

Grand Union Virtual Project

March 23rd 2020

We were all set to start work on a service review of Voids and Lettings with Grand Union Housing... then Boris took to the podium and announced lockdown!

When this happened, many organisations put their improvement work on hold to manage the emerging situation, but Grand Union's stance was different. They didn't want the lockdown to halt the progress they were making with business improvement, so they asked me "can you do the work remotely with the project team working from home?" As an organisation who has been virtual since 2004, and deliver our own Continuous Improvement efforts remotely, our answer was a resounding yes!

We had our scheduled kick-off meeting on Skype the very same week with the project stakeholders. Below is the story from Emma, a key participant and project stakeholder, followed by reflections on virtual working from Rhiannon, who led the project from Ad Esse's side.



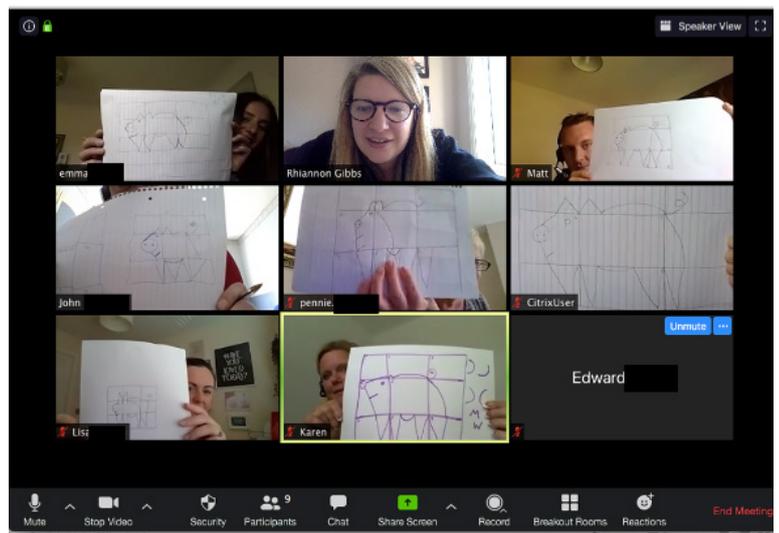
Emma Sheer
Allocations Manager at Grand Union



Grand Union's Voids and Lettings process has been a bone of contention for some time, with different teams trying to make an overly complicated process work. As you can imagine, over the years, this has caused frustration and sticking plasters have been applied to try and make it work. Thankfully as an organisation we took the decision to invest some time, money and energy on reviewing the process, breaking it down and ultimately hoping to come up with a better solution and customer experience.

When I was asked to be part of the review, I was more than happy to get involved. Being one of those frustrated people, meant I was in a good position to highlight the areas that weren't working and hopefully come up with ideas and solutions to move it forward. I was then asked if I would like to be one of the Improvement Champions, one of 3 people chosen across the organisation to do additional training and learn the Lean principles so that we might take the techniques learnt and implement these in future projects. Again, I was happy to be involved so said yes, but if I'm honest at that time I wasn't entirely sure what that meant, or what commitment that would mean going forward.

When Lockdown hit, I did envisage that we may put the sessions on hold, but I was advised it was full steam ahead and we could complete these workshops virtually. I'm not sure how the others felt at the time, but I had trepidations



about how this would work practically. Not only was working from home a whole different ball game, but 8-hour training days on a screen sounded a bit hideous to be honest!

I needn't have worried; the experience of the whole process was a very positive one. Made particularly enjoyable by our Ad Esse Consultant who has a flare for communication, an ability to bring different people together and create an inclusive environment (virtual or not). No easy task with a mix of personalities and characters.

My experience was split into two parts and included five training days learning the Lean Principles and some tools. This part was informative and enabled me to understand the theory. Then alongside this there was the project group to review the voids and lettings process. All in all, I completed the equivalent of 12 virtual days on the project.

Initially there was some ground rule setting, we quickly learnt that when training virtually you will experience the following:

- Breaks every hour, before you start going cross eyed
- Children and other household members are likely to be seen in the background – hopefully not doing anything inappropriate
- An array of breakfast routines and rituals

The ability to keep things light and add a comedy factor ensured we got the most out of our experience and people maintained their enthusiasm for the project.

From an Improvement Champion perspective, I think the training running alongside the project work worked well. I always need to try something before really understanding it and this enabled me to see how the Lean principles were put into practice. It was great working with different people from across the organisation and the virtual "break out rooms" for smaller, task-based time worked well.

The project stages we went through were:

- Stage 1 - We mapped out the "AS IS" state – a lot harder than you think and what became clear was that everyone was interpreting the procedure differently
- Stage 2 - Identifying the – "IDEAL STATE" – how we all wished it could be if there were no boundaries. Again, more difficult than you think as we are naturally restricted by our own boundaries.
- Stage 3 – Mapping realistic solutions and gaining approval from stakeholders
- Fast forward 3 months and we are now in the middle of stage 4 – Implementation!

The project has been handed over to GUHG's Service Improvement manager who is ensuring we keep momentum and accountability for all the teams involved. This includes the setting up of Performance Hubs (Information Centres).

Service improvement is not easy and can often mean a change in culture and thought process – I would highly recommend Ad Esse as a facilitator to help challenge current practice and shape services for the future.



Rhiannon Gibbs
Director at Ad Esse

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consulting

There is nothing like running a workshop face-to-face with people who really care about the work they do and the customers they serve. Over the years you become accustomed to leading a group by picking up on nuances like body language, and tone of voice, to indicate when an exercise may be running out of steam, or it's time to take a break. These things are more difficult to read virtually so everything becomes harder.

You have to put extra into everything you do to make it work. No matter how hard you prepared before for sessions and workshops you have to prepare twice as hard now, instead of looking for tell-tale cues that people want a coffee break you have to schedule them in more. You have to work twice as hard to build rapport and relationships to make the sessions work, and you have to put twice as much effort into being a 'real person' too. Luckily with a

4-year-old in the house running in to attack me with a lightsabre (only once or twice mind but it's enough) coupled with the occasional technical difficulties (Wi-Fi!) soon we were getting on roaringly well!

None of this means that virtual workshops can't be effective, it just means we have to work harder (no bad thing!), and every time I run a session virtually it gets easier. So, in reality it was as much a learning curve for me as it was for the project team and training participants.

The project team had the tallest order to fulfil. They had to get to grips with the project, examine their processes and service delivery inside out, get to grips with the service design principles and a new way of looking at services, make the technology work for them (and fast), and do all this whilst maintaining a new style 'business as usual' delivery for customers.

The team made the technology work and it didn't take long to learn that you have to be outside of Citrix to get a good Zoom connection! It would have been easy for the participants to abandon the project or hand their membership over to someone else, but gratifyingly the project team just got bigger! With more people having things to add or wanting to participate. I think this speaks wonders about the 'can-do' attitude that prevails in Grand Union.

So, what did I learn about delivering improvement projects virtually? Well...

- You need to keep the sessions short. Whole day workshops or training is draining for everyone
- Frequent breaks are needed, at least 5 minutes every hour
- You need to complete the collaborative group sessions in smaller groups and bring everyone back together for a summary
- Try not to lose the social aspect, get to know those people you are working with - call people up to discuss the project and network in a similar way that you would if you were in an office environment
- Templates, templates, templates – in a physical environment templates are mostly stored in my head and created on the spot as and when needed (brown paper, tape, pens, flip-chart and post it notes will get you a long way!) I find printed templates often need adjusting or potentially get wasted. However, in an electronic environment it can take longer to create a template so have a load ready to go and pick up what you need and when.

The project is still in its implementation phase but keep an eye out for our follow up case study when we will celebrate Grand Union's results.

