

Managing self-isolation during COVID-19

Riverside is one of England's largest providers of homelessness services, supporting over 3,500 people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness on any given night. Services range from outreach with people sleeping rough, night shelters and emergency beds through supported temporary accommodation to Housing First and floating support services. We also own and manage over 55,000 homes across England and Scotland.

Many of the customers housed in Riverside properties are vulnerable to effects of the COVID-19 virus, but many have other underlying needs also. This includes substance dependencies in supported housing schemes, as well as learning difficulties and cognitive impairment in Care and Retirement Living services. This puts additional pressures on self-isolation and social distancing rules that Riverside schemes have had to adapt to swiftly.

Medway Housing First – helping customers stay indoors

What is the challenge?

Self-isolation and social distancing are proving difficult for everyone who needs to stay at home. But people in temporary accommodation or who have recently been homeless have access to far less of the diversions and entertainments that will help others through it. With additional needs and poor mental health likely to be additional challenges individuals are dealing with, it can be difficult to stay indoors and follow government guidelines.

What was our response?

In keeping with the principals of the model, our Medway Housing First project focused on the positive reasons stay indoors.

- They asked about their interests and what they like to do when they stay at home, and then sourced some items to help them pursue their interests.
- For one couple living together this was art, reading and puzzles for her, while he liked playing computer games.
- The support team found some second hand games as well as art materials and quiz books that they dropped round so they had something to do while at home.

What can we learn across other services and schemes?

Positive outlets can work a lot more effectively than warnings, rules and coercion. We can emphasise the seriousness of leaving home as much as we like, but if there is little to encourage people to stay then the 'pull' factors of breaking the lockdown are far stronger. Instead, we need to make items available to enable people to stay in, which will also support their mental wellbeing.





Providing activities and safe interaction spaces

What is the challenge?

A regular programme of social and positive activities are a key part of the schedule at all Riverside's supported services schemes. They provide a structure around which people can build their days, and channel energies away from potentially more negative behaviours, as well as vital social lifeline for people who may otherwise be isolated. These have been severely affected by the closing down of communal areas, withdrawal of partner services, staff having to self-isolate themselves and overall limitations on face to face interaction. Yet without activities to fill the day, the likelihood of people going out and putting themselves and others at risk greatly increases.

What was our response?

As with the Medway Housing First example above, staff have been responding flexibly and creatively to continue providing activities and in many cases ramp them up. This is particularly true of Riverside's Care services.

- 'Doorstep Bingo' has become a favourite.
 - In one scheme, a Night Support Worker who has had to self-isolate has started daily surgeries via skype with a shared computer in the scheme common room. Customers can go in one by one to check in directly with him, and all equipment can then be cleaned down in between.
 - In another, one of the Service Managers who has previously worked as a singer in holiday camps has instigated a regular cabaret which is broadcast around the scheme via the tannoy system!
 - Volunteers from across Riverside have also been allocated customers from Care Services to check in with on a daily, every three days, or weekly schedule depending on need.
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What can we learn across other services and schemes?

By meeting other needs such as positive activity and social interaction, we can support people to avoid going out, contracting the virus or passing it on to others. Someone may be a Support Worker, Caretaker or indeed customer with Riverside, but have many skills beyond that could come into their own during this pandemic.



Safe collection and delivery of prescriptions

What is the challenge?

Many people staying in supported accommodation have additional needs that would normally take them out of the house, including for daily prescriptions such as methadone. There are usually strict rules in place for collecting and consuming these medicines, which are a barrier to people self-isolating or staying indoors.

What was our response?

- Multiple locations experienced this problem early with customers who needed to self-isolate.
- The first step was to contact the pharmacy or GP directly to see if alternative arrangements could be made for less frequent collection, pick-up by family, or delivery of the prescription direct to the scheme.
 - If none of these were possible, a temporary procedure was agreed involving two staff members collecting, delivering and handing over the prescription within the guidelines for social distancing. Authorisation by managers, commissioners and contract officers was agreed to ensure it is used appropriately.
 - All of this was captured in a common policy across Riverside so the approach would be consistent and process properly documented, but customers' needs still met.
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What can we learn across other services and schemes?

This is an unprecedented public health crisis, and dealing with it is likely to mean working in a number of ways which we wouldn't do under normal circumstances. This doesn't mean safety and compliance are forgotten, but being open minded about what will still allow us to do what we need to do and get people the things they need.



Safe food provision

What is the challenge?

Many people in temporary accommodation rely on food banks, food clubs or soup kitchens for their meals, and have to make use of shared kitchens where it is virtually impossible to self-isolate. They are also less connected to latest updates or able to go out and get the items they need, meaning they are less likely to have had the time or ability to stock up on essentials. Where food is still being provided in services, there is additional difficulty in distributing this without risking transmission of the virus.

What was our response?

Across the country, Riverside services have put in place extra measures to be able to continue providing food to residents who need it while adhering to public health guidelines and protecting both staff and customers.

- In Derby, arrangements are being made for pre-prepared dishes cooked at home by the scheme Chef (who has an underlying condition) to be picked up and transported to accommodation.
- In Manchester's Wilson Carlisle and Newbury House supported accommodation, as well as the emergency hotel provision Riverside are managing for Manchester City Council, food is delivered to people's doors by staff wearing personal protective equipment.
- In both of these places as well as Hull, Medway and others, this has all been aided by day centres which have ceased their normal operations switching to mobile food provision and coming round with items so staff don't have to go out.

What can we learn across other services and schemes?

Communities are responding to the current crisis too, and there is lots of support they can offer to vulnerable people such as those in supported accommodation. Many are promoting their help online or connecting in to existing faith, voluntary and community sector groups. We can ask for help too and there are lots of people primed to give it!

 For further information, please contact:
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