



Andrea Baker

Director of Housing & Corporate Services
Poplar HARCA



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Poplar HARCA has a keen people focus. When thinking of them, I am reminded of Richard Branson saying, “If you look after your staff, they’ll look after your customers.” If you want to experience community and a real connection with residents, visit Poplar HARCA.

This staff and resident focus has come into its own during lockdown...

Home working

Poplar HARCA’s existing IT infrastructure was supporting staff homeworking a few days each week already. When lockdown hit, within 24 hours desk-based staff were all working from home, including teams who had previously insisted homeworking wasn’t possible for them.

Customer care

Poplar HARCA’s Teams immediately contacted older and vulnerable residents, and young people. Not only because of the potential life-threatening health effects of the virus, but also because of the social and economic impact lockdown would have.

Responding to customer needs

Andrea uses Maslow’s [*Hierarchy of Needs*](#) to explain to her Teams the importance of understanding residents’ priorities.

“Residents are struggling with basic needs, exacerbated and exaggerated by the impact of the pandemic. They are facing challenges like social isolation, how they feed themselves and their families, and how they collect medications. Many residents work in the sectors most impacted by lockdown – retail, travel, hospitality, and many are furloughed or losing their jobs or worried about losing their jobs.”

Additional services

These challenges shaped Poplar HARCA’s immediate response. Its [*Spotlight youth service*](#) set up a confidential [*GP helpline*](#), and rolled out a free healthy takeaway lunch offer for young people.

The Communities Team worked with the Local Authority to provide hot meals every day to children missing out on free school

meals. The Housing and Communities Teams worked closely with local charities, '[Neighbours in Poplar](#)' and '[Women's Inclusive Team](#)' to plug holes in the safety net by providing hot meals and day-to-day support to the most vulnerable households.

More generally, Andrea says the approach had to become even more conversational and relationship-based, moving away from the transactional approach.

Staff satisfaction

A third of staff were furloughed reflecting the necessary scaling-back of services, and this will help mitigate the inevitable financial impact of Covid-19. Staff were assured that no job losses were planned, and wages were topped-up to 100% so no one was financially worse off.

There has been an active programme to look after staff's mental health, furloughed or not. This included online coffee breaks, online staff events (ask Andrea about the HARCA National horse racing evening arranged by the Head of Housing!), wellbeing information and access to colleague Mental Health First Aiders. Also, I hear Friday night drinks is still a thing ...!

Future plans

So, what now? As expected, there is no slowing down. Poplar HARCA is exploring how to now make the best use of their fantastic office, with a future emphasis on the building as a social and collaboration space for staff and local partner organisations. Working life will not return to what it was before.

They are also exploring how their IT Team can evolve to ensure they have control over the systems they need when they need them, rather than having to wait (and pay) the big software providers who don't consider smaller RPs as priority clients.

Poplar HARCA, always one to watch...