

# Business Continuity Plan - Coronavirus Position Statement

Jigsaw

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# 1 Status Update as at 15 January 2021

1. This position statement sets out our response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It takes account of the latest advice from central Government, the NHS and Public Health England on how best to protect our workforce, residents and service users.

## 2 Background

2. On 23 March 2020, the Government announced a lockdown with travel to and from work **only if absolutely necessary**. We closed our offices the next day. The initial lockdown was relaxed after a period but some local restrictions then introduced. The Group's business continuity arrangements ensured priority services were maintained throughout the initial UK lockdown. Full services were re-established in line with the relaxation of Government restrictions.
3. Subsequent local restrictions in parts of Greater Manchester and Lancashire did not impact on services, except that we briefly reverted to an emergencies plus repairs service for Oldham residents during August 2020.
4. However, because of rising infection rates as we entered the autumn, and in anticipation of a fuller lockdown, we stopped booking appointments for non-critical repairs from 16 October 2020.
5. Further restrictions were placed on the general public in November and December 2020. We have now closed our offices to the public other than for appointments that cannot be conducted over the telephone or via video call. Some other services have also been affected, which is explained below, but we have largely effected a comprehensive business recovery so that it is largely business as usual, in line with Government restrictions and incorporating new ways of working.
6. Our ultimate priorities are to continue to provide services to the most vulnerable residents and service users whilst maintaining business critical functions and protecting the health and well-being of our workforce.
7. Our service delivery is more COVID secure than it was at the start of the pandemic. We have reviewed our risk assessments, increased the PPE provided to employees in customer-facing roles (including more vulnerable groups) as appropriate and introduced some socially distanced working practices, eg. digital sign ups on lettings. Social distancing is implemented in our offices.
8. However, to further reduce the risk to employees and customers we have:
  - put on hold plans to reopen communal areas in independent living schemes;
  - stopped making appointments for non-critical repairs inside tenanted properties;
  - deferred planned maintenance works (non-urgent boiler replacements and kitchen & bathroom installations);
  - closed our offices to the public for all but essential appointments.

## 2.1. Support for Residents

9. The impact of COVID-19 on our residents and our communities has been significant. We continue to work with our partner local authorities and other agencies in all our major areas of operation to support residents, redeploying staff resources as necessary.
10. We have partnered with public, private and voluntary agencies, other registered providers and local foodbanks to get food to the most vulnerable members of society. Food parcels have been in high demand throughout all of our neighbourhoods and we have supported families with both immediate provision and longer term solutions through volunteer networks and local authorities. We have also assisted a number of local organisations with funding and by redeploying staff as delivery drivers, helping enable food parcels to be created and delivered.
11. Between mid March and 1<sup>st</sup> August independent living tenants received twice weekly calls to identify anyone self isolating and in need of food or medication or suffering with COVID-19 symptoms and/or experiencing difficulties with mental health. Independent living staff members have returned to working from site since August and weekly welfare calls resumed except where a tenant is suffering with COVID-19 symptoms, in which case they are called daily until they have recovered.
12. We produced a directory of community help groups, including public, private and voluntary sources, which details available support for food provision, medical supplies, money advice, loneliness support, mental health support, home care, utilities and voluntary community groups.
13. Over 6,000 general needs residents aged 70 plus and other residents under 70 who might be vulnerable as a result of physical or mental health needs received a welfare phone call from us to identify any support needs. Those showing signs of real loneliness have been referred to external agencies for regular calls and befriending services. We have recommenced welfare calls to these residents now that we are back in lockdown.
14. 24,000 tenants under the age of 70 were texted to ask if they needed help with money advice, emotional support, access to food or other essentials.

## 2.2. Business Critical Functions

15. We have maintained the following business critical tasks since the beginning of the first lockdown:
  - Staffing and services to our supported housing schemes
  - Lettings to vulnerable groups
  - Services to older residents in our independent living schemes, or living alone in the community
  - Money advice to tenants struggling to pay rent and other bills
  - IT
  - Payroll

- People team to ensure employees are deployed to the necessary areas
- Payment of suppliers
- Emergency repairs
- BACS payments
- FM (for access for IT team, etc. if offices closed)
- Contractual obligations
- Delivery of our development programme
- Health and Safety, reviewing working practices, carrying out risk assessments and completing COVID secure building inspections
- Rent collection, without which we cannot pay for any of the above.

### **2.3. Gas Servicing**

16. Following Gas Safe advice from the beginning of the pandemic, we continue to follow our procedures and try to access properties in advance of a gas certificate expiring. Throughout, we have been conscious of the need to balance this against the health and wellbeing of our customers and gas technicians. We have seen sustained improvement in the volume of services completed since June and our servicing cycle has been operating as normal since August. Our current performance continues to be aligned to pre COVID-19 trend and equates to 0.1% of our properties currently being overdue. Where COVID-19 has been identified as the reason for refused access, we continue not to pursue legal action. However, where a tenant continues to refuse to allow access without engagement with us, we are pursuing legal action in line with our pre COVID-19 procedures.

### **2.4. Electrical Safety**

17. To ensure all our properties are electrically safe we have a five year programme of electrical safety checks. Throughout lockdown we have continued to complete these important checks but, as with gas servicing, we have experienced difficulties with access. We continue to work with tenants who are self isolating and wherever possible arrange a mutually convenient appointment. Where COVID-19 has been identified as the reason for refused access, we continue not to pursue legal action. However, where a tenant continues to refuse to allow access without engagement with us, we are now pursuing legal action in line with our pre COVID-19 procedures.

### **2.5. Grounds Maintenance**

18. We reintroduced our grounds maintenance service in May. We have made some temporary changes to the way we carry out grounds maintenance. In the short term this means that we will focus on grass cutting and when it is possible our staff will spend more time on site to ensure the grounds are brought back up to the usual high standard.

## 2.6. Caretaking Service

19. Our caretaking and cleaning service remain fully operational and continue to complete regular fire safety checks and frequent cleaning of high usage areas in independent living and general needs schemes.

## 2.7. Repairs

20. We made contingency arrangements for a scenario in which, as a result of mass self isolation by tenants, widespread infection, employee absence due to sickness or self isolation or lockdown, we would be unable to deliver our normal day to day repairs service.
21. We moved to an 'emergencies plus' repairs service with effect from 24 March 2020 but began undertaking urgent repairs from 18 May 2020. From the end of June we recommenced routine repairs. We briefly reverted to 'emergencies plus' in Oldham during August but returned to a full repairs service at the end of the month.
22. However, taking account of the rising infection rate during October 2020 and to further reduce the risk to employees and customers we stopped making appointments for non-critical repairs inside tenanted properties. We are deferring planned maintenance works (non-urgent boiler replacements and kitchen & bathroom installations).
23. We will continue with the following:
  - Emergency and urgent repairs
  - Outside routine repairs
  - Gas and electrical servicing
  - Compliance
  - Voids
  - Disrepair
  - In-progress planned projects
  - Grounds maintenance
  - Estate Services
  - Fire safety checks
24. We are using social media, emails and telephone greeting messages to customers calling our Connect centres to explain that we are not accepting non-critical repair requests at present.
25. Where repairs are required in properties with people who have symptoms and are self-isolating, we provide additional safety precautions for our employees.
26. Our call centre staff are equipped to work from home and receive calls from residents making inbound calls.

## 2.8. Letting Properties

27. We continued to let newly built properties handed over by developers from the beginning of the pandemic. In May we recommenced letting all properties in the general needs category with a new digital letting process that maintains social distancing between employees and incoming tenants. Our void refurbishment programme has resumed in full and we have recommenced administering mutual exchanges between properties. Sheltered and supported lets also recommenced.

## 2.9. Rent Collection

28. Tenants who get into rent arrears for reasons connected with COVID-19 are being treated sensitively and assisted. We continue to offer free and confidential advice through our money advice teams. To increase our ability to assist tenant in claiming the benefits and financial assistance they are entitled to, we have reallocated staff to money advice work and are making outbound calls to those not in receipt of housing benefit to see if their circumstances have changed due to the pandemic, offering support where necessary. This includes setting up new payment methods for cash payers who are self-isolating, accepting lower payments when a tenant is unsure of their future income, issuing foodbank vouchers, signposting to debt advice, completing grant applications and making further referrals for food provision to local private and volunteer agencies.

## 2.10. Impact on Workforce

29. We initially projected up to 80% of the workforce becoming infected by COVID-19. The number of employees reporting symptoms/needing to isolate was significantly below this level and has continued to reduce in line with national trends. 212 employees were unable to work due to underlying conditions for themselves or others or because their role could not be fulfilled from home during lockdown. This number reduced to 66 employees and has remained static during lockdown, generally consisting of those shielding and apprentices. Initially 300 front line workers were doing their jobs or carried out other tasks or worked amended hours during lockdown and this has increasing to c. 500. 700 employees were mobilised to work from home, including employees who needed to shield and who have undertaken amended duties instead. The vast majority of employees have worked during lockdown. During the second lockdown all employees were able to work with adjusted duties due to the measures and guidance in place. For the latest lockdown we have seven employees who are unable to work due to the need to shield. This absence is now being recorded as sickness if anyone exceeds their full sick pay entitlement and we have made a commitment to ensure they are offered the opportunity to work from home or be paid 80% of their salary.
30. In partnership with local authorities, eligible staff who work with some of our most vulnerable customers are now being offered vaccinations.
31. We have updated and published to employees our homeworking policy to take account of the coronavirus. We are using Microsoft Teams to support remote team working.

## 2.11. Offices

32. When lockdown was relaxed the message from Government changed from one of 'work from home if you can' to 'talk to your employer about when you can safely return to work'. However, the message is once again to work from home where possible and employees are only working in offices on a socially distanced basis. Office occupation is capped at 50% of normal levels, based on the following criteria:
- Where it would improve productivity
  - For practical reasons, eg. printing
  - To support and train junior members of teams
  - For team building and training for new starters
  - To restart suspended services.
33. but in practice only a skeleton staff is attending the offices at present.
34. Our offices are COVID secure enabling employees to return to the office on a socially distanced basis. Measures include screens on reception and in the interview rooms, removing seating in reception and providing hand sanitiser stations at entrances to the building and within the staff areas. PPE is also provided for staff members along with directional and floor signage to help keep people two metres apart.
35. Our offices are open to the public exceptionally and on an appointment only basis where interviews cannot be conducted over the telephone or digitally.

## 2.12. Supported Housing Schemes

36. Many of our supported housing schemes have on-site staff providing a 24 hour service. We are continuing to run these services, albeit on some occasions with reduced staffing levels. We will utilise teams from across all services to maintain as many supported housing services as possible, both 24 hour and visiting support.
37. Business continuity plans for our staffed schemes and maintenance services are being reviewed and brought into effect as needed.
38. We have now mobilised most of our outreach services, such as Housing First, to support complex clients with staff following government guidance on social distancing.

## 2.13. Independent Living and Supported Housing Schemes

39. We have made our independent living schemes COVID secure in line with government guidance and all scheme based staff are now working on site. Dining rooms are currently closed at schemes where we provide a meal with the meal being delivered to the tenants flat instead. Communal lounges remain closed. As the restrictions have changed, we have kept residents up to date via welfare calls and also by letters and posters around the schemes.

## 2.14. Communications

40. Communications with tenants are channelled through all media, including letters to tenants. Updates are provided on our website, with regular emails sent to notify residents of important information.
41. 46 sets of FAQs have been distributed to employees via their work and home email addresses, with fresh FAQs published in response to the changing situation and staff queries. We also publish these in *Newspiece*, our in house staff newsletter.
42. We are also using our Facebook page, Team - Jigsaw, and our database of work and personal mobile numbers and personal email contacts for employees unable to access company emails. Tailored messages are issued to managers.
43. A staff survey in June to obtain the eNPS (employee Net Promoter Score) for the Group. This asked employees how they felt about the level of communication received from team members, managers and the company as a whole on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) and how they were adapting to changes in working practices:
  - Over 600 employees responded (48% of workforce)
  - eNPS was 58 (rising from 34 last quarter and a negative score at time of merger)
  - Communication was rated highly (80%, 85% and 81% across the categories rated as 'very good/good' respectively) with little variation by directorate
  - Overall, the consensus was that new working practices were working well (76%), with many positive comments reflecting on how the company had handled the pandemic, looking out for the welfare of employees and an appreciation of the financial stability of the company during these uncertain times.

## 2.15. Warning Flags

44. We have set up warning flags on our IT systems to highlight where tenants or their household members are shielding or self isolating because underlying conditions, and for confirmed cases resulting in the death of a tenant. We have put in place protocols to ensure that this information is shared with employees and contractors as necessary.
45. We have put in place a track and trace system for employees who become infected. This has worked successfully. To date we have not had any cases of employees contracting the virus from a work related activity.

## 2.16. Training to Staff

46. All staff were enrolled in an online infection training module in March 2020 and homeworkers asked to complete a homeworking data protection survey in April 2020. Coping with COVID -19 Anxiety and temporary homeworker e-learning online modules were issued in May.

## **2.17. PPE**

47. The Group has adequate supplies of PPE and has issued clear guidance to employees on the need to maintain good handwashing hygiene, social distancing, when face masks are appropriate to be worn, etc. This message is reinforced through a number of channels.

## **2.18. Assurance**

48. All board members are being updated regularly on the position.
49. Our Group Board met monthly at the beginning of the pandemic in order to oversee the Group's response to COVID-19 and support the Executive as necessary in responding to the changing situation. The Group's financial position is being monitored by the Group Board and reviewed by the Executive in line with the Group's stress test recovery plan.

## **2.19. Business Continuity**

50. The Group's operational response to COVID-19 is managed by the Business Continuity Group, which comprises directors from a range of disciplines and includes the Group Chief Executive and all members of EMT. This group meets weekly by video conference.

## **2.20. Stakeholders**

51. We will share this position statement with stakeholders via our website and update it as necessary.



## Creating homes. Building lives.

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