

# Housing chief executive COVID-19 WhatsApp digest

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*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](mailto:james.tickell@campbelltickell.com) or [greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com](mailto:greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com)*

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## 1. Work arrangements and staff

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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**