

**Coronavirus information exchange for GWSF members**

Update 5, 25/3/20

Please feel free to get in touch on any of the issues raised below, and where appropriate we’ll share views and information with members, non-attributably.

**Rent shortfalls**

GWSF has written to Cabinet Secretary Aileen Campbell about this issue, as attached at the end of this Update.

**Office closures**

Some varied feedback from members on this from yesterday:

‘We felt after last night’s announcement that the decision was made for us and we had no option but to have all staff work from home from today.  I am discussing with the Management Team this afternoon (by Microsoft teams hopefully!) what arrangements we need to put in place whilst we all work remotely e.g. weekly checks of the office (as part of this checking for any mail and scanning essential mail, assuming that the mail will start to dwindle over the next week or so) responding to requests for assistance from elderly and/or vulnerable tenants e.g. essential shopping; maintaining emergency repairs and gas servicing, etc.’

‘I'm sure we would like to think of ourselves as essential. But for most of us we aren't. Nothing we do is life or death. Other than perhaps housing support staff in sheltered developments and repairs reporting staff. We are closed. Phones are diverted to mobiles and everyone has access to their desktop remotely. This will be the situation for the time being. From home we can: Report repairs. Check rent accounts. Do morning calls in sheltered developments. Pay contractors. Pay salaries. Monitor kpi's.’

‘You cannot do emergency repairs from home, nor can you remove all kinds of contact from housing staff like wardens, carers and cleaners from the most vulnerable. That is why it is important that we do get clarity in order that if I need emergency planning childcare for my staff in the above categories I don’t get a guy with a clipboard telling me we cannot get it because some Housing staff are not designated as key workers.’

‘Our office closed last night and from this morning all our office based staff are working remotely with full access to housing systems, phone system etc.  We can video call between each other and we’re exploring ways we can do the same, simply and straightforwardly with customers.  Our in house repairs team is also home based, responding to emergencies only.’

‘Essentially we are all in lock down and coping with the emerging issues – I’ve been in emergency planning mode for two weeks and it’s different daily. My initial concern on this designation was around childcare issues for essential welfare rights staff which wasn’t available. WRO/Housing officers are holding the fort from home and are answering questions about financial assistance and ongoing benefits. This is huge. We’re on emergency only repairs. All our planned works including fire safety measures are on hold and we have 12 properties due off site in 3 weeks unless the SG can sort out what happens with construction staff asap.’

‘We are wrestling with the definition of essential work. We feel that our caretakers are essential as there are serious public health risks in multis if the bins are not rotated and common areas kept clear … both fire risks and vermin. We regularly deal with rat infestations and a fire in a multi if the bin chutes are not kept clear could be serious. We are telling our caretakers they are considered essential but it is challenging because there is no guidance on what is essential.’

**Issues around designation of keyworkers**

From some of the feedback above it is clear that greater clarity would be welcomed on the ‘essential worker’ issue, with the complication being that there are posts such as concierges in multis and emergency repairs staff whose roles are, effectively, very different from those of normal housing staff in the current circumstances. We know some clarity would help associations in their discussions with such staff.

At this point in time, however, no such guidance is expected from the Scottish Government. We now know that currently, the only formal role for the Scottish Government on this issue relates specifically to the question of whose children can still access schools. Our understanding is that local councils have issued their own guidelines on this, and that something further is expected from the SG in the next day or two. We are told that this is quite separate from any other keyworker issue.

There are no SG plans to say anything on any other aspect of keyworkers, at this stage, although we will raise the matter in our daily call-ins with the SG and other bodies. We are aware of a case where one HA worker was stopped by police in Glasgow (on 24th) and asked what they were doing. The HA in question (not a GWSF member) is now issuing letters for certain staff to carry setting out what their role is and why it is essential. If any issue with preventing such movement of essential workers grows, we will raise it immediately with the Scottish Government.

**Gas checks**

Our impression is that things are moving fast on this, and we know that a number of HAs are already being advised that their contractors can no longer carry out gas safety checks, including for void properties. It is becoming a legal duty which may no longer be tenable in the current circumstances, and GWSF has suggested to both the Scottish Government and SHR that they will need to provide guidance/reassurance for landlords on this in the near future.

**April rent increase**

A comment from a member HA:

‘We had a query this morning from someone asking if the rent increase would still be applied, given Bank of England dropping interest rates and the perception that landlords will be receiving help from SG in due course.  Our response is likely to be that because of statutory restrictions amongst other things, the rent increase would still be applied but that we would be looking closely at mitigation measures once we had had a chance to revaluate business plans etc.’

GWSF would very much agree with this position. For a tenant facing serious problems paying their rent, a small % increase is not going to be the make or break factor, but such increases will play a critical role in helping bring in income from those tenants who are in a position to pay it.

**Construction sites**

The First Minister has stated in Parliament that construction sites should close and so we expect this to be affecting a number of member associations now. One member commented:

‘We’ve just had confirmation from XX (developer) that they are shutting down the site. Yes we have prospective tenants lined up and we had discussions about holding these void until things got better as tenants would not be able to move. I had emailed SG yesterday to ask what security we could put in place as the developer is obviously keen to handover – I doubt whether habitation certificates could be obtained. Lock down has really just put this on hold but that’s not my decision and SG colleagues haven’t offered anything more today.’

**Food deliveries**

In response to our raising of this issue earlier this week, we had this response from one HA in Glasgow:

‘Regarding food deliveries a number of our older tenants have been using Wiltshire Farm for home deliveries of prepared meals: attached is the link

[https://www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com/](https://urlsand.esvalabs.com/?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wiltshirefarmfoods.com%2F&e=2f9ae826&h=123728f9&f=y&p=n)

They are taking on new customers from 27 March 2020.’

**GWSF letter to Cab Sec 24/3/20**





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Aileen Campbell MSP [By email]

Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government

Scottish Government

St Andrews House

Edinburgh EH1 3DG

24 March 2020

Dear Ms Campbell

**Financial support for tenants and housing associations**

On behalf of our 65 member associations may we first recognise and thank you and your Scottish Government colleagues for your efforts so far to tackle the impact of Coronavirus. In particular there are elements of the £350m package announced last week which could help some of our members – and their local third sector partners – with the wider support they provide as a community anchor body.

This letter relates more to the core activities of housing associations and, in particular, to the difficulties some tenants will have paying their rent and the subsequent loss of income members will face as they seek to protect people.

At this point our members are doing everything they can to maintain the best possible service levels for tenants. As well as housing and welfare rights staff being available to talk with tenants who have queries or worries, associations are focusing on efforts to ensure urgent and emergency repairs continue to be carried out, and other health and safety issues prioritised (for example, cleaning communal areas in closes to help stop the virus spreading). In some areas, such as Glasgow, where the Council has suspended uplift of bulk items, some members have told us they are trying to fill the gap by doing this with their own staff or contractors.

We know that evictions from arrears related to the Coronavirus crisis will not be progressed. Associations will continue to urge tenants to let them know if they are in difficulty and will work with tenants wherever possible to help them make claims, normally through Universal Credit with all the challenges this entails.

There will, however, be serious financial consequences for associations from both the cessation of evictions and, more significantly, the wider impact of the crisis. The build-up of arrears from not progressing evictions is only one aspect of a much greater impact on social landlords:

* A significant number of tenants who may have had no pre-existing arrears will face difficulty paying their rent because they are no longer earning or, for example, because of additional complexities with claiming Universal Credit.
* Many factored owners will face similar difficulties in paying their monthly fees
* Void properties will increasingly lie empty as landlords and contractors struggle to carry out routine works and visit prospective applicants, and power companies become unable to attend as normal

The UK welfare system must ensure people have enough money to live on, but we know not all our tenants will be able to pay their rent during this crisis, and so all our members are expecting major shortfalls in income over the coming months as they effectively support tenants financially by temporarily absorbing shortfalls of rent. So whilst the detail can be discussed at a later stage, at this point in time the sector very much needs an in-principle commitment from the Scottish Government to explore a mechanism for compensating social landlords for income which is lost as a result of protecting tenants during the crisis and which cannot realistically be recovered.

We very much recognise the sensitivities around messaging on this issue. In particular we know it would not be appropriate to give any impression to tenants that rent does not still have to be paid. An in-principle commitment to explore a mechanism for providing financial support is not something the sector would wish to publicise, but it would be of great comfort at this stage. Without financial support it will be our tenants who will eventually foot the bill through their rent, and we trust that Ministers will agree this cannot be allowed to happen.

Yours sincerely



David Bookbinder

Director