

New plans to get Britain building in coronavirus recovery

- Government to extend planning permission deadlines, saving hundreds of construction projects' permissions from expiring
- Flexible working hours on construction sites to support social distancing, helping people return to work safely
- New changes could speed up the pace of the planning appeal process

New measures to help the construction industry boost building and return to work safely will be introduced this week, Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick MP announced today (22 June 2020).

Planning permission deadlines will be extended, planning appeals will be sped up and builders will be allowed more flexible working hours following agreement with their local council.

Planning permission usually expires after three years if work has not started onsite. Sites with consent that have an expiry date between the start of lockdown and the end of this year will now see their consent extended to 1 April 2021. This will prevent work that has been temporarily disrupted by the pandemic from stopping altogether.

The government estimates that by the end of this month alone, more than 400 residential permissions providing more than 24,000 new homes would have expired. The new measures will help these developments and more resume as the economy recovers.

New measures will also permanently grant the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) the ability to use more than one procedure – written representations, hearings and inquiries – at the same time when dealing with a planning appeal, enabling appeals to happen much faster.

Last year a pilot programme tested this approach and implemented recommendations of the Rosewell Review, which more than halved the time taken for appeal inquiries, from 47 weeks to 23 weeks.

This will also help builders to quickly agree more flexible construction site working hours with their local council for a temporary period. This will make it easier to follow public health guidance onsite and by staggering builders' arrival times, public transport will be less busy and the risk of infection will be reduced.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

Building the homes the country needs is central to the mission of this government and is an important part of our plans to recover from the impact of the coronavirus.

New laws will enable us to speed up the pace of planning appeals and save hundreds of construction sites from being cancelled before they have a chance to get spades in the ground, helping to protect hundreds of thousands of jobs and create many others.

Taken together, these measures will help to keep workers safe and our economy moving as we work together to bounce back from the pandemic.

Today's announcement builds on measures to support the economy and protect the capacity of the construction sector, including:

- Introducing more than £330 billion of loans and guarantees to help firms continue operating
- Deferring self-assessment payments until 2021 – crucial for a sector in which many are self-employed
- Providing households across the country with reassurance such as 3-month mortgage holidays, including for landlords, alongside a ban on tenant evictions which has been extended to 5 months
- Safely reopening the housing market, helping estate agents, conveyancers, removals firms and the wider construction and property industry to return to work while following social distancing guidelines
- Launching a Charter with the Home Builders Federation, helping construction sites reopen in line with health and safety guidance

The government continues to listen to all parts of industry to see what further support may be required.

[Fiona MacGregor speech at Digital Housing Week – 22 June 2020](#)

Introduction

It's indicative of the extent to which the world has changed that we are all participating in this conference online rather than where we would normally be at this time of year, in the conference hall in Manchester – which is currently the Nightingale Hospital.

The word 'unprecedented' can be overused – but these days it is not hyperbole. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted and continues to affect the lives of everyone in the country, and across the world. However, one of the lessons from the pandemic – when we get to the learning lessons stage – has to be the extent to which its impact has been greatest on the most vulnerable and those who may be subject to inequality. There have been differential impacts on older people, our BAME communities and those with underlying

health conditions, groups who may be strongly represented among those the social housing sector serves.

The same is true of the key workers in both the public and private sectors the country so clearly relies on – often low paid, their contribution to our communities and society is often supported through access to affordable housing. One of the first lessons might be that the pandemic has reinforced the core purpose and the value of the social housing sector.

The sector's response

While nothing can, or should, detract from the tragic impacts on so many, in the face of the very significant challenges brought by the pandemic and by lockdown, overall, the sector has responded with agility and focus. In aggregate, how the sector has coped thus far is probably at the upper end of what anyone might have predicted at the outset. Firstly dealing with practicalities – moving overnight to, where staff can, working from home, implementing remote governance arrangements, sourcing PPE or getting accounts signed off.

But what has been most striking was the clear-eyed focus on tenants – safety, lives, livelihoods and welfare. By making sure emergency repairs services were able to be maintained and aiming to keep critical safety inspection programmes going. By redeploying staff to contact and support vulnerable tenants and those accessing the welfare system, often for the first time. By generally seeking new ways to engage tenants in such changed circumstances (maintaining a clear focus on transparency and accountability is something I'll come back to).

Of course, not everything will have gone right in every instance, but it seems clear, and there have been myriad examples, that the sector has acted on its core values of providing an essential service that aims to meet the needs of the tenants, residents and communities it serves, while protecting and supporting their staff, who deliver those front line services. And, following the initial focus on existing tenants and residents, many providers have sought to work with local authority partners to assist in the "Everyone In" initiative to protect rough sleepers, as well as making voids available for those suffering domestic abuse.

Of course you would expect me to say that this may not have been possible without providers having appropriate contingency plans in place. To those who have in the past questioned why the regulator (and I quote) 'keeps banging on about stress testing', I hope that now they can see why. Even if "global pandemic" or "extended country-wide lockdown" may not have specifically featured on anyone's risk register, that ability to act quickly, and demonstrate resilience in the face of significant challenge is testament to the power of asking the "what if" questions.

The regulator's response

I hope you will agree that the regulator has acted with equal agility, flexibility and pragmatism. We acted decisively to ease the regulatory burden

so that providers could focus on front line operations. Pausing IDAs, delaying deadlines for regulatory returns, shifting our focus onto enhanced monitoring of financial viability risks and introducing the Coronavirus Operational Response Survey were all necessary responses to the evolving crisis allowing us to focus our monitoring on key risks and challenges.

A key message from us has been that we are in the territory of identifying where help and support might be needed, and we've had a particular focus on providers with significant care and/or support operations, where some of the risks and challenges of the pandemic have had the potential to be even more acute.

So far the Quarterly Survey monitoring has shown that the sector was in a good place financially at the end of March, although there are further challenges on the horizon as we begin to emerge from lockdown, which I will come back to.

CORS confirms that to date the social housing sector, including local authorities, is continuing to broadly maintain service delivery for emergency repairs and essential health and safety checks. We recognise that even though the lockdown is easing, the operational context remains challenging, and that on some matters, such as gas safety checks, the position may get worse before it gets better. Of course it will be essential to maintain that clear focus on priority health and safety checks and we will continue our CORS monitoring for the time being.

However, while we recognise that achieving full BAU compliance will take time, given how lockdown has impacted operations, that does not mean that we've vacated the field of regulation and everyone has a free pass in all areas. If we see egregious examples of non-compliance, especially in areas not directly affected by the pandemic, we will take regulatory action as normal.

Coming out of lockdown – Risk management in the “new normal”

As the immediate crisis eases, providers are turning their attention to emerging from lockdown. We have seen from the most recent GDP figures and a range of forecasts, the post-pandemic environment will be challenging economically. We know providers are closely monitoring the impact that the end of the furlough scheme might have on unemployment and potentially rent arrears, and, as you begin to catch up on repairs backlogs, how your contractors and supply chains may have been affected.

There is also much discussion about capacity for development and contribution to supply – in the context of significant uncertainty about how the housing market will perform. Providers have already adjusted sales forecasts in the most recent Quarterly Survey. Providers' boards will need to monitor the issue closely, (as will we), and ensure that risk appetite is aligned accordingly and that ambitions can be supported within stress tested business plans. This will be particularly important as providers may be asked to support the recovery through development, something the sector has a good track record of doing supported by a tried and tested financing model that is

well proven – this might not be the time to be overly ambitious in terms of complexity or innovation.

So the range of issues creating uncertainty will impact on how business plans are being revised. In juggling development plans, beginning to re-instate building safety works and beginning to grapple with zero carbon, providers will be firmly back in the territory of how best to balance trade-offs.

Of course we, and you, have been clear that building safety cannot be traded off. A week yesterday, was the third anniversary of the tragic Grenfell Tower fire and in just over two weeks' time the Public Inquiry resumes. And in that context, the Government has confirmed its intention to publish the social housing white paper later this year. This may involve changes in the regulatory framework and an increased focus on the consumer standards. We've said for some time that providers should not wait to focus on areas of their service or their engagement with tenants they need to improve.

As I said earlier, the sector has focussed on front line services to tenants and residents during the pandemic and on reaching out to support tenants.

It goes without saying that your tenants are your most important stakeholders. As lockdown eases, the premium on communication with, and listening to, tenants and residents has never been higher – both on day to day matters, such as risk assessments when accessing peoples' homes – but also on the strategic direction and focus of your business – what services are needed and valued, and how they might best be provided in future.

In the current context, including the challenges highlighted by the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, transparency and accountability to tenants, residents, staff and stakeholders matters more than ever. Maintaining that sharp eyed focus on what matters to tenants is not a one-off – continuing to prioritise and work on it will stand you in good stead to respond to the White Paper when it is published.

Next steps for regulation – What we are talking to our board about

Now that we have passed the peak of the pandemic and the lockdown is easing, we are looking at the next phase of regulatory changes we need to make. We are discussing these with our board, and I make a point of this deliberately. The current crisis has required agility, but that does not negate the need for sound decision-making and good governance.

We will continue to focus on specific operational risks through CORS and conduct our Quarterly Surveys so that we have up to date information on viability risks. However, we need further assurance on the overall position of the sector as we go forward, which we can only get from the annual stability check process. To do that we will need Financial Forecast Returns from providers by the Autumn and are considering 30 September as the date we are likely to aim for. We will confirm the position within the next week to ten days.

We will also need to look at a resumption of In Depth Assessments. So that we

can get the whole programme going again in due course, we will be looking to run some virtual IDAs with a small number of willing providers over the summer. This is not just about ensuring that remote IDAs will work, but also about ensuring that the IDA is tailored to the specific risks of the “new normal” of the pandemic recovery – including how boards are ensuring their organisation can be resilient in the face of on-going challenges.

Of course, risks that pre-date the pandemic period have not gone away. I mentioned tried and tested models earlier. There is often a value in simplicity, and that may be even more true in times of crisis. I would urge you to think carefully about what we know works, and to always question, for example, whether some piece of elaborate financial engineering is necessary.

The pandemic has been, and may continue to be, particularly challenging for care and support providers – an area that we have been monitoring closely. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of resilience in this part of the sector and of having a business model that can weather a range of storms. That may not be achievable if the business model is predicated on generating a set level of profit, or to meet the financial aspirations of those with short-term horizons.

Conclusion

Providers have shown that they have been able to do the right thing by their tenants during the pandemic by keeping essential services going. The sector is also well placed to support the recovery. Whether that is rehousing former rough sleepers who have been brought in during the pandemic or helping to deliver the recovery in home building.

While we are all hopeful that the trajectory of the pandemic continues to be positive, many challenges remain on the horizon, whether managing the recovery phase, delivering on building safety responding to the white paper or facing up to the challenges highlighted by Black Lives Matter.

In a context of many competing demands, stakeholders will have a range of expectations of providers. The challenge for boards will be to make clear, defensible decisions about how they respond to those demands, that have regard to those expectations but are not necessarily led by them. You should own your own narrative about this – one that reflects your purpose and objectives. Keeping your current and future tenants at the heart of that narrative will be key.

PDF, 868KB, 10 pages

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UK locust sprayers arrive in Pakistan to help tackle crises

World news story

20 micro-sprayers from the UK have now arrived in Pakistan and will help immediately to tackle the devastating desert locust swarms



They are the first 20 of 50 sprayers as part of a UK aid package of £1m to support the Government of Pakistan tackle to outbreak, which has been declared a national emergency.

UK funding will ensure:

- 50 sprayers (20 of which have arrived) to be sent to control locusts and help to ensure food security;
- 1,300 PPE kits help ensure surveillance and control operations can continue safely through the coronavirus pandemic;
- 18,000 vulnerable farmers are helped;

The sprayers are from UK-based company, Micron Sprayers Ltd. It has over 50 years of industry experience, and its products are used in over a hundred countries across the globe.

Underlining the close trading relationship between the UK and Pakistan, Micron Sprayers Ltd is also working on a separate agreement to supply 83 sprayers to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in Pakistan. This agreement is not funded by UK aid.

UK aid has given £1 million to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to tackle swarms of locusts up until 30 September 2020, as part of our help support food security in Pakistan.

Dr Christian Turner CMG, British High Commissioner to Pakistan, spoke at a ceremony to hand over the sprayers to the Pakistan Government today. He said:

Make no mistake, this locust outbreak is a big challenge. That is why the UK, through aid to FAO, has worked to ensure these UK-manufactured crop sprayers get to Pakistan as soon as possible.

The High Commissioner to Pakistan handed over the UK sprayers at the ceremony in Islamabad to H.E. Syed Fakhr Imam, Federal Secretary, Mr. Omar Hamid Khan from the Ministry of National Food Security and Research; and Mina Dowlatchahi, Country Representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, alongside DFID Pakistan Director Annabel Gerry,

Note to the editors:

- The desert locust is considered the most harmful migratory pest in the world. Scientists say just a single square kilometre of swarm can contain up to 80 million adults, with the capacity to consume the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people.
- The Pakistan Global Humanitarian response Plan (GHRP) estimates that around 1.5 million people are affected by the infestation
- Climate conditions in 2019 and 2020 combined to make 2020 likely to be one of the worst on record for severe desert locust impacts. UK aid will strengthen Government of Pakistan and farmers' ability to manage the situation, by strengthening surveillance and monitoring capabilities which will provide information on the level of threat and inform decision making.
- FAO is implementing this work in close collaboration with the Ministry of National Food Security and Research. The Department of Plant Protection has been leading the surveillance and response with the operational support of the National Disaster Management Authority has been, working with provincial governments.
- The UK is providing support to the UN Food and Agriculture Office (FAO), which has the skills and expertise in locust control, to coordinate the response on the ground. DFID will help strengthen the ability of the Pakistan government and farmers in surveillance and monitoring of the locust, to identify the threat and evaluate the risk. It will also help them make better decisions, combat desert locust infestations, and improve locust management in Pakistan.

For further information:

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High street discount retailer donates £35,868 for waste packaging offences

The donation will be used to help environmental studies for the Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape Partnership based at Hams Hall, Coleshill, Warwickshire.

This financial contribution is from an Enforcement Undertaking (EU) offered to the Environment Agency by The Works Stores, a high street (and online) discount retailer of books, art and craft materials, gifts, toys, games, whose head office is based in Coleshill.

The company admitted that between 7 April 2010 and 7 April 2016 it had not been registered as a producer of waste packaging due to lack of awareness of The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations.

These regulations ensure packaging materials such as cardboard, plastics and glass are recycled and do not end up in landfill.

Companies with a turnover of £2 million or more and which handle more than 50 tonnes of packaging per year, must ensure a certain percentage of waste packaging is recycled.

A spokesperson for the Environment Agency said:

Enforcement Undertakings allow businesses who fail to comply with legal requirements or pollute the environment to come into compliance or positively address and restore any harm caused to the environment and prevent repeat incidents.

The Environment Agency is increasingly using this method of enforcement for less serious cases to restore and improve the environment, change behaviour and improve practices of the offender.

Please report any environmental issues to the Environment Agency's 24 hour incident hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

A spokesperson for the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust said:

The money is being used by the Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape Partnership to deliver a wide range of environmental activities.

Primarily it will be used to deliver education sessions to primary school groups about the importance of rivers and wildlife based at the partnership's Environment Centre at Hams Hall.

Some of the funding will also be used to deliver training sessions to groups in environmental conservation and to support the willow tit, one of the UK's rapidly declining native birds.

Funding will help the partnership's volunteers Tameforce to undertake tree planting and other activities to improve the habitat for willow tit.

Notes for editors

Enforcement Undertakings (EUs) enable firms and individuals who have damaged the environment or operated outside of legislative requirements to offer to complete actions which will address the cause and effect of their offending, including making a payment to an appropriate environmental project.

EUs can be offered for offences including polluting rivers, breaching permit conditions designed to protect communities, or failing to register and comply with recycling/recovery obligations. The Environment Agency then carefully considers whether the actions offered by the offender are acceptable.

Where the breach does not have a direct impact on the environment, such as Packaging Waste Regulations offences, EU offers must contain actions that will protect, restore or enhance the environment.

Environmental incidents should be reported to the Environment Agency's 24 hour incident hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

UN Human Rights Council 43: Resolution on South Sudan

Thank You Madam President.

The United Kingdom, on behalf of a core group also consisting of Albania and Norway, is again honoured to present this resolution on South Sudan to the Human Rights Council for adoption.

The resolution before us would renew the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan for a further year.

At the outset, allow me to warmly acknowledge the Permanent Represent of South Sudan, and his delegation, for their constructive cooperation during the negotiation of this resolution. I also commend their Government's continued commitment to work with the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan.

That this resolution should again be adopted by consensus, and under item 4, is testimony to the desire of the Government of South Sudan to begin to face its challenges, and to reach out openly to this Council and the international community more broadly. We again firmly believe that the work of the Commission can help identify and address critical human rights challenges and provide support to address them.

Madam President,

We welcome the formation of the transitional government as there remain human rights issues which must be addressed. We are, for example, concerned by significant increases in intercommunal violence and systemic sexual and gender-based violence. Moreover, the humanitarian situation remains dire and exacerbated by the COVID 19 global pandemic. The transitional government therefore has a lot to address – and we pledge to assist where we can.

In this regard, I would like to stress the important call in this year's resolution to provide technical assistance to the new government. We look forward to working with the Government of South Sudan, the OHCHR and international donors to help identify and realise this.

Finally, Madam President, I would like to thank all delegations for their valuable engagement during the negotiation of this resolution and I look forward to its adoption, again, by consensus.

Thank you, Madam President.