

ASTER GROUP

Housing provider

ORGANISATION CASESTUDY

Aster Group is a leading housing developer and provider with over 31,000 properties and 90,000 customers in the South West. We spoke to the leader of, and one of the officers from, a community safety specialist team that deal with anti-social behaviour and domestic abuse.

ASTER
GROUP

MAIN CHALLENGES OF MANAGING DURING COVID:

The team have been dealing with far higher call volumes and more complex issues than normal and have been unable to respond in person, as they normally would, to help resolve issues early.

The manager has nine direct reports, and alongside a colleague has oversight of 17 staff. She has been a manager for seven years. The team deal with domestic abuse and with anti-social behaviour issues such as drug dealing, county lines, noise, and the implications of mental health issues.

Traditionally they work out in the community to facilitate early resolution of issues, but could not do this during lockdown. With people spending more time in their homes, the number of cases the team dealt with increased by over 50% on the previous year. Five staff were seconded from other parts of the organisation and a new starter was also recruited in August 2020. This new member of staff had no previous experience in social housing but had transferable skills from four years working as a police officer. It was undoubtedly a difficult time to join the team.

“
If you're in an office and you were stuck with something or you didn't understand something, you could just lean over to whoever's next to you and be like, 'Oh, can you help me with this?' Whereas now it's like, you're calling someone up on Teams and it feels a bit more like you're taking them away from what they're doing, whereas it just would be a quick, 'Oh, can I grab you for two seconds? Can you just show me how to do this?' So, I think for me, that's the most challenging thing, not being able to just have those quick interactions with your team.

Staff Member

”
The role requires staff to assess complex cases over the telephone and refer cases onto more experienced staff, where required. Failure to assess cases effectively can put people at risk. It is therefore vital that training for new recruits equips them to do this. Thorough induction plans were developed to offer a 'crash course' in areas assessed as critical for the role such as specialist safeguarding training. All training had to be offered remotely.



“
For all the people who were brought in during that time it was the in-person aspect that was most difficult. You know if you're in an office and you overhear conversations, it's actually quite key. Normally they would be hooked up, listening in, that would be a massive part of the initial training. We're trying to find solutions for that but it just wasn't quite the same, actually. It's that on-the-job training which I think was really challenging.

Manager

”
The new recruit's natural learning style would be active, on the job learning, but this has been more difficult to facilitate during the pandemic. Their manager broke the job down into segments and then covered each of these with the new starter one by one. Working independently, the staff member worked through a variety of online information and courses recommended by their manager, noting down questions as they went which the manager then covered off. The manager has also conducted three-way calls to listen in and provide feedback on his work, and has spent a lot of time working with him one-to-one.

“
She is always checking in on me to see if I'm alright, if I'm fitting in with the team, and stuff like that. I think getting those, like, bonds and relationships with people is harder, I find, harder to do over the computer and she is quite aware of that because she likes her team to be quite well-knitted.

Manager

”
The manager also identified the key contacts she needed, internally and externally, to fully understand the context to his work, then organised online meetings to establish 'partnership links'. He was also enrolled onto a BTEC Level 3 in Community Safety in January to give him a sense that he was 'part of something bigger' and doing this course 'filled a massive void' given that he had never met his team face to face.

“
Because it's a housing organisation, I didn't really know how people actually come to get into the homes, like, what the process is of someone coming into one of the homes and she set up a call with two of the people from the lettings team and they explained the whole process, how people come into the homes and stuff. That was something I was, sort of, confused on because we're working in a housing group and I don't understand how people actually come into the homes. So, I spoke to my manager and she, yes, she organised a call, which was really helpful.

Staff Member

”
Given the difficult issues staff are dealing with, and that they are doing so in their own homes, the manager was aware of the potential impact this could have on staff mental health. Team meetings have been 'mixed up' to focus on the team's successes and to bring in inspirational speakers. The manager also instigated a charity event where the team worked out together virtually every morning in full fancy dress for a month and the organisation has sent out thank you gifts in recognition of their work. Where staff were really struggling, they could be taken off the phones for a few days giving them a break from the 'relentless' pressures of the job. The new starter describes his manager as 'enthusiastic about making sure I'm alright' and describes the importance of her staying in touch and checking on his welfare. The manager believes her role was vital to 'hold the team together', to take responsibility for the team as a whole and to manage the risks to colleagues and customers.





It was absolutely up to me to be a voice for the team, to really articulate what was happening on the front line, to make sure I can do that for them to get the right support in place.

Manager



Her approach has been to maintain a consistent and reliable presence, whatever her personal struggles, so the team felt that they could depend on her. It helped that the organisation had already been moving towards a more flexible working policy and that 60% of staff were already engaged in some form of working from home prior to the pandemic.



One of my biggest priorities as a manager, as a leader during that time, was their well-being 100%. There was so much going on at home, so much going on in the world, they needed to know you were consistent and stable. That was a really crucial role.

Manager



TOP TIPS FOR MANAGERS



Be a role model - demonstrate **behaviours** your team expects to see.



Provide opportunities for new/low skilled workers to develop their skills and knowledge through **coaching**, **mentoring**, and **personal development**.



Joining a team that is dispersed can be overwhelming. Facilitate meaningful connections with direct reports, **virtually**, encouraging the **building of relationships** through information discussions and socialising.

[ACCESS ALL RECOMMENDED TOP TIPS >](#)

[READ THE FULL REPORT >](#)

