

Housing chief executive COVID-19 WhatsApp digest

First report 18th March 2020, updated Tuesday 24th March at 17:45

Below is the first summary of the housing chief executive WhatsApp group discussion, organised by topics.

If you're interested to join the WhatsApp group, which is open to all housing CEOs, please email: james.tickell@campbelltickell.com or greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com

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1. Work arrangements and staff

- Flexibility is key! Works both ways.
- Mental health and wellbeing of staff (and customers) essential right now; lots of thought going into this (e.g. wellbeing advisors, wellbeing buddies, virtual lunch and brews).
- Communication with board/colleagues and regular updates; suggestion of morning phone 'huddle' for executive team – outcome communicated to colleagues; daily manager-colleague catchups.
- All orgs working from home (WFH) in some respect; some entire workforce, others splitting teams on rotation; home care can't work from home (it's in the name); now very few with any in office and then only bare minimum essential.
- Many redeploying staff to cover essential roles and/or new roles looking out for vulnerable and elderly residents; redeploying staff to welfare and support options if limited by home working options; reduced rotas so only fraction working at any time.
- Issue around approach to sickness and absence; many treating COVID differently and not requiring usual proof/not setting same limits; paying sick leave to those on probation; parents needing to look after children – can they take on a WFH role? Borrowed holiday/loans?; varying pay/duration arrangements; will need to keep under review; some asking staff to take unpaid leave where flexible working can't be arranged around childcare, however there is view this is harsh; others say partial family leave and after that unpaid—under review.

- Checking with over 70s if they want to continue working (repairs).
- Suspension of pay awards? Most say 'no', as needed for morale; some giving bonus for 'extra mile' response to COVID-19.
- When looking at employees in high risk groups, some include those with family members in those groups, others don't.
- Challenge around online capacity; suggestion to go for double what's needed; school closures and childcare responsibilities may be useful in terms of informal shift patterns and reduced load on servers.
- Move to ask staff what they can offer/bring to the table in terms of things always on their radar but never had time to work on previously.
- Being approached for work by those laid off in hospitality sector.
- Staff being asked to take annual leave for part of isolation to mitigate impact; some asking staff to take 25% annual leave in first quarter to avoid backlog of leave taken coinciding with backlog of work.
- Uncertainty around designation of 'key workers'; decision deferred to schools; some encouraging care related staff to go for key worker status to provide crucial care and support as and when; care and support (C&S) provider drafting letters to schools to position workers as key in order to continue sending children to schools and working as normal; since address to the nation much stricter understanding of which workers are actually 'key'—general position seems emergency repairs, C&S and compliance.
- Agile working can only go so far, organisations will be tested even more as staff/residents/family members become unwell.

2. Financing

- Move to adjust budgets last minute.
- G15 pushing HA sector to be part of fiscal stimulus package.
- Rebuilding business plans with various outcomes tested.
- Stress testing for pandemic, inclusion of rent holiday option.
- Move to increase cash holdings.
- Keeping log of costs in case of govt help at some point; some using COVID monitoring codes within system to track impact of rent arrears.
- Possible delays to year end.
- Question of postponing next rent increase; most say no, but looking to support residents through flexible approaches.

- Some tenants expecting/demanding a rent holiday – possible arrears issue down the line.
- Keeping an eye on sales – too early to discern trend.

3. Property and development

- All but essential repairs cancelled in many cases; some keeping repairs team working on non-contact externals; H&S testing and repairs, fire safety programmes continued – to keep under review; PPE issue (see below) may bring all repairs to halt anyway; difficult to adapt to continuously changing stages of lockdown—daily reviews; concern around how sustainable this is for a period of 3-6 months.
- Issues around gas servicing and compliance; some refused entry by residents; need more PPE equipment for staff; need clarity from regulator; full compliance not an option—prioritisation and compromise.
- Impossible to source PPE – gloves, masks, sanitiser etc – price gouging by some suppliers.
- Some local contractors have laid off all staff—concern they won't be there in future when they'll be needed again—looking for external works to keep them busy and employed.
- Contractors refusing to enter properties unless residents have been self-isolating for 14 days.
- Opportunity to clear voids; voids works suspended by many (non-essential); others using voids for homeless.
- Issues sourcing materials for repairs teams as suppliers have shut; need to pressure gov to allow them to stay open.
- Potential issue with waste and collection, especially over warmer months; looking to increase bin provision.
- Talking to housebuilders and contractors about plans to take a view on development and investment programmes – some sites now closed, others open.

4. Other operational issues

- Rents and evictions avoided; not publicising but not evicting for COVID-related arrears; need clear info regarding Universal Credit (UC); rent holidays tricky unless government underwrites; encouraging people to pay where they can; getting messaging tone right will be key—focus on communication and engagement.
- Some residents expecting/demanding rent holidays.

- What counts as essential services in case of lockdown? Current guidance not seen as comprehensive/useful.
- Queries around commercial properties; some told theirs (pubs, shops) not to worry; others working on case by case, will tolerate some arrears; others looking at rent holidays.
- Some suspension of lettings/viewings, particularly in older people schemes, some pushback from councils; delaying handover for Extra Care schemes; others introduced safe distance policy in viewings.
- Move to all allocations coming from homelessness.
- Provision of emergency accommodation for healthcare workers.
- Issue around managing disputes in time of social distancing; some working with police directly.
- Some reports of increased anti-social behaviour and/or domestic violence.
- Communications with customers to let them know we're still here, and staff to let them know what's going on.

5. Vulnerable residents

- Care homes in lockdown (visitors banned); question about closing common rooms in sheltered schemes – some since decided to lock, some still open.
- Creating records of elderly/vulnerable residents; issue about how to provide them the support they need; access to food particularly.
- Helping partner LAs with resilience plans around vulnerable people.
- MHCLG looking for register of vulnerable people; lack of clarity around definition of 'vulnerable'.
- Need protocol for dealing with emergency repairs in households with vulnerable residents.
- Teams redeployed to help in community, e.g. help pharmacies with deliveries.

6. Governance and leadership

- Asking Boards to trust executive team; some issues with Board understanding the impact of the past week.
- Regular check-ins; others holding weekly briefings; suggestion to keep daily decision-log as decisions made so quickly, then sharing with Chair and Vice Chair weekly.

- Operations taking precedence over governance.
- Looking for regulator clarity; seeking open dialogue with regulator; drive to draw up contingency plans across sector to retain standards; NHF lobbying; co-regulation requires self-reporting; NI regulator has acknowledged slippage but asked associations to record and track decisions.
- Many have run virtual Board meetings with success; conversations more focused; Chairs need support; ask questions like 'does anyone disagree?'; use chat facility so people can indicate they wish to speak; some asking for questions in advance.
- Move to revise Standing Orders to delegate certain powers to smaller group of Board and/or CEO and Dir Ops in extremis.
- Changing nature of leadership challenge – how to address?
- Executive team keeping end of week diary to capture learning.

7. Looking forward/innovation

- Possibility of procuring a single legal commission together, probably via NHF to advise on wicked issues.
- Advanced tech for remote working of different kinds; Moving away from old-style office bases.
- Reduction in business travel.
- Transformed NHS and social care; more investment in healthcare.
- Thinking about how to support people who are lonely and isolated.
- Greater appetite for pooled resources between HAs and LAs; joined up thinking.
- Community more important.
- Flexibility and collaboration.
- Solidarity between social landlords vital – a time for sharing and mutual exchange.
- Lower operating costs; new prioritisation of services.

END