

Business Continuity Plan - Coronavirus Position Statement

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1 Status Update as at 29 April 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. On 22 February 2021 we welcomed the Government's roadmap to the gradual relaxation of restrictions and have been reviewing our services with a mind to achieving a rolling alignment.
3. The key change to our service since 12 April is the resumption of non-critical repairs inside properties. We are also planning:
4.
 - to recommence planned maintenance works (non-urgent boiler replacements and kitchen & bathroom installations);
5.
 - the reopening of communal areas in independent living schemes;
6.
 - the gradual reopening of our offices to both employees and the public.
7. The Government's advice is to continue working from home and our offices remain closed to the public. Further details on individual services are provided in the sections below.

2 Background

8. Since the first lockdown, we have been monitoring Government advice closely adjusting our services and the way we work accordingly to maintain the safety of our residents and employees.
9. The Group's business continuity arrangements ensured essential services were maintained right from the start of the pandemic with full services re-establishing as and when Government restrictions were eased and for as long as it was permissible.
10. 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.
11. In line with Government restrictions and incorporating new ways of working, our service delivery remains COVID secure. 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. Whilst our offices remain closed to the public, social distancing measures are in place.

2.1. Support for Residents

12. 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 employee resources as necessary.

13. As local authorities began to roll-out vaccination programmes the Group has also worked to support their efforts. This has been particularly effective with respect to homeless people within our communities.
14. Partnerships with public, private and voluntary agencies, other registered providers and local foodbanks, have enabled us to get food to the most vulnerable members of society. Food parcels have been in high demand across many of our neighbourhoods and we have supported families with both immediate provisions and longer term solutions through volunteer networks and local authorities.
15. Texts and regular welfare calls to tenants, particularly those living in Independent Living schemes, have helped us identify and support their needs with access to food or other essentials, money advice, emotional support and other services. Tenants showing signs of real loneliness have been referred to external agencies for regular calls and befriending services.
16. A directory of community help groups on our website provides tenants with details on support available around food provision, medical supplies, money advice, loneliness support, mental health support, home care, utilities and voluntary community groups.

2.2. Business Critical Functions

17. 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

18. 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.
19. 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.
20. Being mindful that an unintended consequence of the response to the original lockdown restrictions would be a spike in gas safety inspections during April and May 2021, the Group's Asset Management Team has put measures in place to ensure sufficient resources are available to address this.

2.4. Electrical Safety

21. 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.
22. Equally, there has been an increase in no-access/refusals resulting from those who are now working from home and so unable/unwilling to facilitate the turning off of electricity. 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. Repairs

23. Given the Government's roadmap for the gradual relaxation of restrictions, the Group will implement a phased return to provision of a full repairs and maintenance offering. This commenced with the reintroduction of routine repairs on 12 April 2021, followed by planned maintenance activities during May 2021. All other maintenance services continue to be fully operational.
24. Our connect contact service employees continue to work from home and receive calls as normal from residents requesting repairs. We have the appropriate measures and additional steps in place to allow our technicians to work safely. Where repairs are required in properties with people who have symptoms and are self-isolating, we provide additional safety precautions for our technicians.

2.6. Grounds Maintenance

25. We reintroduced our grounds maintenance service in May 2020. To ensure Covid-19 secure working arrangements, 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 employees will spend more time on site to ensure the grounds are brought back up to the usual high standard.

2.7. Caretaking Service

26. 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.

2.8. Letting Properties

27. We continued to let newly built properties handed over by developers from the beginning of the pandemic. In May 2020 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 and focused campaigns to promote Independent Living lettings have also been deployed.

2.9. Rent Collection

28. Rent collection has remained at acceptable levels throughout the pandemic and well within the tolerances/parameters established through our stress testing.
29. 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 employees 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.
30. Where there is evidence that non-payment of rent is not related to the pandemic, the Group is now re-utilising court action, as applicable and in-line with Government guidance.

2.10. Supported Housing Schemes

31. 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.
32. Business continuity plans for our staffed schemes and maintenance services are being reviewed and brought into effect as needed. Employees have also had access to local authority vaccination programmes as these have become available.
33. We have now mobilised most of our outreach services, such as Housing First, to support complex clients with employees following government guidance on social distancing.

2.11. Independent Living and Supported Housing Schemes

34. We have made our independent living schemes COVID secure in line with government guidance and all scheme based employees are now working on site. During the pandemic, dining rooms have remained closed at schemes where we provide a meal with the meal being delivered to the tenants flat instead, as have communal lounges. As the restrictions have changed, we have kept residents up to date via welfare calls and also by letters and posters around the schemes.
35. In line with the Government roadmap, planning is now underway to reinstate both dining rooms and communal lounges in line with relevant restrictions.

2.12. Impact on Workforce

36. The vast majority of employees have worked during each lockdown. The number of employees who have received the Covid-19 vaccine is increasing with very good coverage of those working with vulnerable residents or in other front-line roles.
37. 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.

2.13. Offices

38. 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 post-Christmas lockdown meant the message once again became to work from home where possible and a limited number of employees are working in our offices on a socially distanced basis.
39. Office occupation is currently 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.

40. In practice only skeleton employees are attending the offices at present.
41. 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 areas and providing hand sanitiser stations at entrances to the building and within the employee areas. PPE is also provided for employees along with directional and floor signage to help keep people two metres apart. Our Health and Safety Team has been undertaking a series of compliance audits to ensure agreed controls remain in place and effective.
42. Our offices are open to the public exceptionally and on an appointment only basis where interviews cannot be conducted over the telephone or digitally.
43. As part of the Group's alignment to the stages of the Government's roadmap, consideration is now being given as how best to begin easing restrictions on office usage.
44. To support this:
- Consultation is underway with employees and unions to incorporate an element of home working into our working arrangements in the future, in line with business requirements.
 - The IT team has undertaken a survey to understand device/equipment requirements.
 - An assessment of further office requirements is being undertaken. This includes identification of technological solutions that may assist employee safety (e.g. air filtration/purification).
 - A mechanism by which testing packs will be distributed to employees is currently being designed.

2.14. Communications

45. Communications with tenants are channelled through all media, including letters. Updates are provided on our website, with emails sent to notify residents of important information.
46. Employees are kept informed with FAQs distributed in response to the changing situation and employee queries via their work and home email addresses. These are also published in our employee newsletter and a bespoke knowledgebase.
47. Two employee surveys conducted so far have enabled us to understand how our workforce is feeling about the level of communication received from team members, managers and the company as a whole and how they were adapting to changes in working practices.

2.15. Employee Training

48. All employees were enrolled in an online infection training module in March 2020 and homeworkers were 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 2020 with periodic focus on mental health/wellbeing thereafter.

2.16. Warning Flags

49. We have set up warning flags on our IT systems to highlight where tenants or their household members are shielding or self isolating because of underlying conditions, and for confirmed COVID-19 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 and that the information is regularly reviewed and updated to ensure accuracy.
50. 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. Equally important, employees have also been asked to let the Group know if and when they receive the COVID-19 vaccination. This will prove both a vital control and a reassurance to teams and customers as vaccination levels rise.

2.17. PPE

51. 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

52. All Board Members are being updated regularly on the position.
53. 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.
54. As necessary, the Group has undertaken liaison with Public Health England, who have remained satisfied with the approach being taken.

2.19. Business Continuity

55. 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 fortnightly by video conference.

2.20. Stakeholders

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



Creating homes. Building lives.

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