

How are Riverside projects responding to the COVID-19 outbreak?

Riverside is one of England's largest providers of homelessness services, supporting over 3,500 people who are homeless or at risk 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.

Every local response to the COVID-19 outbreak is tailored to that area. Across our varied locations and services, Riverside staff have been working with customers, partners and commissioners to find new ways to address emerging challenges, keep everyone safe and meet their needs.

Helping vulnerable people through the lockdown

Positive activities to help people social isolate

Self-isolation and social distancing are 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.

In keeping with the principles of the model, our **Medway Housing First project** focused on the positive reasons to stay indoors. They asked customers 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. In **Riverside Care Services**, staff have been playing 'Doorstep Bingo' to keep everyone busy while still self-isolating, and in one scheme a Service Manager who used to be a professional singer has taken to regular cabaret sessions broadcast over the tannoy!

As a result, tenants have taken on board the lockdown measures and are maintaining contact with support workers in a safe fashion, demonstrating how positive approaches 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.





Helping vulnerable people through the lockdown continued

Access to food and essential items

Many people in temporary accommodation rely on food banks, food clubs or soup kitchens for their meals. 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.

As external services closed due to new restrictions, people were still hungry and needed to eat. At **Vaughan House in Guildford**, the local Salvation Army foodbank has set up in the scheme so they can ensure food items make it to those in temporary accommodation who might go hungry.

From that location they can also safely distribute to anyone else in the community in need. 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 **Hull** and **Medway**, connections were made with new community groups to drop off additional food supplies.

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!

Alternative arrangements for prescriptions

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.

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. In **Guildford**, the strong relationship with the Public Health team allowed the implementation of a 4-day delivery schedule, where script's were left in a locked box in each person's room – so only they had access but at limited level to reduce risk.

In other areas such as **Medway** and **Wakefield**, alternative arrangements involving two staff members collecting, delivering and handing over the prescription have been set up. 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.

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. Close relationship with Public Health or Drug & Alcohol services has facilitated flexible responses in some places, and where not possible staff have worked creatively to find solutions that don't jeopardise safety.



Working with partners to ensure co-ordinated response

Setting up a Local Taskforce

People who are homeless and rough sleeping have complex lives that touch on many different agencies and support providers. With likely additional underlying health needs and challenge of self-isolating putting them at greater risk, the need to find a co-ordinated response to keeping them safe is greater.

Wigan set up a 'Local Taskforce' headed up by the Local Authority. This included the pre-existing Springboard supported housing partnership of which Riverside are a partner, alongside the drug & alcohol agency, providers of day services and night shelters, as well as Public Health to feed in the latest advice on staying safe in the crisis. The Task Force comes together on a weekly video call to co-ordinate action for the individuals in the area who are known to be at risk, and any other support which needs to be arranged. As a result, B&B placements for everyone in inappropriate accommodation for self-isolation or social distancing have been sourced and there is a ready-made response group for any escalations of changes that might happen in coming weeks.

Our services are part of a broader network of support for our customers. Leadership from Local Authorities and collaboration between providers when all are willing to take time to share their needs can save a huge amount of time and stress when it comes to making quick decisions.

Suitable alternatives to emergency accommodation

Night shelters and quick access emergency beds are often a first step on people's journey out of homelessness and rough sleeping. In normal circumstances the aim would always be to get people into more stable accommodation as soon as possible, but during this public health outbreak the shared facilities and even shared rooms make these options even less suitable.

In **Wakefield**, Riverside worked closely with the Local Authority to find B&B placements for the handful of individuals using emergency access beds at Marsh Way House supported housing. Emergency funds made available for local authorities by the government were used to cover the costs, and support continued to be provided by the Riverside outreach team.

Local contexts vary greatly and quick responses are able to be found when there is good communication between relevant partners to get everything needed in place. By relocating the support which is being provided into more appropriate setting for a public health crisis and drawing on additional emergency funding, support and accommodation were able to be provided without major disruption to the customers.



Managing the workforce to keep schemes running

Pooling staff across services

Supported accommodation requires a range of roles performed by individuals with different expertise, many of whom have specific training and qualifications. The pool of staff services can draw on has been significantly limited by people with underlying conditions who need to self-isolate, as well as those showing symptoms. This threatens the ability of services to keep running

At **The Crossings in Hull**, there are a number of services Riverside are involved in running with partners from the building. By temporarily closing the high-intensity Assessment Hub and switching the floating support service to telephone contact, additional staff capacity could be drafted in to cover shifts in the supported accommodation unit. This has also created additional space for anyone who may need to self-isolate in the future, and the ability to support them with more appropriately trained staff from Health or Social Care.

There are deeper resources available by looking beyond teams and even organisations. In circumstances such as these for shorter period of times, support models may need to be adapted so that what is available can be deployed in the most rational ways. Pooling them collectively can get everyone the support they need for the short term and keep services operating.

Volunteer support from Riverside

With offices closing and many other services or functions of a large housing association being paused, Riverside has a significant workforce it can draw on to support some of the customer-facing tasks. While frontline staff who have underlying conditions may also not be able to make it in to work, many have been going above and beyond to still contribute from their homes.

Combined support from across the business helped Riverside Care And Support contact 7,500 customers in the first two weeks of the outbreak, including 97% of Retirement Living customers likely to be most vulnerable. In **Liverpool** and **Manchester**, support from the Evolve maintenance teams helped deliver essential supplies to Retirement Living properties and emergency hotel provision opened to support people sleeping rough. A call out for staff across the business to volunteer to support local schemes if they are short was answered by hundreds of colleagues across the business, and will help keep schemes open if staffing shortages affect local schemes.

Riverside are privileged to be a larger organisation with many different workstreams. The response to the NHS 'Everybody In' volunteering scheme has demonstrated that the desire to support vulnerable people amongst the general public is huge, and even where organisations don't have other teams there are likely to be opportunities to call on support from the 'mutual aid' groups in their local area.

 For further information, please contact:
endinghomelessness@riverside.org.uk

