

# Business Continuity Plan - Coronavirus Position Statement

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## 1 Status Update as at 29 July 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 19 July we welcomed the Government's move to the next step with many restrictions lifting across England and look forward to resuming a more normal way of life.
3. While we continued to provide services with some adjustments throughout the pandemic in line with Government guidance, since April 2021 a large majority of our services returned to where they were pre-pandemic.
4. This includes repairs, which returned to a full service when we resumed carrying out non-critical repairs inside properties. Emergency Repairs, Gas Safety and Electrical Safety checks to homes have continued.
5. Despite restrictions being lifted, Covid-19 has not gone away and it is important that we remain cautious. The safety of residents and our employees continues to be our priority.
6. Our offices and working practices are Covid-secure with risk assessments in place. Our colleagues who have been working from home have now started returning to offices.
7. Customers will also be able to visit us in person from 02 August, when our offices re-open to the public on an appointment only basis.
8. This includes the Housing and Customer Hub based at Cavendish 249, where customers can make an appointment to visit. Tenants living in Miles Platting, can drop by Baker House without the need of booking an appointment.

## 2 Background

9. Since the first lockdown, we have monitored Government advice closely, adjusting our services and the way we work accordingly to maintain the safety of our residents and employees.
10. 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.
11. Our ultimate priorities are to continue to provide services whilst protecting the health and well-being of our workforce.
12. In line with Government guidance 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.

## 2.1. Support for Residents

13. 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.
14. As local authorities continue to roll-out vaccination programmes the Group works to support their efforts. This has been particularly effective with respect to homeless people within our communities.
15. We have engaged in partnerships with public, private and voluntary agencies, other registered providers and local foodbanks, who work 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.
16. Texts and regular welfare calls to tenants during the early stages of the pandemic, 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.
17. 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

18. 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 -19 secure building inspections
- Rent collection, without which we cannot pay for any of the above.

### **2.3. Gas Servicing**

19. Following Gas Safe advice from the beginning of the pandemic, we continue to follow our procedures 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. Our servicing cycle has been operating as normal for nearly a year and has seen sustained improvement in the volume of services completed. over the course of the year Our current performance continues to be aligned to pre COVID-19.
20. 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.
21. The Group's Asset Management Team has put measures in place to ensure sufficient resources are available to address any spikes in gas safety inspections over the summer months.

### **2.4. Electrical Safety**

22. 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.
23. 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**

24. Given the Government's roadmap for the gradual relaxation of restrictions, the Group implemented 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.

25. Our Connect contact service employees continue to 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**

26. We reintroduced our grounds maintenance service in May 2020. To ensure COVID-19 secure working arrangements, we have made some changes to the way we carry out grounds maintenance. As always, our main priority is the health and wellbeing of our customers and employees.
27. Our service is now back to pre-pandemic levels and our team will help ensure the grounds are maintained at the usual high standard.

## **2.7. Caretaking Service**

28. Our caretaking and cleaning services 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**

29. We continued to let newly built properties handed over by developers from the beginning of the pandemic. Since 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. Independent Living and supported lets also recommenced and focused campaigns to promote Independent Living lettings have also been deployed.

## **2.9. Rent Collection**

30. Rent collection has remained at acceptable levels throughout the pandemic and well within the tolerances/parameters established through our stress testing.
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 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.

32. 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

33. 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.
34. 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. Most of our outreach services, such as Housing First, continue to support complex clients with employees following government guidance on social distancing.

## 2.11. Independent Living and Supported Housing Schemes

35. We have made our Independent Living schemes COVID secure in line with government guidance and all scheme based employees are working on site. During the pandemic, communal lounges and dining rooms remained closed. At schemes where we provide a meal, this has been delivered to the resident's flat instead and dining rooms re-opened from 17 May. As the restrictions have changed, we have kept residents up to date via welfare calls and also by letters and posters around the schemes.
36. Our communal lounges re-opened on 17 May on an appointment only basis. **We are now beginning to reopen lounges for free access from 02 August**, on a scheme by scheme basis once **COVID secure reviews** are completed. Additional cleaning materials and information will be provided for residents on the use of these facilities going forward including wiping down surfaces after using the lounges. Residents are encouraged to observe a safe distance and be respectful to other residents particularly when inviting external visitors into their schemes. However, this is not something we can enforce as we have no legal powers to do so and our schemes are not staffed 24/7.

## 2.12. Impact on Workforce

37. 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. The Group continues to work with employees and encourage the take up of the vaccinations programme.

38. Our homeworking policy was updated. Following consultation with employees and unions, we have incorporated an element of home working into our future working arrangements. From August 2021, approved office-based employees are able to spend up to 50% of their time home working.

### 2.13. Offices

39. With the Government's move to Step 4 out of lockdown, people are no longer instructed to work from home if they can. The guidance is that employers plan a gradual return to workplaces over the summer.
40. Our offices remain COVID secure enabling employees to work safely. Measures include (not an exclusive list):
- screens on reception and in the interview rooms
  - reduced seating in reception areas
  - max occupancy limits in meeting rooms, kitchen areas and toilets
  - allocated desks and seating with a clear desk policy
  - enhanced cleaning
  - hand sanitiser stations at entrances to the building and employee areas
  - air purifiers/filters in air conditioned office spaces
  - signing in and out process.
41. PPE is also provided for employees along with signage instructions throughout our buildings to help ensure employees continue to keep a safe distance and adhere to our Health and Safety guidelines. Our Health and Safety Team continues to undertake compliance audits to ensure agreed controls remain in place and effective.
42. Employees are encouraged to complete lateral flow tests the day before they attend the office. Any employees feeling unwell are instructed to stay at home and if they show coronavirus symptoms to get tested and follow government guidelines. Employees testing positive for coronavirus need to report it to the Group's sickness line.
43. The return to the offices has been well received with colleagues working with us to follow the guidance and measures we have in place. Employees returned to working in the offices one day per week from Monday 19 July. We are continuing with our plans to start the new working arrangements from Monday 2 August 2021. Our capacity levels will still be 50% or lower.
44. Our offices are open to the public on an appointment only basis with the exception of Baker House, Miles Platting where customers can drop in without the need for an appointment.



## **2.14. Communications**

- 45. Communications during this time continues to be vital for residents and colleagues, with clear and consistent updates and information. These are channelled through a range of media, including across our websites, as well as letters and emails sent to notify residents of important information. Updates on the Government guidelines, information from partners and local authorities and general advice including around the vaccination programme, has been shared across our social media platforms.
- 46. Employees are kept updated with FAQs distributed in response to the changing situation and any further employee queries sent via their work email addresses and intranet. These are also published in our employee newsletter as well as a bespoke knowledgebase which is easily accessible.
- 47. Employee surveys 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, confirmed COVID-19 cases and COVID-19 cases resulting in the death of a resident. 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 continue to utilise a track and trace system set up 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, safe 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. 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. As necessary, the Group has undertaken liaison with Public Health England, who have remained satisfied with the approach being taken.

## **2.19. Business Continuity**

53. 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**

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



## Creating homes. Building lives.

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