

Repairs and maintenance services

(updated 01 April)



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

Repairs services are adapting to limitations that have been put in place as a result of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

Following the UK Government's announcement of stricter measures to ensure that nobody leaves their home for anything other than essential food or medicine, one form of exercise a day, and/or to travel to work if absolutely necessary, there will be increased access issues for emergency repairs and gas and fire safety checks.

Priorities will change as available resources reduce, but landlords will be keen to keep essential services running as normal as possible.

Under new [UK Government](#) guidelines, landlords have been asked to suspend non-urgent repairs appointments and to enable social distancing to reduce any further spread of the virus; only emergency lighting, plumbing and gas works are to go ahead, to prevent harmful risks to customers and stock.

The Scottish Government has [advised social landlords](#) to carry out emergency repairs where possible, bearing in mind guidance on hygiene and social distancing. Failures to deliver any services due to Covid-19 should be recorded and any significant instances should be reported to the [Scottish Housing Regulator](#).

Under the current circumstances, when offering an emergency service it is now paramount for landlords to assess how best customers are communicated with, how triage is used in response to a reported emergency repair where a person may have Covid-19 symptoms, and how social distancing is practiced in a consistent and effective way to protect both staff and customers.

Repairs and maintenance engineers working in the properties of customers who are self-isolating or vulnerable should follow the latest advice from the UK Government or devolved administration in your area.

We have been talking to housing providers about what they are doing, and have collated the following things for you to consider:

1. Keep yourself and customers safe.

- Ask the customer whether they are displaying symptoms of Covid-19 and then make an informed decision as to whether the repair is an emergency or can wait for now.
- Make an informed decision as to which engineer is best placed to attend a property that states symptoms of Covid-19; if an engineer is [classed as vulnerable or high-risk](#) through medical conditions, for example diabetes, they should not be attending this particular property.
- Conduct dynamic risk assessments.
- Wear personal protective equipment.
- Wash/sanitise your hands upon entering and leaving a property.

Guidance for:

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland

COVID-19
GOOD PRACTICE #3

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2. Emergency repairs:

- Consider redefining what an emergency repair is now and make this easy to access and read for customers. Clearly defining what constitutes an emergency during the pandemic should help save time and resources.
- Encourage the use of video and/or photographs of the reported repair, to assess and confirm the severity without the need to visit the property for a pre-visit.
- Ask the customer to confirm whether they are self-isolating due to showing symptoms of Covid-19 and get this in writing for documentation.
- If a customer is self-isolating and showing symptoms and does not want to allow you access to their home due to fear of contact, you could ask them to open their property to you and ask them to stay in another room or the garden if they have one; you may want to reinforce the message that this is a repair that poses significant health risks if not carried out. You may also wish to inform them of your own safety measures such as personal protective equipment (PPE) dust sheets and cleaning products, for extra reassurance.
- If a customer is not self-isolating but requires an emergency repair, it may be helpful to advise the customer that you will be wearing PPE and would appreciate if they were able to remain in a separate room while you access the property. Reassure the customer that this is a precautionary measure and is in line with the most recent Government guidelines, This could help ease anxiety.
- Continue to review your tenant communication systems and record what has been done and any responses from tenants.

3. If repairs are non-urgent:

- Keep an open and honest dialogue with customers and contact them to let them know that their repair has been, or is due to be, scheduled for a future date in order to keep them safe. Make clear to the customer that their rescheduled date which will be clarified with them as soon as possible. Document the

reasons you cannot carry out the work at this stage.

- Start to plan for how you will deal with backlog of responsive repairs when services return to a steady state.

4. Gas and fire safety checks

- Many organisations are still aiming to continue with gas servicing as near to normal as possible, but are now focusing on the highest risks. If you anticipate difficulties in gaining access as the situation continues to escalate, the [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#) in England have advised that you have the flexibility to carry out annual gas safety checks two months before the deadline date. It is expected that the two-month period to carry out annual gas safety checks should provide adequate resilience in most situations. The HSE is currently seeking guidance from Cabinet Office on what gas engineering services and scenarios are considered 'essential' for the next 3 weeks; for example, attending emergency breakdown, versus installing a new appliance.
- It is now encouraged to arrange your annual gas safety checks as early as possible, to minimise instances where appointments may be missed due to a tenant in self-isolation or gas engineers being unavailable.
- Consider the use of a date-based risk assessment; if the resident is refusing access due to self-isolation or concerns over the new stricter guidelines, arrange to call them back in one week, bearing in mind that national guidelines and developments are happening daily, and arrange a new appointment if all is okay to do so. If the resident states that they have Covid-19, the same would apply here except the timescale for a call and new appointment would be 14 days.
- Some organisations operate a ten-to-twelve-month gas servicing programme and have reported that they are proactively looking at which properties with tenants aged 70+ will be in the programme over the next 12 weeks and are targeting these as a priority.
- Make sure that your Board is kept up to date on the current situation on your gas safety

compliance, any risks in relation to non-compliance and the mitigating steps you are taking to overcome them.

- Northern Ireland await further guidance from the Department at this stage and we will update you as and when this is communicated. Meanwhile, The Northern Ireland Housing Executive have issued some helpful advice that can be found at [here](#).

5. Legal and regulatory responsibilities

- Organisations are expected to meet all applicable statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of the occupants in their homes, however we know that many providers have decided to put non-urgent repairs on hold for the time being; this may cause concern for landlords regarding their compliance.
- In England, [The Regulator for Social Housing has issued a statement](#) reminding providers that they are expected to communicate in a timely manner with the regulator on material issues that relate to non-compliance or potential non-compliance within the regulatory standards. Where providers believe tenant safety is threatened or viability is under strain, they should contact the RSH immediately, and specifically they will expect providers to notify them when:
 - o either as a result of access issues, or a shortage of staff, you are unable to deliver a minimum service to your tenants. For example, if you are unable to complete emergency repairs or statutory health and safety requirements, and a material backlog of outstanding repairs and safety checks are building up;
 - o a shortage of staff means that safe levels of staffing cannot be maintained in care, supported or vulnerable people's accommodation; or
 - o danger to tenants is identified and cannot be rectified within reasonable timescales.

- We want to reiterate that it is very important to closely monitor on a daily basis and clearly record any issues that you are facing in carrying out essential services as a result of Covid-19.
- [The regulator in Wales has written to Housing Associations](#) to make it clear that it's focus at the current time will be on the impact of Coronavirus. The regulator outlined that primarily, this will be limited to the safety of tenants and service users and ongoing financial resilience and viability. The regulator has made it clear that the team must be informed of any significant changes to service provision due to the pandemic and any compliance risks relating to health and safety that have been identified.
- [The Scottish Housing Regulator](#) has asked staff to record any situations where they have been unable to provide a service because of Covid-19 and to report any significant service disruptions. It has also postponed other regulatory activities to allow social landlords to focus resources on dealing with Covid-19.
- It is important to re-visit and examine your contractual rights and obligations at this stage
- **In the event you are completely unable to gain access to a property due to self-isolating concerns, it is advised that you document and record all of the reasonable steps that you made in an attempt to carry out the work which will comply with law.** Be sure to document:
 1. All details of communication with the customer including dates, times, method of communication, and outcome.
 2. Details of any attempt to gain access and reasons for refusals.
 3. Plans in place to re-visit this property.
 4. Communicated with elected members governing Boards.

We will be monitoring the situation in each nation as it develops and offering advice on what we know so far. It is helpful for us to understand the measures that your organisation may be putting in place, so please get in touch via our email address: policy.practice@cih.org