



FACTSHEET

HOMELESSNESS AND COVID-19: BUSINESSES AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

MAY 2020

Having a decent and secure place to live is the foundation from which we can go on to thrive in work, education and relationships. With the UK facing strict social distancing measures, the majority have a safe place to live. However, it is estimated that 320,000 people are experiencing homelessness in the UK, meaning the measures to protect yourself and others – including handwashing, social distancing and staying at home – are made more challenging, or even impossible for one in 200 people¹.

Businesses have an important role to play in the UK's response to homelessness, which is set out in our [Designing Out Homelessness toolkit](#) published in partnership with the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Mayor of the West Midlands and Gowling. This factsheet focuses on how businesses can respond to homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prevention

COVID-19 has brought increased instability and insecurity for the whole of the UK. Households facing financial concerns or insecure housing prior to March 2020 are at an even greater risk now. Some will be relying on savings and family

members when faced with pay cuts or redundancies, but others without these safety nets will be vulnerable to homelessness.

Recent research has found that one in four people facing homelessness are in workⁱⁱ

One of the most important roles employers can play is preventing mounting pressures from turning into a crisis, such as employees becoming homeless.

Discover who is most at risk

It can be difficult to know who in your workforce might be at risk of facing homelessness, particularly given nationwide instability that could be affecting whole households at this time.

For employees who are facing homelessness, employers should recognise that the process of seeking help from local authorities and other services may involve time off for appointments – allowing employees to use flexible working arrangements or offering additional leave could make the difference between the employees keeping their home or becoming homeless.

Shelter offers an 'Employee Housing Health Check' to help businesses understand how the housing emergency is affecting their workforce. It supports employers understand their employees' housing struggles before they reach crisis point, making the workplace a safe place to talk about housing issues and a place where employees can





get the advice they need to prevent homelessness. To find out more email corporate@shelter.org.uk.

Good work for all

While employment is crucial in preventing homelessness, work does not always provide the stability and security it should. This uncertainty has become particularly widespread as the UK responds to COVID-19:

- Research by the Office for National Statistics found that 23% of adults were worried about the impact on their household finances, primarily in relation to reduced income.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Work-related concerns were mentioned by nearly 40% of adults as being among their current anxieties, the main one being availability of work and decreased hours and the potential or actual closure of their own business.^{iv}

As employers respond to COVID-19, it is important to start by ensuring the basics are right. This includes:

- paying the correct wage or salary, on time;
- providing employees with the right physical environment, tools and training to do the job;
- having clear contracts in place, including sickness and holiday pay;
- treating all employees with respect and dignity at work.

Adhering to the minimum standards set by the Government should be the starting point rather than the end goal for responsible businesses, and we encourage all businesses to be generous where possible. Business in the Community's (BITC) [Good Work for All action plan](#) sets out the steps companies can take to build on the basics and improve job quality across three areas. With [new](#)

[measures set out by the Government](#), it is important to note the following:

Fair pay and benefits

- The Government's Job Retention Scheme allows businesses to furlough employees and apply for a grant that covers 80% of their usual monthly wage costs, up to £2,500 a month, plus the associated Employer National Insurance contributions and pension contributions. Businesses should consider going above the statutory minimum, keeping employees on full pay where possible especially where pay would otherwise fall below the minimum wage.
- Employees are entitled to Statutory Sick Pay if they need to self-isolate, even if they themselves are not showing any symptoms. Employees can 'self-certify' for the first seven days off work. This provision is regardless of contract type providing employees earn an average of at least £120 a week.
- Businesses should not consider cutting employee benefits at this time, as employee benefits can help employees manage living costs particularly if their household has had a significant reduction in income. BITC has [published some ideas for employers](#) to make more of their employee benefits at this time.

Skills and development

- Though employees on furlough are not allowed to work, they are permitted to use the time for training and development. This could be a good time to invest in the development of your staff by providing access to essential skills training for your whole workforce, particularly for staff that might normally find it harder to access such opportunities. It could also help to prepare





workers that may need to be redeployed or find work in different sectors in the future. If staff are being paid at 80% and therefore below minimum wage, be careful to ensure any time used for training is paid at the full 100%.

- If your business is experiencing increased demand at this time be careful to ensure workers are given thorough inductions with all the necessary safety information. See our [factsheet on rapid recruitment](#) for more guidance.

Security and structure

- Make sure you communicate clearly with workers on temporary contracts. Be clear about sick pay and holiday pay entitlements and give as much advance warning as possible of working patterns and changes in the business.
- Explore whether you can make workplace benefits available to these workers from day one and be sure that they're aware of your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if you have one, as well as any support you provide around financial wellbeing and mental and physical health.

Wellbeing as prevention

Problems with mental health and wellbeing are strongly correlated with an increased risk of homelessness. Therefore, a holistic approach to employee wellbeing is one of the most important tools for your business in preventing homelessness.

This is particularly true given the negative impact that COVID-19 is having on people's mental and physical wellbeing. The ONS [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey](#) showed over four in five adults in Great Britain said they were very worried or somewhat worried about the effect that the COVID-19 is having on their life.^v

21% of homeless people cite mental health problems as a reason for homelessness.^{vi}

Social distancing is impacting on your whole workforce, and therefore it is especially important to ensure line managers are regularly checking in with employees and to promote any wellbeing helplines and resources you have in place. You should particularly prioritise measures to support:

- Employees with disclosed mental health conditions.
- Older workers and those with underlying health conditions who may be having to self-isolate and may suffer with greater levels of anxiety as a result.
- People experiencing domestic abuse, as victims have little escape from perpetrators. The National Domestic Abuse helpline has seen a 25% increase in calls and online requests for help since the 23 March 2020 lockdown, and visits to the National Domestic Abuse helpline website for information were 150% higher than during the last week in February 2020.

As people are increasingly socially isolated, touchpoints with colleagues and line managers may be the lifeline someone needs to seek help.

Impact story: Gowling WLG draws the dots between wellbeing, domestic abuse and homelessness

As well as working with BITC to provide inclusive pathways to employment since 2014, Gowling WLG is now aiming to prevent homelessness by providing a holistic wellbeing programme for





employees, including support for those affected by mental health issues and domestic violence.

Lorna Gavin, Head of Diversity, Inclusion, and Corporate Responsibility explains: 'What we are trying to do is raise awareness, resilience, and support. Crucially, we are changing our culture to help people address mental health problems as they arise and before it reaches crisis point where someone might end up losing their home.'

Since implementing their programme of domestic violence support they have supported more than 20 women, from all business levels, who have disclosed they are enduring domestic violence, enabling them to stay in employment.

Following COVID-19, Gowling WLG created a wellbeing hub for employees and has ramped up signposting to mental health and domestic violence champions. The firm has been in contact with all team leaders asking them to look out for signs (via video link or other patterns in their behaviour) that colleagues may be struggling with mental health, domestic violence or may be vulnerable in some other way, and encouraging them to act on any concerns they may have.

Offering practical help

Councils and community organisations are rapidly responding to support people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis. Employers can offer practical help to those supporting people experiencing homelessness, such as financial support, in-kind donations, employee volunteers and logistical support.

BITC has set up a new National Business Response Network to coordinate the business response to COVID-19. Visit our [online portal](#) to see requests from community organisations and to offer support.



Impact story: Intercontinental Hotels Group accommodates rough sleepers

Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) has worked with the Mayor of London to provide accommodation for rough sleepers across the capital, ensuring they have a safe place to self-isolate.

The rooms are being provided at a substantially discounted rate. IHG is also working with BITC's National Business Response Network to find accommodation solutions in other parts of the UK.

Pathways to employment

Offering pathways to employment for people who have experienced homelessness may be more challenging in the current circumstances but is not impossible.

Partnership is key. Ask existing partners how you can support them to work with clients that are seeking employment or establish a new partnership to deliver support.

It is also important to consider any barriers to excluded groups within your recruitment process, particularly for sectors undergoing rapid recruitment. Our [factsheet on rapid recruitment](#) explains how to take an inclusive approach to rapid recruitment at this time.

Wellbeing resources

- **The BITC Workwell model:** <https://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/workwellmodel>
- **COVID-19: Wellbeing Toolkit:** www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/covid-19-helping-your-employees-stay-well/
- **COVID-19: Helping your employees stay well toolkit:** www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/covid-19-employee-health-and-wellbeing



- **COVID-19 guidance on domestic abuse for employers:** www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/covid-19-domestic-abusesupporting-employees/

ⁱ Shelter, Analysis of DCLG data, 2018

ⁱⁱ Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ ONS, April 2020

For more information or to discuss any of the examples in this factsheet, please contact Charlotte.Gibb@bitc.org.uk

^{iv} Ibid.

^v ONS, April 2020

^{vi} Ibid.

