

Coronavirus – our response and current priorities

Briefing for housing associations

24 March 2020

Summary

This briefing sets out housing associations' response to the coronavirus outbreak, and what more support is needed for residents and housing associations. Housing associations are working closely with local government and other partners to support people and communities. Right now, they are:

- **Keeping residents safe** by ensuring critical safety functions can continue.
- **Protecting residents' income and livelihoods** by halting evictions for anyone with rent arrears caused by the crisis, and putting in place extensive support for everyone affected.
- **Keeping vital services running**, including care and support schemes to protect the most vulnerable and ease pressure on the NHS.
- **Supporting communities** to come together to address the crisis, and helping suppliers and contractors to continue their important work.

We welcome the vital steps the government has taken so far to support individuals and businesses. To further help residents, we're working with the government on a range of critical issues, including:

- Ensuring the benefits system smoothly supports everyone affected by the crisis to carry on paying their rent and living costs in full.
- Seeking urgent clarity that certain housing association staff are considered essential workers for the purposes of school closures and travel restrictions – including roles that keep homes safe, provide care to elderly and disabled people

and frontline support services for people with complex needs.

- Ensuring vital care, support and other services can continue to operate, with access to personal protective equipment and staff.

These are our priorities in the coming days and weeks, but in the longer term we will work closely with the government on how housing associations can support communities and the economy to recover, including by continuing to invest in new and existing homes.

Introduction

Housing associations are working closely with residents, local government, the NHS and others to respond to the coronavirus crisis. We welcome the vital steps the government has taken so far to support individuals and businesses.

Housing associations' priorities over the following days and weeks are:

1. Keeping residents safe
2. Protecting resident incomes and livelihoods
3. Sustaining critical services
4. Supporting communities and recovery

This briefing provides further details on these four priorities, outlining what housing associations are doing, and what we need from the government to support this.

1. Keeping people safe

Housing associations' first priority remains keeping residents, employees and communities safe.

What housing associations are doing

- Putting in place extensive contingency plans to ensure critical functions can continue – for example, waking watches in high rise buildings, vital remediation works and emergency repairs.
- Ensuring that critical safety functions can be fulfilled without exposing employees or residents to the risk of contracting coronavirus – for example, calling ahead to every resident, sourcing and distributing protective

equipment, and rescheduling appointments.

- Taking extra steps to protect residents who are self-isolating if appointments have to be delayed – for example, by issuing carbon monoxide alarms.
- Supporting contractors and suppliers where possible to continue critical functions, including paying small suppliers quicker where necessary to protect supply chains.
- Working in partnership with other housing associations to explore the possibility of pooling resources across operative teams.

What we need from the government

- Agreement that waking watches, emergency repairs and remediation work are critical safety functions and helping ensure they can be delivered by:
 - Designating these roles as key workers for the purposes of school closures, and essential workers for the purposes of travel restrictions.
 - Helping coordinate continuity of delivery should they be severely impacted by illness or isolation.
- Support to make risk-based decisions on how to protect both residents and staff when planning statutory safety checks or emergency repairs when a resident is self-isolating. We are in urgent conversations with the regulator and MHCLG, pushing for clarity or new guidance on this.
- Help coordinating the supply of personal protective equipment and sanitisers to ensure access for organisations that require it for safety-critical work.

2. Protecting resident incomes and livelihoods

Housing associations are charitable organisations with a strong record of supporting tenants and residents through difficult times. They are redoubling these efforts in the current crisis. We welcome the unprecedented measures the government is taking to support incomes.

What housing associations are doing

- Committing not to evict anyone for rent arrears acquired as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

- Putting in place extensive support to help residents manage falls in income – for example, by quickly claiming all the benefits they’re entitled to.
- Setting money aside to support residents via hardship and charitable funds.
- Prioritising staff resources so that claims continue to be verified on time.
- Treating people with compassion and understanding – for example, by deferring rent payments where needed, including during the five-week wait for Universal Credit.
- Providing support for older or vulnerable residents – for example, by phoning every resident to assess need in the event of self-isolation, and using staff and volunteers to help by funding or linking with other local charities and coordinating volunteers.
- Protecting their own employees from the impact of the crisis by providing additional sick pay, paid leave and other support, including to contractors.

What we need from the government

People who experience a sudden fall in income will rely on the benefits system to meet their immediate living costs. In addition, now that schools have closed, families already on very low incomes will see significant new financial pressure. We also need to help people living alone to stay safe rather than working due to financial pressures.

The government should strengthen the benefit system so that people are able to stay safe and meet daily costs. **Therefore, for the duration of this crisis, we need a system that covers housing costs in full**, which means that the DWP should:

- Launch a large-scale publicity campaign to make sure people claim what they are entitled to as soon as possible.
- Offer targeted help for families by suspending the household benefit cap.
- Make sure people have enough to live on week-to-week at the start of the claim by making sure people know about getting an advance.
- Significantly ease the conditionality, sanctions and backdating rules for people claiming Universal Credit to ensure that everyone is able to meet their costs.

- Provide significant additional funding for local authorities to offer Council Tax Support and Discretionary Housing Payments.
- **Make changes to the administration of Universal Credit – to help speed up the process, protect residents, and free up housing association staff time to concentrate on helping residents – by:**
 - Giving all new Universal Credit claimants the choice to make a direct payment from their benefit to their landlord. This will help people to budget month-to-month. Landlords need to be able to keep track of these payments and the DWP should press ahead with the roll-out of the new payment system for landlords.
 - Improving the Landlord Portal to allow information flow between the DWP and social landlords. This will reduce DWP staff time, help social landlords support vulnerable residents and reduce fraud.
 - Taking a more risk-based approach to verification around change of circumstances to drastically reduce the burden of administration for housing associations and free up staff time.
 - Communicating with landlords about changes to the Universal Credit system, so they can support residents to make and manage claims.

3. Sustaining critical services

Housing associations support older and vulnerable residents through a huge range of supported and sheltered housing schemes, hostels, and outreach programmes. These services will be more vital than ever to help people through the coronavirus crisis and ease the burden on the NHS, but they are extremely challenging to deliver with large numbers of staff unavailable for work.

What housing associations are doing

- Planning carefully for how to keep vital supported and sheltered housing services running – including homelessness hostels, domestic violence refuges, and specialist housing for older people.
- Working closely with national and local government to provide emergency support to rough sleepers.
- Facilitating timely hospital discharge and reducing pressure on the NHS.

What we need from the government

- Ensure that essential frontline staff providing care to elderly people or support services for people with complex needs in sheltered and supported housing settings are designated key workers for the purposes of school closures, and essential workers for the purposes of travel restrictions.
- Commit to helping meet the significant additional costs facing some supported housing providers as they strive to keep services running.
- Grant funding to enable housing associations to buy new or existing market homes and convert them to social rent for homeless families living in temporary accommodation, sustaining demand in the housing market.

4. Supporting communities and recovery

Housing associations are major social and economic anchor institutions in many communities, supporting community groups, small businesses, contractors and supply chains. They also built a quarter of all new homes last year including almost all affordable homes.

In the short term our role will be to support local partners and communities wherever possible. Keeping development sites open at all will be a real challenge. But in the longer term we can work with the government to help communities and the economy recover. Some early commitments around this could include:

- Flexibility from Homes England and the GLA on starts and completions deadlines given the current uncertainty.
- Funding to convert new market sale and shared ownership homes to rented homes, to help prevent homelessness and ensure that empty homes are put to good use.
- Streamlined planning rules and decision making so new developments can quickly get underway when restrictions ease.