Design Thinking to Meet the Moment

DESIGNING FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS CASE STUDY *Written by Olivia Sun and Thomas Both, in partnership with Lajaune Lincoln of Peabody*

How Peabody became stronger in crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic forced every organization across the globe to respond to change. For Peabody, one of the oldest and largest housing associations in the UK, developing a COVID-19 response plan was essential for them to successfully carry out their long-standing social mission: to make people's lives better. They provide housing and support across London and the South-East of England to over 133,000 residents, including 7,000 over the age of 70. When the British government announced an indefinite lockdown in March 2020, Peabody staff quickly realized they would need to develop a new means of support that would be possible under the new restrictions. Using the agility and collaboration of their design practices, they carried out a remarkable COVID-19 response that brought housing stability, resource access, and financial security to vulnerable residents in their communities.
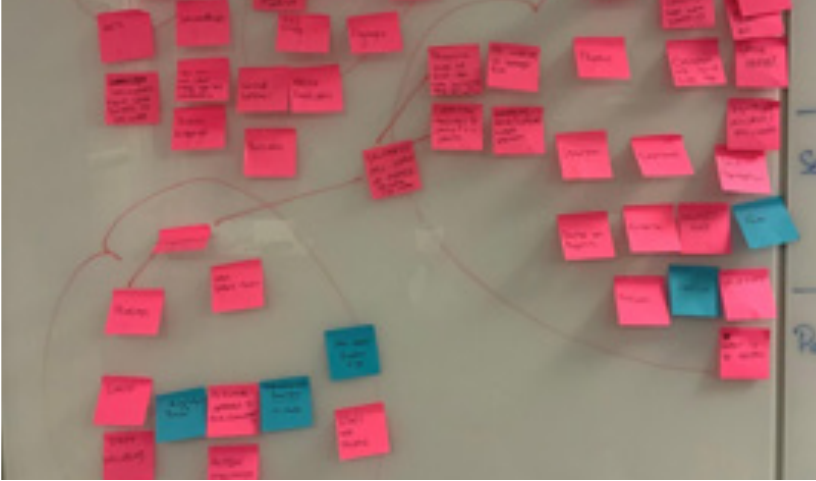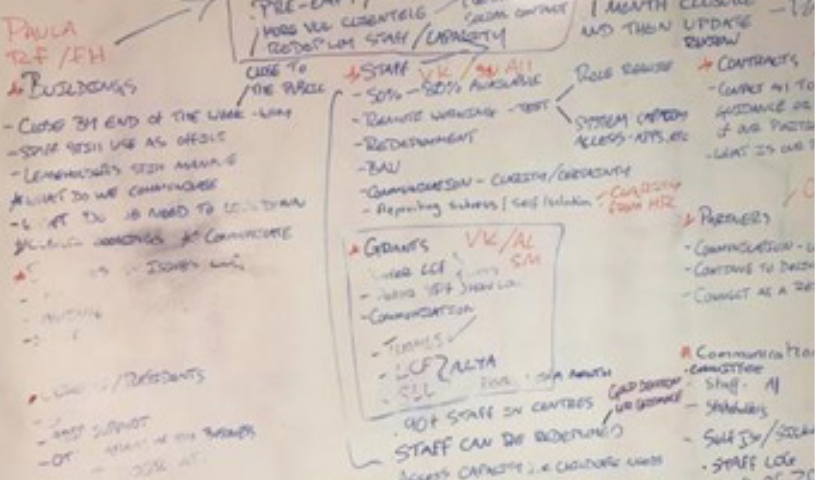
Photos from the boards of a March 2020 in-person session to shape the response to COVID-19.

UNDERSTANDING RESIDENT NEEDS

In the early days of the pandemic, Peabody staff members had already begun making the first rounds of check-in calls to 3,000 vulnerable residents and 6,600 elderly residents. Many residents, like 80-year-old Jane, couldn't leave the house to pick up medication; others, like Oliver, lost jobs and needed a week's worth of food to get back on their feet. One woman named Charlotte was struck by extreme financial hardship, as well as severe flooding in her flat. These devastating events took such a toll on Charlotte's mental health that she attempted suicide. (Names have been changed for anonymity.)

Hearing the struggles of Jane, Oliver, Charlotte, and so many others revealed that there was an entire community of low-income, elderly, immunocompromised, and solo-inhabitant residents who were at a point of crisis and in desperate need of help.

Performing these early check-ins allowed them to see the effects of this global health crisis at a human level, and understand the needs that arose because of it. Staff reported that as a result, they felt more connected to a purpose: to ensure all residents felt as secure as possible during this period of uncertainty and upheaval.

With this shared commitment of keeping resident well-being as their north star, Peabody staff understood the need to employ new ways of offering support during a time of critical demand. Thus, in the last week at the office, a group of staff within the Care and Communities department gathered in front of whiteboards to begin shaping a more organized and effective COVID-19 response plan.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

During this meeting, the Care and Communities team applied a systems lens to their understanding of the human experience to better make sense of the big picture. They weren't afraid to ask a broad range of questions, from "How do we collaborate from a remote setting?" to "How do we ensure transparent communication with all our residents, partners, and staff?". They defined what they knew, what they didn't know, mapped stakeholders, and drew connections.

Staff were encouraged to share the feedback they were receiving from their check-in calls and interventions. This built a better understanding of the needs across client groups, and also helped the group to gain a better understanding of what each team was delivering. This level of communication between staff at the very early stage of the pandemic — when everyone was on shaky ground — not only provided more confidence and direction, but also built buy-in for a collective approach.
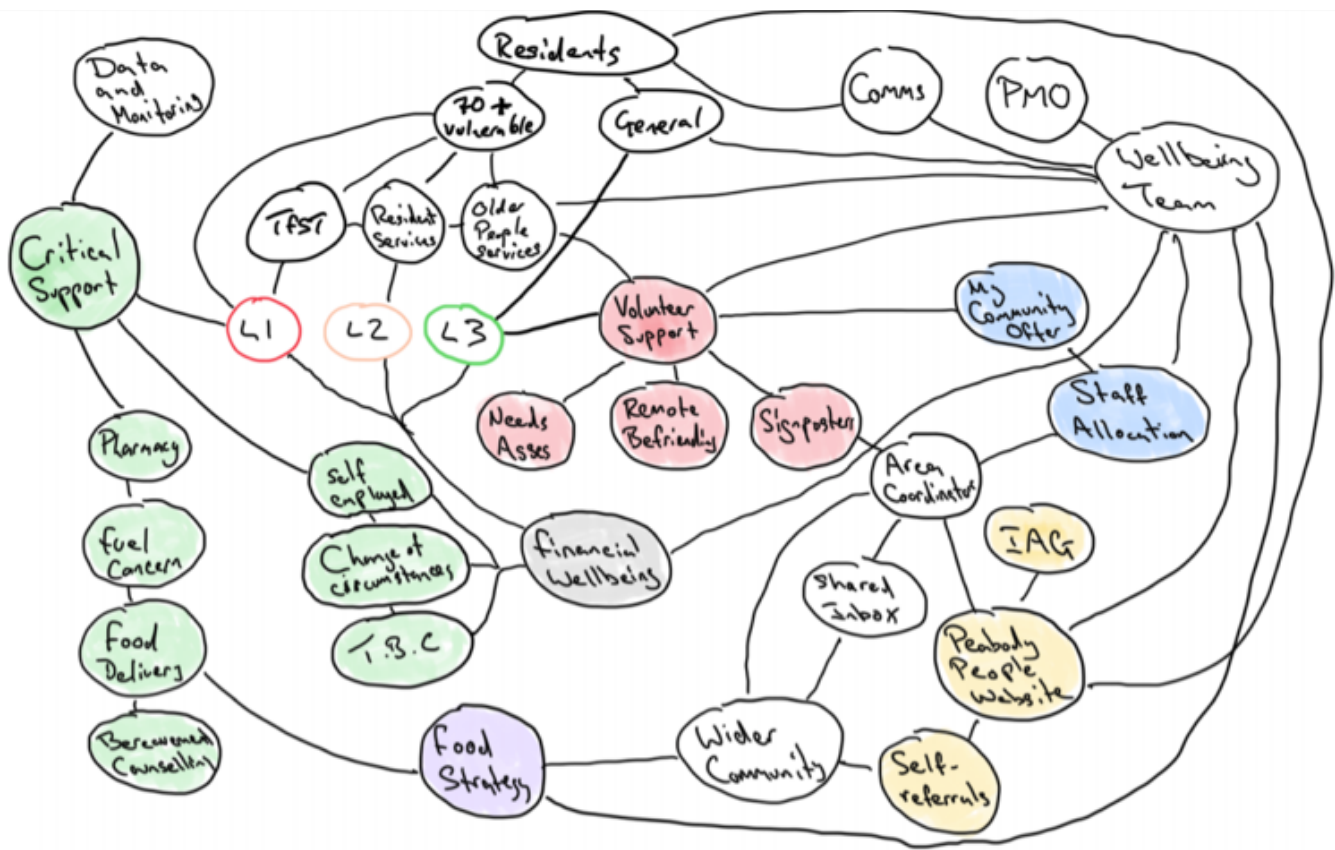
A stakeholder map created early in the COVID-19 pandemic; mapping proved helpful to see how teams could reorganize and more efficiently serve residents.

Collaborating visually on a board brought clarity that would've been impossible to achieve, had staff members sat at a table and took notes independently. Through a team effort, they quickly created a visual map of all the moving parts of their plan-to-be.

Their stakeholder map (above), in particular, was an enlightening display of how interconnected Peabody's internal teams could be. It brought clarity to roles, exposed duplicative work, and highlighted where staff needed to shift capacities. Take the resident well-being calls, for example: making 10,000 calls would typically have taken weeks to complete. But visualization helped them quickly see which teams could offer additional support to accelerate the process. As a result, Peabody split up the calls across staff and volunteer teams based on groups of residents with varying levels of need (L1, L2, and L3), showing how more could get done if teams relied on each other rather than staying in their lanes of delivery. For example, the Volunteering Management Team mobilised staff from different departments across the business to support calls being made to residents who were isolated or had to shelter at home to avoid exposure. They were able to conduct initial assessments and then signpost and refer clients to the most appropriate in-house or external services.

Lajaune Lincoln, Head of Young People and Community Services at Peabody Community Foundation, describes this planning meeting as "the moment everything clicked." It was a turning point for many Peabody staff members to understand how a design mindset promoted cross-departmental collaboration, innovation, and quick action. Just a couple days after this meeting, all Peabody staff were forced to leave the office indefinitely due to shelter-in-place orders. However, they had already come up with the foundation for their COVID-19 response. They named it the Resident Wellbeing Plan.

Peabody staff quickly mobilized to deliver critical supplies and services to residents.

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

During the first week of lockdown in the UK, the Peabody Resident Wellbeing Plan officially launched. Staff were delivering food parcels to low-income families and medication to elderly residents. They worked with The Plattery, a local community partner, to drop off home-cooked meals to residents in west/central London. They built a network of businesses to donate essential items, created informational flyers, and compiled community resources. They mobilized their volunteer network to deliver care packages and serve as a friend to lonely neighbors. Thanks to their agile approach, Peabody could promptly redeploy staff members to projects that needed additional support based on staff's preferences and strengths. Remarkably, in the first five days of lockdown alone, Peabody provided support for 1,200 people with critical needs.

The transition to online services was another key component of the Resident Wellbeing Plan. When the pandemic hit, staff members realized they needed a new means for residents to reach out for help. They moved quickly to create a COVID-19 specific website, which they built in a single weekend and launched the next Monday. Within only 5 days of launching, the website already had over 650 users with almost 100 people referring themselves and others for urgent support. The first version was far from perfect, but the steady traffic flow indicated that the website was a desired and used resource. In the subsequent months, staff integrated the platform into the main Peabody website and continuously improved and expanded its functionality according to feedback. The team's initial bias toward action allowed them to rapidly create a practical solution in a condensed timeline.

Their action-oriented attitude didn't come out of thin air — it was the product of a steady departmental culture shift. In fact, the work leading to this success actually started two years prior.

THE GROUNDWORK FOR PEABODY'S SUCCESS

In December 2018, Lajaune Lincoln attended a Stanford University Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d.school) Designing for Social Systems workshop. Reflecting on his experience at the d.school, Lajaune says: "I remember the buzz of flying around the board of our first design challenge, sticking post-it notes here, there, and everywhere, and feeling that thrill when we came up with a really juicy idea. My new design mindset helped connect and make sense of all of my learnings. It felt like everything during my professional career had been leading to this point and I now had a new sense of clarity and fulfillment. I recognized without a doubt the power that it would have for me personally and in my work at Peabody."

Lajaune remade an underutilized breakroom (original state shown on left) into a collaborative workspace (right).

Lajaune became an enthusiastic proponent of human-centered design and committed to integrating it into Peabody. After his d.school experience, he began applying the tools and mindsets of design in a myriad of ways, being sure to get his colleagues involved. He conducted trainings for his teams using materials from the d.school, including The New City Experience activity (a structure and worksheets for a two-hour experiential introductory activity). He sought out other books and resources (*Designing for Growth*, by Liedtka and Ogilvie, is a favorite) to think about how to best describe the value and principles of design in a business-oriented organization.

A few months after attending the DSS workshop, Lajaune seized an opportunity to apply design thinking when his department sought to better understand the impact of their services. Insights from the work spurred the development of a story-based website highlighting positive impact, which celebrated staff achievements and boosted staff morale.

Sponsored by directors, Lajaune then collaborated with staff to reimagine operational services using design and systems approaches. He also spearheaded the creation of a collaborative office workspace by repurposing an underutilised breakroom. Perhaps as important as anything, Lajaune integrated techniques into the day-to-day teamwork and meetings that he was part of.

Formally and informally, his colleagues started naturally adopting similar behaviors. Some were conscious practitioners of the underlying design principles, while others remained unknowing of this driving force. Although the presence of design in Peabody's practices was sometimes unnamed, its methods of collaboration and creative problem solving became well-integrated and naturally employed. The first months of the pandemic became the ultimate test of Peabody's resilience — and their design approach helped them respond powerfully.

As staff members from across the organization united around a shared purpose, they worked together more closely than ever before. There seemed to be an unspoken shared commitment to take on work that was typically the responsibility of others, even if it meant crossing team barriers. Especially due to the remote nature of work, their seamless collaboration was an impressive feat.

A screenshot of the 'Peabody Stories' website that resulted from a design project spearheaded by Lajaune Lincoln.
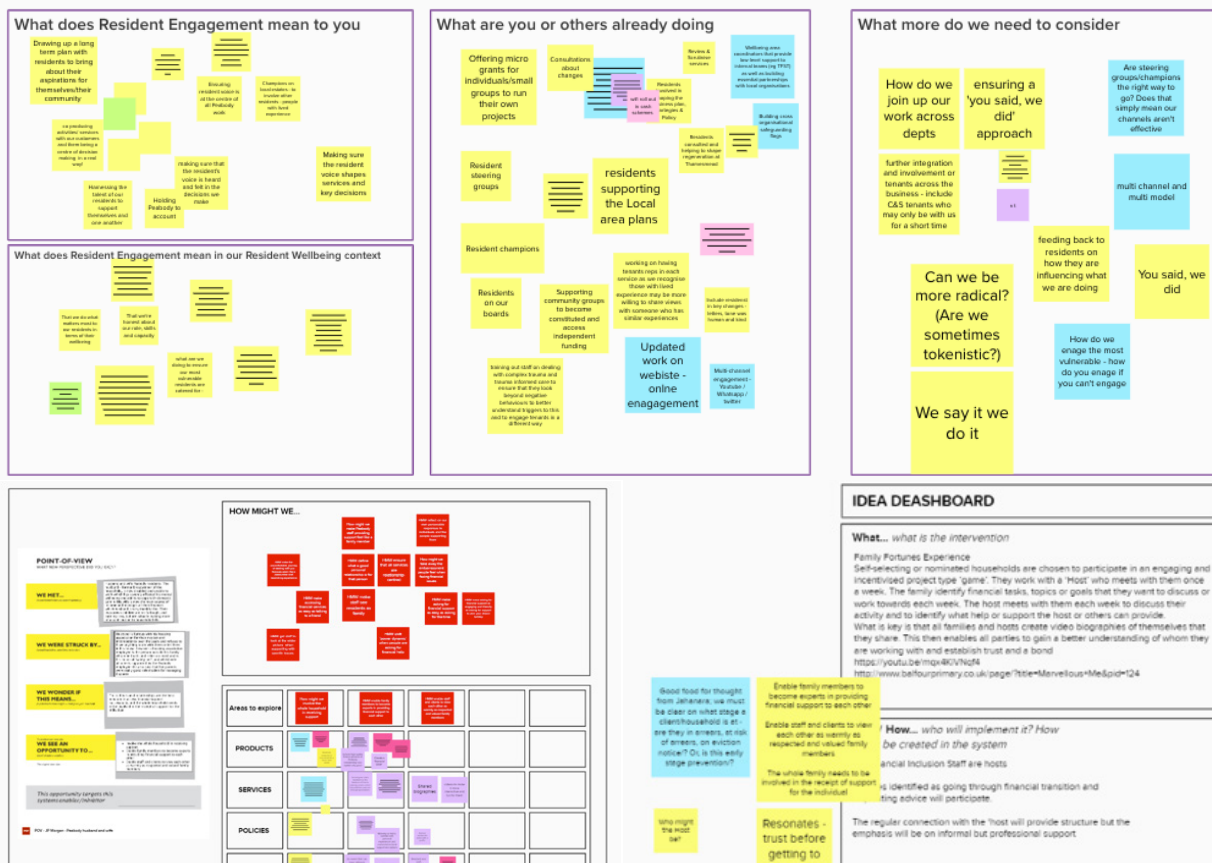
The Peabody team utilized Mural to continue active collaborative sessions and develop new strategies, while working remotely.

DIGITAL COLLABORATION

With in-person collaboration already posing a challenge for many, remote collaboration can feel like a near impossible task. Resident Wellbeing Project staff, however, showed that there are plenty of ways to continue collaborating effectively even when not physically together. Their favorite tool is MURAL, a digital collaborative workspace for organizing thoughts on virtual sticky notes. They used MURAL to capture input from each team member, identify common themes, anticipate problems that would arise, and create strategies to respond. Project meetings weren't about reporting what tasks each person completed, like in a typical project management approach, but about what they needed to do next, together.

The more they worked collaboratively using MURAL boards, the more listening and learning happened across their ranks. Collaborating on a shared visual board helped reduce the focus of seniority or clout of the colleagues, and emphasized the work and ideas themselves. Leadership took a backseat and focused on asking questions that would inspire "lightbulb moments." Those with resident-facing roles were empowered to share more of their input; after all, they had the most intimate interactions with residents. People's titles faded to the background while everyone naturally took turns sharing and leading.

The Resident Wellbeing teams quickly developed a system that promoted an ideal balance between collaboration and efficiency. During meetings, everybody had the chance to voice their suggestions and capture those on the digital MURAL board; then a Project Lead would make sense of all the ideas, transform it into a written cohesive plan, and share it back with the teams. It was a way for every staff member to have a sense of ownership and vested interest in their work, without slowing down their process of getting to a tangible plan of action.

Although staff weren't physically together, they were continuing to nurture a feeling of togetherness and culture of inclusion.
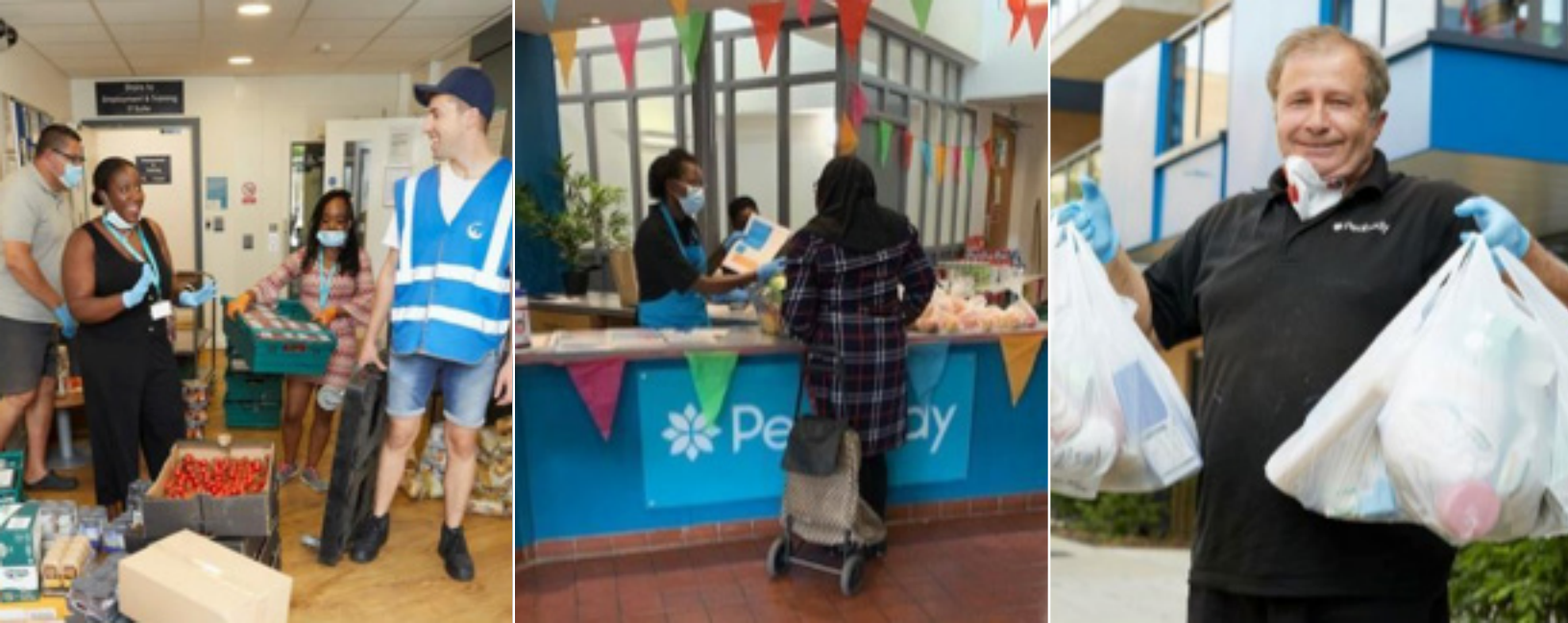
Peabody staff and partners offered new means of support to 21,000 people, in response to needs rising from the pandemic.

RESIDENT WELLBEING PLAN IMPACT

Peabody's Resident Wellbeing Plan resulted in considerable impact, especially crucial during a time of such great need. In just 9 months, from April to December 2020, Peabody directly assessed the needs and offered new means of support to 21,000 people.

One of those people was Charlotte. Peabody connected Charlotte with their mental wellbeing stream to kickstart her road to recovery, set her up with a money management plan for long-term financial stability, and referred her to the local food bank — a resource just minutes away which she had not been aware of before. Today, Charlotte is receiving ongoing support and has plans to volunteer at the food bank in the near future.

At a community-wide level, among those 21,000 contacted, Peabody provided financial support for 1,000 residents and wellbeing support for nearly 8,000. They delivered 790,000 Personal Protective Equipment items and 7,000 food parcels to resident homes. On top of that, Peabody's home delivery meal partnership with The Plattery has continued with success to this day. Peabody achieved these results via new approaches to providing services that they never employed before.

A design practice supported Peabody to make a substantial responsive impact in the midst of great ambiguity and change. They were able to quickly organize and engage all hands on deck, in-person and online. With their intentional outreach, team collaboration, sense-making, and ideation, the team responded more effectively to this crisis. This experience also strengthened the organizational culture, building stronger relationships, trust and practices.

Collaboration, sense-making, and visual thinking has become more integrated into work at Peabody.

FOUR DESIGN BEHAVIORS TO STRENGTHEN HOW YOUR ORGANIZATION OPERATES

Peabody's success in responding to crisis was powered by design. Here are four ways you can harness **design to serve and enhance your organization:**

1. **Use shared visual workspaces to dissolve hierarchy and hear everyone's voices.** Collaboration is no easy task, especially for large teams in a remote work setting. Peabody demonstrated that using a visual workspace — physical or digital — can help flatten a rigid hierarchy, work across silos, and include everybody's voices at the table. This design approach was a driving force that allowed "all front-line internal teams to work as one." In the case of a crisis, this contrasts from a typical reaction to consolidate command and control in leadership.

2. **Sense-make and synthesize to create a clear direction and plan that everybody can rally around.** When you're met with a daunting challenge, it's easy to feel stifled. Design tools can help you create sense out of all the messiness. After visually laying out information (as described above), make sure that teams invest the necessary time to identify patterns and trends that clarify what is happening and identify possible ways forward. For the team at Peabody, Lajaune created a visual map of their internal teams that quickly revealed how staff capacity could be matched with resident needs.

3. **Let the needs and experiences of the people you serve drive the action you take.** At the start of the pandemic, Peabody knew they needed to focus on supporting their residents' wellbeing through the pandemic. However, like most of us, they didn't have a blueprint to follow under rare circumstances like a global pandemic. So, they listened to their residents, and let that inform their action. Ultimately, Peabody expanded their role to also provide food, utilities, and increased financial and emotional support — because that's what the residents most needed during the pandemic.

4. **Take action and expect to make improvements/changes along the way.** Designers understand that taking initial action moves their work and thinking forward. This first step creates the basis for feedback to be received and appropriate adjustments to be made. Nothing is perfect the first time around, so acting in an iterative manner leads to the solutions most informed by the people you serve.

THE WORK CONTINUES

With the help of design, Peabody developed the collaboration and operational system necessary to continue providing sustained support until the end of the global pandemic. They will continue to listen to feedback and alter services in a way that makes their residents feel as secure as possible. Peabody will also continue improving its internal practices, allowing new, innovative processes to be embedded into the fabric of the long-standing organization.

Lajaune and his colleagues share that there's still plenty of work to be done. Fortunately, the success of their COVID-19 response acts as a catalyst for more organization-wide design practices. They hope to recreate dynamic collaboration in other parts of their operations to embed resident wellbeing as the starting point for all organizational interventions. A key project is the building of shared data tools that will enable different functioning Directorates across the business — including Tenancy & Housing Management, Corporate Services, Modernisation, and Care & Support — to integrate their data and have a holistic view of residents. This will enable them to better understand and collectively respond to the individual needs of every person Peabody works with. Ultimately, Lajaune and the rest of the Resident Wellbeing Project team envision a future where Peabody can embed its human, collaborative, and swift practices across their sector, and also share with the rest of the world.

Designing for Social Systems (DSS) is a program of the Stanford d.school. The purpose of DSS is to empower leaders and practitioners in the nonprofit, philanthropy, government, and social impact fields to work in more effective, human, equitable, and strategic ways. In collaboration with these practitioners, we aim to redesign how this work is done, develop more effective interventions, and advance the sector as a whole. See more at dss.stanford.edu

The Peabody Group is a housing provider, and also delivers an extensive range of community programs. The organization is responsible for over 67,000 homes in London and the South East and 155,000 residents.

Lajaune Lincoln, with over 30 years of work experience in the public sector, is Head of Young People and Community Services at Peabody, with responsibility for the strategic and operational direction of community development and support services.

Lajaune attended the DSS workshop in December 2018, and has returned as a coach and instructor in workshops and webinars since then.