

# Business Continuity Plan - Coronavirus Position Statement

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# 1 Background

1. This position statement sets out our latest 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. The Group's business continuity arrangements ensured priority services were maintained throughout the initial lockdown which began in March 2020. Full services were re-established in line with the relaxation of Government restrictions.
3. The introduction of local restrictions in parts of Greater Manchester and Lancashire did not impact on services, except that we temporarily offered an emergencies plus repairs service for Oldham residents between 27 July 2020 and 27 August 2020.
4. A full repairs service was then reintroduced. However, because of rising infection rates as we enter the autumn, we are changing how we deliver repairs from 16 October 2020 and this is explained in more detail below.

# 2 Aim

5. Our ultimate priorities are 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.

# 3 Status Update as at 16 October 2020

6. 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 were then introduced.
7. On 12 October 2020 the Government introduced a three-tier arrangement across the country placing the vast majority of our properties and offices in Tier 2 (high risk level) with Merseyside (including Sefton) placed in Tier 3 (very high risk level).
8. On 16 October 2020 it was confirmed that Lancashire would move into Tier 3 from midnight, with discussions ongoing between central and regional government about Greater Manchester possibly being placed in Tier 3.
9. Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions do not stop employees travelling to and for work purposes, but the infection rate in the North West and the Midlands is increasing and more employees and residents will need to self isolate because they or a family member get infected.
10. 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.

11. However, to further reduce the risk to employees we have:
- put on hold plans to reopen communal areas in independent living schemes;
  - stopped making appointments for non-critical repairs inside tenanted properties. Appointments that have already been made will be honoured;
  - deferred planned maintenance works (non-urgent boiler replacements and kitchen & bathroom installations).

### **3.1. Support for Residents**

12. The impact of COVID-19 on our residents and the communities we work in 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.
13. We have partnered with a 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.
14. 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 returned to working from site from the beginning of August and welfare calls returned to their previous level of one call per week except where a tenant reported they were suffering with COVID-19 symptoms. In those cases we called them daily until they were recovered.
15. We have 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.
16. Over 6,000 residents aged 70 plus in our general needs accommodation and other residents under 70 who might be vulnerable as a result of physical or mental health needs received a welfare phone call from Jigsaw Homes to identify where support was needed either directly or via referral to a support network. Those showing signs of real loneliness have been referred to external agencies for regular calls and befriending services.
17. We have also been keeping in touch with younger residents via text message. 24,000 tenants under the age of 70 and where we have a mobile number were contacted asking if they needed help with money advice, emotional support, access to food or other essentials.

### 3.2. Business Critical Functions

18. We have successfully maintained the following business critical tasks since the beginning of 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.

### 3.3. Gas Servicing

19. 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 resumed our gas service programme in full during May. The rate of access success for gas servicing improved week on week and returned to expected levels during July and we continue to make inroads into the backlog of services that lockdown created. We increased our resource capacity by employing sub-contractors in addition to our directly employed workforce and our programme is estimated to return to its normal position during September. 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.

### **3.4. Electrical Safety**

20. 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.

### **3.5. Grounds Maintenance**

21. 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.

### **3.6. Caretaking Service**

22. 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.

### **3.7. Repairs**

23. 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.
24. 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.
25. However, taking account of the rising infection rate during October 2020 and to further reduce the risk to employees we have stopped making appointments for non-critical repairs inside tenanted properties. Appointments that have already been made will be honoured. We are also deferring planned maintenance works (non-urgent boiler replacements and kitchen & bathroom installations).
26. 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

27. We are using social media to explain to tenants that non-critical repair requests will not be accepted at the current time. We will review the position again in four weeks' time.
28. Where repairs are required in properties with people who have symptoms and are self-isolating, we provide additional safety precautions for our employees.
29. Our call centre staff are equipped to work from home and receive calls from residents making inbound calls.

### **3.8. Letting Properties**

30. 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.

### **3.9. Rent Collection**

31. 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 tenants 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.

### **3.10. Impact on Workforce**

32. We initially projected up to 80% of the workforce becoming infected by COVID-19. That proved to be overly cautious and 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.
33. 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.

### **3.11. Offices**

34. We have made our offices COVID secure to enable some 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. 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'. The message is once again to work from home where possible and employees are only working in offices on a socially distanced basis, with office occupation 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.
36. Our offices are open to the public on an appointment only basis.

### **3.12. Supported Housing Schemes**

37. 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.

38. Business continuity plans for our staffed schemes and maintenance services are being reviewed and brought into effect as needed.
39. 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.

### **3.13. Independent Living and Supported Housing Schemes**

40. We have been busy making 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 are still closed.. As the restrictions have changed, we have kept residents up to date with the changes via welfare calls and also by letters and posters around the schemes.

### **3.14. Communications**

41. Communications with tenants are being channelled through all media, including writing out to all our tenants. Updates are provided on our website, with regular emails sent to notify residents of important information.
42. 39 sets of FAQs have been distributed to employees via email with fresh FAQs published in response to the changing situation and any further issues raised by staff. We are also publishing these in *Newspiece* - our in house staff newsletter - as appropriate.
43. 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.
44. We carried out 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.

### **3.15. Warning Flags**

- 45. 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.
- 46. 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.

### **3.16. Training to Staff**

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

### **3.17. PPE**

- 48. 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.

### **3.18. Assurance**

- 49. All board members are being updated regularly on the position.
- 50. 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.

### **3.19. Business Continuity**

- 51. 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 now meets weekly. All meetings are held by video conference.

### **3.20. Stakeholders**

- 52. We will share this position statement with stakeholders via our website and provide updates as necessary.



## Creating homes. Building lives.

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Regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing Registration No. LH 4345

Registered under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 Registration No. 29433R

Document produced on 16 October 2020.