

Supporting tenants affected by COVID-19 who have rent arrears

(10 December, 2020)



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the UK government has advised people to stay at home or work from home wherever possible, in order to restrict the spread of the virus. These measures will have a detrimental impact on employment, wages and the income of people who are self-employed. As well as changes to universal credit, emergency legislation limits landlords' ability to evict tenants during the crisis period (see our [briefing on the 'Coronavirus Act 2020 and protection from eviction'](#)).

Many people in rented accommodation are far less likely to have built up an emergency savings fund to cover their costs during this time and others will have employment contracts, such as zero-hour contracts, that leave them in a vulnerable position and some are likely to lose their jobs. This means they will have either limited or no income.

We have put together a good practice guide based on what housing providers across the UK are doing to engage with their tenants who are experiencing financial hardship during this challenging time.

Talk to tenants

Tenants may struggle financially if they:

- Have coronavirus, or they are following guidance to stay at home
- Have lost their job
- Are self-employed and can't get work
- Can't work because their workplace has closed

Tenants will be feeling worried during this difficult time. Some may be reluctant to speak to you due to fear of losing their home. Aim to proactively identify customers whose income might be affected by COVID 19 and contact them immediately.

- Consider drawing together a specialist income and money advice team to offer the right advice and support
- Consider doing an audit to identify all the people in your organisation who have the right knowledge and skills – this will help to increase capacity in your income management team
- Consider involving other internal teams to ensure there are enough resources to deal with tenant queries. Use your contact centre staff to make that initial contact with those who could be affected, advising tenants what to do and setting up payment plans
- Make sure there is a clear guidance about what teams need to discuss and provide links to support networks. Think about creating a frequently asked questions resource for people to refer to.

When speaking to tenants on any issues:

- Urge them to contact you if they are having symptoms or self-isolating and will find it difficult to pay their rent
- Take the opportunity to update their contact details including information on their next of kin details if you do not have these details already.

Guidance for:

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland

COVID-19
GOOD PRACTICE

#CV19HOUSING

Help tenants claim the right benefits

Support your tenants to maximise their income and claim the right benefits:

- 'Entitled' to is one of the leading online benefit calculators to help people determine what they can claim www.entitledto.co.uk
- Turn2us also provides information on claiming benefits and you can also access charitable trust funds to support tenants <https://benefits-calculator.turn2us.org.uk/AboutYou>
- Universal credit have a [dedicated page](#) providing detailed information on coronavirus and claiming benefits understanding universal credit
- CIH has put together a factsheet on what you know about welfare benefits to support housing professionals. www.cih.org/resources/PDF/Policy%20free%20download%20pdfs/CV19_Welfare_benefits.pdf

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has issued new guidance, which covers changes to jobcentre appointments, special arrangements for people already claiming benefits, advice for people making new claims for benefits and information for self-employed people. www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-support-for-employees-benefit-claimants-and-businesses

Advice about benefits and employment rights in Scotland www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/health/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you/

Northern Ireland Department for Communities latest guidance: www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-service-updates.

Reassure your tenants you won't evict them

Your tenants will be worried during this challenging time so it's important to reassure them that you won't be taking any legal action against them. You should:

- Ensure staff remain tenant-focused and empower them to use their discretion

- Suspend any legal action, any reminder letters and court summonses.

Medway Council has suspended issuing reminders, final notices and court summonses. Bailiff action is also on hold for current arrears cases.

Other housing providers such as Solihull Community Housing, Total Housing, Broadland Housing Group, Stockport Homes Group and Metropolitan Thames Valley have all shown their commitment not to commencing any new proceedings or evictions against anyone in arrears or financial hardship caused by COVID-19 for three months.

- Refer tenants to your inhouse tenancy support services or specialist money advice teams who can offer extensive financial help and support, including help with claiming benefits, providing advice on budgeting, bills, debts and maximising income. (See useful links listed below)

Walsall Housing Group (WHG) is reassuring its tenants that no-one will lose their home as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. They have expert money advisors available to support people during this time. www.whg.uk.com/news/latest-news/coronavirus-covid-19-information-and-updates-for-customers/

- If housing benefit or universal credit doesn't cover all of a tenant's rent, they may be able to get a discretionary housing payment (DHP). www.gov.uk/government/publications/claiming-discretionary-housing-payments
- Consider bringing forward rent-free weeks if these are offered later in the year. Make an agreement with your tenants that you will give them the rent-free weeks now because of the current situation and they are to make rent payments during the actual rent-free weeks.

Some local authorities have set up an additional 'discretionary rental hardship fund' to help tenants who are struggling to pay their rent. They are also looking at bringing their 'rent free' weeks forward to April.

Have a flexible approach when encouraging rent payment

Work with your tenants to establish an affordable repayment plan which reflects their individual circumstances and increases as their circumstances improve.

Black Country Housing Group has changed its arrears policy to give greater discretion to staff in agreeing payment plans. It has paused all evictions for non-payment of rent for three months. It has also produced a letter about changes to its services as well as and reassuring tenants no evictions will be carried out and offering them support. www.bchg.co.uk/media/1360/hfop-update-25320-2-00000002.pdf

They are also making daily welfare calls to their tenants and keeping a record of all those impacted by COVID19. This is allowing them to responsively resource where the issues are. They are measuring their performance weekly and continuing to hear the customer voice through an adapted survey, which includes emotional sentiment section. By doing this they are getting a better understanding of their customer needs and able to identify the gaps which they can fill.

If tenants pay rent by cash at a Pay Point, ask them to consider an alternative way to pay such as direct debit, card payment or online payment, so that they can follow government advice about staying at home and maintaining social distance.

Make information available online

You won't be able to visit your tenants and they won't be able to come into the office. Telephone, text messages and email will be the main safe ways to communicate with them.

Provide up to date information online:

- Dedicate a page with useful information for your tenants, giving clear messages on:
 - how you are changing your approach to support them

- what to do if they are struggling to pay rent
- how they can apply for benefits
- where to go for support
- Places to get help and support including in-house or external financial support services, details of local food banks if they are struggling with food, gas, electric, council tax and water
- Consider developing a frequently asked question information sheet for tenants with links to other support networks such as how to claim benefits, seeking money advice so people can self-access information and advice.

Sovereign Housing Association has put together information on its website advising tenants what they need to do if they can't pay rent. It has also created a top 10 tips and benefits and coronavirus. <https://my.sovereign.org.uk/articles/general-articles/covid-19>

Grand Union has put detailed information on its website with lots of links for tenants to access www.guhg.co.uk/coronavirus/

Moray Council has produced a short guide for tenants facing rent or financial challenges reassuring their tenants that they will suspending any legal action and that frontline officers will work with them offering financial advice. www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_132517.html

- Think about tenants whose first language isn't English. If you can, produce information in the main community languages giving clear guidance on what they need to do if their income is affected by COVID 19 and how they can access support. Make this information available online.

Offer support with other finances

Tenants may need your support with their priority bills and other finances. Make sure they know how to access this if it's something you provide internally or else signpost them to other local agencies. It's important to check that local services are still operating and accessible at this

time before referring people there. Ensure this support is available online and by telephone.

Council tax

See our briefing on welfare benefits www.cih.org/resources/PDF/Policy%20free%20download%20pdfs/CV19_Welfare_benefits.pdf

Government has allocated a £500 million hardship fund, which will provide council tax relief to vulnerable people and households to help those affected most by coronavirus.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/council-tax-covid-19-hardship-fund-2020-to-2021-guidance

Food

Some of your tenants may be struggling to buy food due to financial hardship. Also, those self-isolating might need help with shopping and picking up medication. Refer them to local food banks and provide them with details of local support network groups. Again, check that these services are still operating at this time. Make this information available online, on your letters/leaflets, emails and text messages.

The Trussell Trust operates a network of foodbanks across the UK. www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/

Priority bills such as gas, electric and water

Different energy suppliers will have their own ways of dealing with pre-payment meters. People with underlying health conditions should contact their energy supplier to let them know. They will add them to their Priority Service Register, which will give them extra support should they need it. If they are self-isolating, support them to contact their energy company as soon as they become aware of an issue to do with their pre-payment meter, as some of the solutions can take a few days.

Advice on energy related issues can also be found at:

www.ofgem.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-and-your-energy-supply

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/energy/energy-supply/get-help-paying-your-bills/you-cant-afford-to-top-up-your-prepayment-meter/

www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/2020/03/energy-firms-move-to-help-customers-unable-to-top-up-due-to-coro/

www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/2020/03/uk-coronavirus-help-and-your-rights/

Help with other debts

If your organisation doesn't have an in-house money advice service, there are other sources of help you can point people to.

The Money Advice Service offers advice and guides to help people manage their finances. They have tools and calculators to help keep track and plan ahead and also offer support over the phone and online.

www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/articles/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you

Step Change offers a free debt advice and counselling service

www.stepchange.org/

Citizens Advice offers free, confidential information and advice to help people with money, legal, consumer and other problems

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

The National Debt Line offers a useful online tool

<https://tools.nationaldebtline.org/dat-reg>