

**The impact
on Housing
Associations
by the
Covid-19
pandemic**

Managing your People Through Change

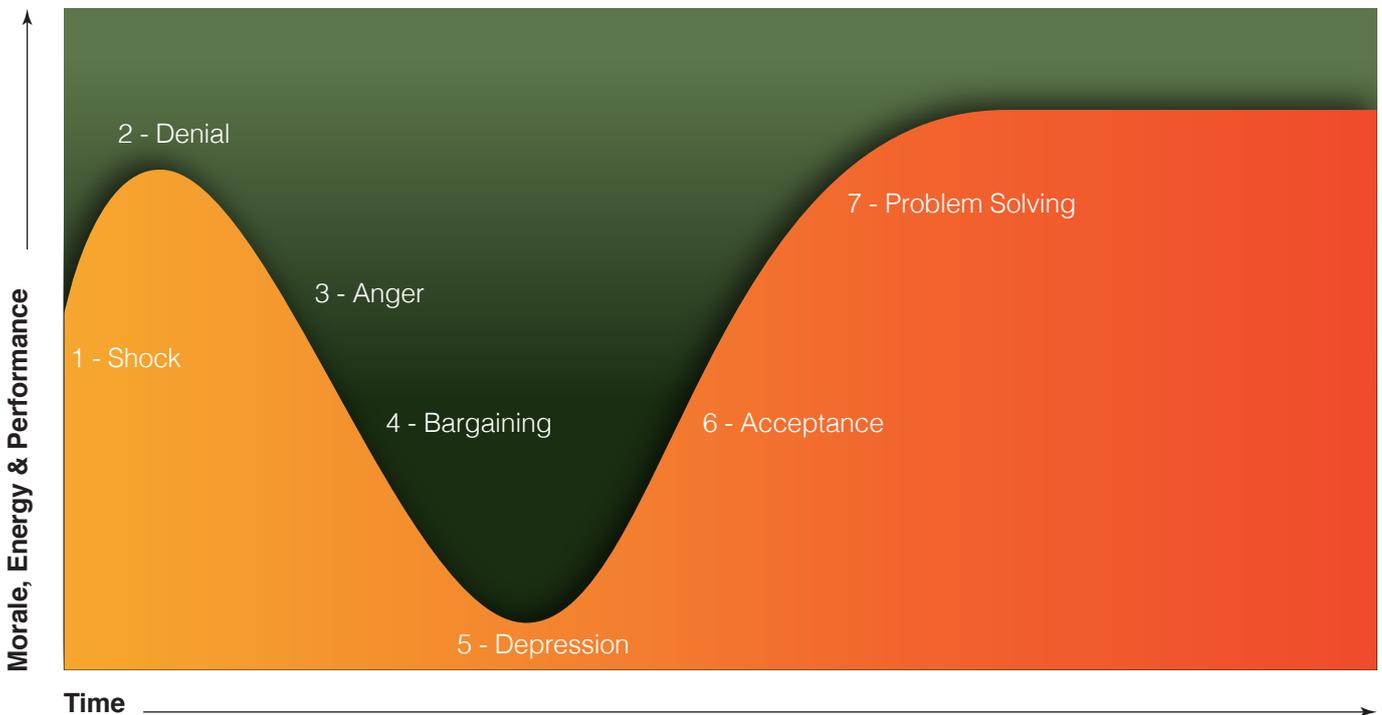
Covid-19 has turned the working world, and society at large, on its head. As a people centred business, Greenacre wanted to understand how Housing Associations have coped throughout the pandemic, how it has impacted how their business operates and what it means for the future. We spoke to a large number of Human Resources Directors to find out and below we summarise some of the key themes that came out of that research.

The first thing to note is that many Housing Associations are resilient, adaptable and committed organisations with strong leaders that have really stepped up during the crisis. Many organisations surprised themselves at how quickly they were able to mobilise for homeworking, plan what services should be provided, how that would be done in a safe environment and how to maintain staff engagement remotely.

The Change Curve is a popular model used to understand the stages of personal transition and organisational change.

The seven stages can be experienced at different speeds dependent on personality and/or organisational culture, however, it appears the scale of the disruption of Covid-19 has actually accelerated progress from stage 1 to 6 very quickly indeed. This stoicism to maintain a level of service to vulnerable customers (and staff) has been a credit to the sector and positions it well to attract more, much needed, talent into the sector in the future.

The Change Curve



So how have we adapted?

Implemented an appropriate IT infrastructure - Some organisations were more ahead of this than others, but the speed of mobilisation across all organisations was impressive. IT Agile programmes that were planned to be rolled out over the space of 2 years were up and running within 2 weeks.

Embraced an agile workforce - Once the technology was in place, everyone was able to commence working from home and this includes some of those services that were never expected to do so, such as contact centres. Interestingly, some of the worries and/or concerns about remote working have not yet been realised. KPIs have exceeded expectations in the main, sickness absences have dropped significantly, and staff satisfaction has improved significantly. All of this has been achieved whilst some staff members have had to deal with 'home schooling' and/or childcare responsibilities, shielding or coping with isolation. Organisations have flexed to the personal circumstances of their employees rather than enforcing the standard 9-5 work culture and have been rewarded accordingly.

Established a clear and consistent communication strategy- Comms teams have been at the epicentre of most organisations' responses. With a remote and disparate workforce and widespread confusion as to what the future holds, most organisations quickly established robust and regular communications with employees. CEO's have done daily and weekly video briefings to update everyone on their actions and responses to the pandemic. They have been quick to provide re-assurance to staff about pay commitments, sick leave entitlement changes and furlough processes in order to avoid panic and rumour. Equally, some organisations have produced regular updates from other parts of the business - "A day in the life of..." or HR making "touchpoint" calls to check on staff wellbeing. These all sit alongside the more regular, operational

MS Teams or Zoom calls with departments to focus on the more day-to-day operational requirements of the business and help to maintain a sense of belonging and togetherness.

Implemented the governments furlough scheme - Initially this seemed to be a contentious issue across the Country. There were those that could see it was an inevitable solution during lockdown and others that were uncomfortable using the public purse as a Public Sector body. Ultimately it soon became an unavoidable option due to the significant drop-in services provided. Many RPs tried to limit their furloughed numbers and opted to re-assign staff where appropriate. This not only allowed staff to experience a new department and feel part of the solution, but also demonstrated the flexibility and willingness that exists in the sector. Communications and engagement with those furloughed staff also remained important to maintain their engagement and inclusion in the organisation.

Recruitment went online - Initially most recruitment campaigns were put on hold but only for a short period until the crisis management phase had been completed. Then, those campaigns that were business critical were resumed and carried out online using various video conferencing tools and online testing. Each campaign offered up new learning and we are now in a position whereby many organisations will continue to use online interviewing as part of their recruitment processes moving forward.

Made staff wellbeing a key strategic objective - Perhaps one of the biggest positive outcomes from the pandemic is that it has put employees at the heart of an organisation's strategic thinking. The line between work life and home life has been blurred by remote working with positive and negative outcomes. Some staff have spoken of working too much and burnout, some are concerned with isolation or feeling caged in.

All Housing Associations that we spoke to have been working very hard to look after their staff and their wellbeing through various activities and initiatives. These have included...



Online quizzes/yoga/coffee mornings etc

Care packages sent to staff includes chocolates, drinks and messages from the CEO

"Thank you" payments to carers and personalised message from the CEO

Video diaries from various members of staff

Increased use of social media services like WhatsApp and Yammer



So what have we learnt?

Your People ARE your Business

As we are all squirrelled away in rooms in our houses, trying to balance home schooling and work, our colleagues and external partners have got a glimpse of the person behind the professional. We now know so much more about the people with which we work or do business - we know the name of their dog or cat, we know how many children they have or what hobbies they have been doing to keep themselves grounded. And the sector has embraced this - it has helped to build better and stronger relationships - either with their colleagues, customers or suppliers which can help with better outcomes, better collaboration or better solutions.

As we start to plan the re-mobilisation of services across the country, many RPs are considering how they operate by putting the people at the centre of their plans. Job roles and requirements are being designed around the people in them, rather than fitting people into job roles. Many of those we spoke to have sent out surveys to their staff to ask how they want to work in the future. One set of results revealed that only 20% of their staff base wanted to return to the office full time, and another reported that 83% were happy with working from home.

A number of organisations have taken this a step further and started to design "avatars" for their roles to help inform their talent acquisition strategies. Therefore, roles that can be home based can be sourced from a wider geographical candidate pool, opening up the scope to secure better suited applicants. Equally, home working can help overcome access issues for disabled applicants which drives improvements in EDI engagement.

It's not all about Location, Location, Location

"Work is something you do, not somewhere you go", is a well-trodden saying recently but has never been more true. Housing Associations have seen the huge benefits that flexible working can bring. Time saved on commutes or travelling to meetings, having the opportunity to do some exercise in the middle of the day or being able to have dinner with the family have all resulted in a happier, more fulfilled and committed workforce. The results from a number of RP surveys suggest that working from home is not perhaps the preferred option, rather a hybrid of home/office working. Offices are being redesigned as spaces for collaboration rather than designated individual desks.

New Training/Self Development is vital

One area that some Housing Associations have struggled with has been accessing the necessary training for staff to feel confident in their new working practices. Training on how to use the new technology (Zoom, MS

Teams etc.) was provided but some other areas were overlooked. How to manage remotely is the most common obstacle as this may not become apparent for a while yet. Some organisations who already had online training "academies" have been able to implement modules that cover this and have **been** widely used by staff in management positions.

However, time away from the office environment and the threat of the pandemic seems to have given many people time for self-reflection. Not only have people committed to learning a musical instrument or get fitter, but they are also looking at how to improve themselves at work and are hungry for learning and development opportunities. Those organisations with eLearning capabilities have noticed a significant increase in utilisation of these services.

Act decisively and quickly

The pandemic forced organisations to make informed decisions quickly and to monitor the progress or impact of those decisions closely. Where things weren't working out as planned, they have adapted, reviewed again, then re-assessed until it works effectively. Small pilots, for example, splitting customer contact teams into two shifts, have been run to tight deadlines, assessed and then rolled out in the space of weeks rather than years. The need for long drawn out programmes with multiple layers of risk assessment where thrown out by necessity, but proved that if you have the right leadership and bring the right minds to the table, that initiatives can be mobilised very quickly and successfully.

Clear Leadership is essential, but so is delegation

Most organisations responded quickly. Their leaders maintained very regular communication with their organisations through both written and video briefings and this brought a calmness and stability to proceedings. However, those organisations that have fared best quickly established a "network of teams" to work towards a common goal. This enabled them to engage more effectively across the entire organization more rapidly and more appropriately.

In summary, the last few months have been challenging, complicated and full of insecurity. But they have also been rewarding, empowering and have offered up the opportunity to completely re-design how we work around the most important people - those that do the work and those that we serve.

Should you wish to discuss any of the above points in more details, please don't hesitate to contact one of our consultants. Please visit our website for more information and support www.greenacre-recruitment.com