVID-19-related queries from colleagues and customers via a dedicated COVID-19 email address; it also created a special section on the website where people could go for help. Queries were logged and dealt with swiftly – most of these came in the initial phase of the pandemic.

The MTVH Connect team launched a daily programme of online events to help connect colleagues. Over eight weeks it ran 37 sessions: The Coffee Room, Guest speakers, colleague stories and 'Geeta Live.'

"Geeta's live sessions were incredibly powerful, both in bringing people together and as a direct and quick way to share information across the organisation. Our discussions around Black Lives Matter gave people a safe, open space to share their experiences and raise concerns. It really heightened our focus on diversity and inclusion."

Geeta Live gave MTVH's Chief Executive, Geeta Nanda, a chance to speak to colleagues in a personal way, talking about her own experiences and giving crucial updates during the crisis. Staff heard from a diverse array of guest speakers, including Dr Helen Sinclair, Clinical Psychologist, Grenfell Health and Wellbeing Service and Toufik Kacimi, CEO of Muslim Welfare House. MTVH's new Chair, Althea Efunshile, also spoke to staff, to explain her future aspirations. Staff were also encouraged to send in short 'Thought for the day' video clips, to share their experience of lockdown, to bring everyone closer together.

Windrush Day, 22 June 2020, explored MTVH's roots as a housing association created for people from the West Indies. This included a premiere of the MTVH Windrush Story film, as well as a cooking demonstration and a virtual tour of MTVH's migrants' service in Derby.

The Stories team was tasked with showcasing colleagues' work, many of whom worked on the frontline, and shared the often vivid stories on the MTVH website and social media.

The Communications team also supported the launch of Balance, a staff mental health support group; the launch of a staff wellbeing resource kit and the introduction of Wisebox, a new online learning programme. It also created a safe place online for BAME staff to discuss Black Lives Matter (BLM) and held Zoom sessions on BLM and racial injustice for about 300 staff.

"90% of staff said our executive team communicated clearly during lockdown."

A G15 member



"The work done by our Communications team during lockdown was great, as it gave clarity in a time of upheaval, provided 'need to know' information, and created a feeling of unity and common purpose."

Case study

L&Q: Building a best practice approach to internal communications

L&Q took a fresh look at staff communications at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, realising that they would form a critical element of its response during lockdown.

The inclusive approach considered when, where and how staff worked, with coordinated communications giving clear and consistent messaging, to avoid confusion and to avoid the spread of false information. The tone was calm and informative and only covered issues within L&Q's control.

The aim was to maintain a 'drumbeat' of strategic messaging, to reassure staff the situation was in hand and that information they were reading was current. It was also important to ensure staff understood the role of L&Q's Pandemic Crisis Response Team and how everyone would have to work differently during lockdown.

A network of decision-makers and a single source of 'truth' was established. Existing communications channels were reviewed and updated and new ones introduced, to ensure information reached as many staff as possible. Communication cascades were vital to keep frontline staff, who often could not access digital communications quickly, up-to-speed with the latest news.

Feedback from regular staff surveys was vital in shaping communications, as well as guidance and working practices, throughout the crisis. Surveys covered homeworking, working practices and wellbeing.

It was also more important than ever that leadership was visible, so regular live broadcasts – attended by an average of 900 employees – saw the Executive team give updates on the latest response, followed by live Q&As.

A new dedicated section of the intranet gave details of the COVID-19 command structure, service updates, protocols and guidance and FAQs. Regular email updates covered L&Q's response to the latest government advice, answers to issues raised by staff, recognised success and included good news stories. Everything was also posted on Yammer, to increase communications reach.

Maintaining and protecting staff wellbeing was vital, so communications also covered issues such as mental/physical health, loneliness, anxiety and stress, supported by a section of the intranet dedicated to wellbeing.

L&Q's new approach proved successful, with average open rates of emails at 65% and a weekly newsletter having an average open rate of 48%.

"88% of staff said they were proud to work for us."

A G15 member

Learning points

- Messages to staff should be clear, concise and consistent with external communications and focus on wellbeing, as well as operational issues
- The tone of voice should be informative and personal, not corporate
- Be honest: Don't be afraid to say 'we don't know'
- Use multiple channels and cascade information (for example via team meetings) to reach as many employees as possible
- Some employees may be anxious and may also be the most difficult to engage with, so you may have to use different approaches
- Use social networking tools to encourage employees to socialise as much as possible.

The aim was to maintain a 'drumbeat' of strategic messaging, to reassure staff the situation was in hand and that information they were reading was current.

Communication priorities

- Ensuring internal and external communications were consistent
- Reassuring and supporting staff
- Promoting a feeling of being together
- Maintaining engagement.

The long term impact of COVID-19

We believe that the impact of COVID-19 on G15 members' social purpose will be minimal: we will still build and manage affordable housing and provide services to support our customers.

However, we agree there is likely to be an impact on our long term strategies, our working cultures and our relationships with customers. We envisage becoming far more flexible in the ways we do things, moving away from a permission culture to accelerate decision making and empowering employees to take more decisions themselves, without fear of failure. For many of the G15, the lockdown acted as a catalyst make changes they had wanted to do for some time, but for one reason or another, could not get stakeholder buy-in.

Biggest long term challenges

- Future austerity
- Customers needing more support to cope with financial hardship, as well as physical and mental health impacts
- Delivering more homes while financing is squeezed
- Tighter regulations.

90%
of G15 members surveyed
think there will be an impact
on rent and affordability

The long term impact on customers

Our customers will be affected by coronavirus for some time to come, in terms of the impact on their physical and mental wellbeing and their financial situation. We expect that the increased demand for care and support will continue, a situation that is likely to be exacerbated by the economic impact of Brexit in 2021.

The switch to digitally-based landlord services has certainly been accelerated and customers have welcomed having more control over their interactions with us. However, face-to-face interactions are extremely important – we need to get to know our customers better to ensure the tools we use are as effective as possible and meet their needs.

All of the G15 said they expected to take a 'hybrid' approach, using digital, telephone and face-to-face interactions to provide flexible offerings. The reliability of our customer data will be critical in this regard. Ultimately, this should make us more proactive and efficient, freeing-up resource to help our most vulnerable customers; help us improve services and deliver more value for money.



The long term impact on how we work

The lockdown has demonstrated that people will no longer have one workplace and that being present in an office does not necessarily mean staff are more productive. This raises issues around our responsibilities as employers – how do we ensure staff can work safely at home, how do we manage them and how do we support them.

As we begin the slow return to the office, G15 members said they wanted to avoid slipping back into old ways of working, if there are better ways to do things. During lockdown, it was found that some teams can actually be more effective when working remotely. Many of the G15 reported that their customer-facing teams, in particular, had become more attuned to customers' situations, which has meant they have solved issues faster, with fewer escalations.

But, while some employees have been happy to work at home, others have expressed a desire to come back to the office, not only because of their home situation but also because they miss the social aspects of work.

This is particularly true of younger employees, who benefit from working in offices where they can build their career and social networks. The G15 members envisage taking a flexible approach, one that strikes a balance to suit all generations, walks of life and society as a whole.

From an operational point of view, we need to understand the impact of flexible working and whether or not we need as much office space in the future. While there are clearly cost and environmental benefits of staff working from home more regularly, these need to be balanced with the short term impact of keeping under-used offices open.



Case study

Clarion: The benefits of remote working for customer services teams

When staff in Clarion's Contact Centre and customer services teams were forced to work at home due to the lockdown, there were concerns that services could be affected.

Remote working has, however, delivered a number of benefits: productivity was maintained, with the same number of customer calls being handled, plus there was improved work-life balance for staff (and fewer staff absences), without a drop in the quality of service.

Remote working began in March, as the lockdown came into force. At the same time, Clarion also introduced a new tool enabling it to collect customer payments securely and broadened its live chat capabilities beyond repairs to all customer enquiries.

The biggest challenge initially was ensuring everyone could log on remotely and had a suitable working environment at home. Fortunately, remote working had been tested (albeit on a smaller

scale) as part of business continuity planning, so the transition was fairly seamless, with the IT team on hand to sort out any problems as they occurred.

Contact Centre and customer service managers also held daily conference calls with senior management, and with their teams, to ensure alignment of activities and customer messaging. Additionally, Microsoft Teams was introduced to help improve staff communications and maintain morale.

And, while new reports had been introduced to monitor productivity during lockdown – because it had been expected to fall – these actually demonstrated that performance was maintained. A knock-on benefit was that reports helped identify those team members who were struggling or disengaged, so support could be given as early as possible.

The online approach gives more flexibility in arranging shifts, recruitment and training. In fact, during lockdown, Clarion took the opportunity to build staff capability, with webinars used to train up more omni-channel advisers.

The key changes we will make to the way we will work

- Flexible working arrangements
- Empowering staff and moving away from permission cultures
- A blend of digital and 'traditional' customer service delivery.

"80% of staff said working from home was a positive experience and three quarters said they would like to work from home permanently, or for most of the working week."

A G15 member

The long term impact on development

Building more affordable homes will remain at the heart of what we do.

COVID-19 has had a short- to medium-term impact, delaying the delivery of new homes as construction sites closed during lockdown. We have resolved problems by working with our contractor and developer partners, and sites are open again, with effective social distancing and other safety measures in place.

The longer-term impact of COVID-19 is less easy to assess. If the economy fails to recover quickly, and if there are significant increases in unemployment, then we are likely to see an impact on the markets for housing for sale and for shared ownership.

Most of our developments are on mixed tenure sites and this market uncertainty will impact on our ability to build affordable homes. The situation is compounded by the investment we are making, following the Grenfell tragedy, to ensure our buildings are safe and secure, which has impacted on some G15 members' funding of new homes.

While the environment is challenging, we do not expect demand for affordable homes to fall; the affordability gap is widening and a recession would increase demand for affordable housing. Meeting that demand will be a significant challenge, requiring the efforts of the G15 and housing associations across Britain, and effective support from the Greater London Authority and from Government.

The G15's Homes for Heroes campaign, for example, launched in May 2020, is calling on the public, private and charitable sectors to create a national programme to build 100,000 low-cost homes for essential workers who have kept Britain going during the coronavirus pandemic. Homes would be high quality, well-designed, energy-efficient and digitally connected, while being affordable to rent or buy by essential workers.

Case study

Notting Hill Genesis: Remote training for new care staff

Notting Hill Genesis completely redesigned its induction training for new care staff when face-to-face courses could no longer be held during lockdown.

As well as adapting an existing course so that it could be run online, Notting Hill Genesis worked with Unique Training Solutions to devise a new programme that could be delivered over five days.

This gives new staff all the essential skills they need before starting work, including Skills for care training, without comprising on

quality of learning, or the safety of residents. Training is delivered via Zoom, with attendees also receiving a Care induction training pack and a self-assessment tool.

The move online has also solved one pre-lockdown issue. Previously, training was held at one of Notting Hill Genesis' London offices, which meant new starters had to travel into London to attend courses. The new approach means staff can carry out their initial training online and any other elements that cannot be delivered remotely, such as manual handling, can be taught locally, saving time and money.

"79% of staff say we should take this opportunity to transform the way we work."

A G15 member



Case study

Catalyst: Using COVID-19 to get closer to customers

Catalyst has completely changed the way it communicates with customers. During lockdown it switched from traditional, typically paper-based methods, to email, text and outbound wellbeing telephone calls.

"I would just like to say a massive thank you to the wellbeing team for your help and support. When I received my first phone call I was very tearful and alone but by the second and third calls I was in a much better place. Thank you all and continue what you are doing."

The change was driven by the need to communicate changes to services and Government guidance very quickly. This greater sense of urgency resulted in mass emails and text messages being sent to customers for the first time. Fortnightly emails were sent to 18,000 customers and nine texts to 30,000 customers, supported by an increase in social media activity, and a dedicated COVID-19 section of the website with information, news, FAQs and service updates.

"I just wanted to say thank you for your really lovely update emails. It really helps to feel tenants are cared for by you in these scary times. So thank you."

Customer needs were at the heart of communications, driving the topics, messaging and tone of voice. The aim was to make communications meaningful, relevant and helpful, and as accessible as possible, while showing kindness and empathy and not being intrusive.

'Word on the street', a weekly analysis of email and telephone enquiries from customers, informed the content of fortnightly email updates, text messages, website updates and also what was posted on social media. The focus was on the wellbeing and safety of customers and their families. They were kept up-to-date on how they could access essential services, including financial support, to ensure they could continue to pay their rent and access benefits.

Regular reviews enabled the team to learn what worked (and what didn't), helping it to improve future communications, in terms of both messaging and mode of delivery.

The team also filmed non-scripted videos with the CEO, directors and managers across the business, to communicate changes to services such as repairs and ASB, which proved popular with customers and were more accessible than a 'corporate' and more traditional approach. Online video workshops were held to discuss issues with customers, which changed the dynamic between landlord and resident and led to meaningful conversations.

The result has been increased digital engagement with customers: website traffic is up 100% compared with pre-lockdown, and sessions have grown by 55%, helped in no small part by increased social media activity.

Catalyst also created a Wellbeing team to contact its most vulnerable customers by telephone – more than 5,000 calls were made during lockdown. Catalyst believes that outbound calls are back in fashion and, in the long-term, aims to reduce the number of emails and resolve issues, particularly complaints, over the phone.

The result has been increased digital engagement with customers: website traffic is up 100% compared with pre-lockdown, and sessions have grown by 55%, helped by increased social media activity.



The key long term impacts

- Brexit and economic uncertainty
- Continuing restrictions on development
- Financial pressures, due to a lack of financing and the need to pay for building safety work.

The role of housing associations in a post-COVID-19 world

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted, once again, that housing associations do more than just build and manage homes; we drive social transformation in higher-need neighbourhoods, building resilient, thriving and cohesive communities where people want to live.

We work with community partners, and each other, to reduce anti-social behaviour and tackle the root causes of youth violence in our communities; to deliver projects that enable positive pathways for young people; to provide skills and employment training; and to promote wellbeing and reduce isolation of older residents, so they can live independently for longer.

By reducing homelessness and by supporting victims of domestic violence, racial abuse, sexual abuse and housing those with welfare or medical issues, we can help reduce the burden on emergency services, healthcare and local authorities, save money and impact positively on the economy.

People's life chances are improved, helping them to thrive, enabling them to realise their potential, work meaningfully and contribute to their community.

With Brexit and the potential for future spikes in coronavirus infections, economic and social uncertainty is likely to continue for some time to come, and many of our customers (both existing and future) are most likely to bear the brunt.

So, as well as continuing to build more affordable homes for those most in need, we must also build on what we have learnt during the pandemic and lockdown. We must continue to build customers' resilience, helping them sustain their tenancies, improve their physical and mental health, reach educational attainment, gain employment and build their support networks, so we can minimise these impacts.

As organisations, we have learnt it is important for us to be more flexible in how we work, who we employ and in the services we provide, to build our own resilience, so that we can cope with future shocks and support our customers, whatever the circumstances.

Lessons learnt so far – the top ten

1. Strong leadership is vital. Having clear values and a clear purpose helps everyone get behind your response
2. Have decision-makers in place, establish roles and responsibilities and practice scenarios regularly
3. Test plans as thoroughly as possible, and stick to them, but be prepared to react quickly to unforeseen events; plan for the worst
4. Keep up-to-date with local, national and global events to ensure you are better-prepared and be informed, but not led, by events. Take time to plan how to respond. Beware misleading advice and follow government guidance
5. Staff are your most important asset in a crisis – remember the softer side of people management and truly engage with them
6. Clear and proactive communication is critical: be consistent in messaging across all channels and audiences and remember the importance of tone of voice: be informative and personal, not corporate
7. Embrace new technology, digital platforms and 'self-serve' but take time to really get to know your residents on the ground to ensure these tools meet customers' needs
8. Limit IT choice – having fewer hardware and software platforms makes it easier to move quickly and is simpler to manage
9. Ensure your compliance work is on-track; it is one less thing to worry about
10. Learn from a crisis: consider how you can change your ways of thinking and working to improve services and make you better-prepared for future shocks.

About the G15

The G15 is the group of London's largest housing associations. We are the collective voice of some of the leading organisations in the housing sector.

Our members house one in ten Londoners and are the largest providers of affordable homes in the capital. We build a quarter of all London's new homes and own or manage more than 600,000 homes.

Housing associations were set up to support people in housing need and this remains at the heart of everything we do today. We are independent, charitable organisations and all the money we make is reinvested in building more affordable homes and delivering services for our residents.

Each G15 member is different, but we are all striving towards the same goal – to help solve the country's housing crisis, build communities and improve lives.



The G15 COVID-19 Lessons Learnt Group



Ian Hill

Interim Director of Governance & Compliance
ian.hill@a2dominion.co.uk



Sarah Thomas

Chief Operating Officer
sarah.thomas@chg.org.uk



Lisa Buckingham

Project Director
lisa.buckingham@clarionhg.com



John Carmichael

Risk and Governance Director
john.carmichael@hyde-housing.co.uk



John Lumley

Strategic Director – Assets and Regeneration
jlumley@lqgroup.org.uk



Helen McTeer

Head of Corporate Planning
helen.mcteer@mtvh.co.uk



Christo Gouws

Director of IT and Transformation
christo.gouws@networkhomes.org.uk



Tom Hunt

Director of Health and Safety and Office Services
tom.hunt@nhg.org.uk



Hilary Milne

Group Director Governance and Compliance
hilmilne@onehousing.co.uk



Jenny Spoor

Director of Housing Services
jenny.spoor@optivo.org.uk



Helen Coleman

Director of Strategy and Planning
helen.coleman@peabody.org.uk



shgroup.org.uk

Elisabeth Williams

Strategy & Policy Director
elisabeth.williams@shgroup.org.uk

