



24 April 2021

Social housing and COVID-19

The pandemic has highlighted the crucial role of social housing. The sector has managed the crisis well but must now find ways to accelerate new build developments to keep pace with demand.

COVID-19 has changed the face of social housing across the UK. It brought into focus the importance of having a home – somewhere to be safe and secure away from the pandemic. It threw the vital role of housing associations into stark relief.

Since April 2020, the Regulator of Social Housing has been surveying the larger social housing providers about the challenges they've been facing, and reporting on it through the Coronavirus Operational Response Survey (CORS). Although the resulting reports are about providers' experiences, they also highlight many common issues for tenants and residents.

Keeping up with COVID-19

The most recent CORS report highlighted the disruption caused by the pandemic to the essential services delivered by social housing providers. Compliance checks for gas, fire and asbestos all took a dive but these have now returned to normal and have been stable since August 2020 despite another long-term lockdown.

Near the beginning of the first lockdown the government wrote to all social housing residents to tell them 'you should have a decent, warm and safe place to live'. What this has meant for residents is that while work was paused at the beginning of the first lockdown, many repairs are now up-to-date.

This follows the introduction of a new charter for social housing residents, which sets out what every resident should expect:

1. To be safe in your home.
2. To know how your landlord is performing, including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account.
3. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly, with access to a strong ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.
4. To be treated with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants.



5. To have your voice heard by your landlord, for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its board. The government will provide access to help, if you want it, for you to learn new skills to ensure your landlord listens.
6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in, with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.
7. To be supported to take your first step to ownership, so it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow.

So how have social housing providers kept to the charter throughout lockdown?

Digital and data

The use of resident data and digital services has been crucial during the pandemic. According to a 2018 Charter Institute for Housing report, 79 percent of housing providers have seen cost efficiencies as the driving fact for digital transformation. GreenSquare housing group calculated that telephone and post costs approximately £10 per use, whereas using digital channels costs approximately 10p.

This has meant that many providers already had digital portals in place. During the pandemic they expanded the use of these portals to help manage their properties and engage directly with tenants through video calls. So the loss of face-to-face interaction hasn't been as detrimental as it might have been. Digital channels are also more efficient, which has been beneficial during a period when staff time has never been more precious.

Social housing providers have made good use of the data they gather. With the right infrastructure in place and data being fed in by residents, analysis methods can predict maintenance scheduling and help both tenants and the social housing organisations predict where the need will be and plan for it.

Delivering more affordable housing

Despite the sector performing well in many ways during the pandemic, the pause on building work has been a setback. Not only has it meant that the sector has fallen behind on targets, but the impact of the pandemic on the poorest in our society has also increased the need for support.

The government has a target of 300,000 new homes per year by 2025, but with social housing providers like L&Q homes seeing a 78% reduction in new housing delivered, achieving this is looking increasingly unlikely. So how do we look beyond the pandemic to solve this issue? What is key is that all housing that is built is seen as long-term as well as affordable, not a quick solution that will need to be rebuilt in 20 years.

Social housing providers are in the same boat and so should consider collaborating. Planning large-scale developments in line with government guidelines, while sharing costs for building materials and construction, could be the solution to both solid and speedy generation.

Illuminations

- A clear social housing charter from central government for residents, upheld by the Regulator of Social Housing, means that residents know what they should expect from their landlords.
- Swapping to digital channels of communication can save money while also protecting businesses and boards from serious unplanned incidents, such as the pandemic.
- To help the production of new social housing for generations to come, social housing companies should support each other and work together for sustainable solutions.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk.