



APSE Building Maintenance remobilisation report



About this report

Following the outbreak of coronavirus and the declaration of a pandemic, the Government implemented a series of measures to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the population. As a result of these measures, local authority services have adapted and implemented alternative approaches to service delivery to respond to the restrictions and challenges presented by the health pandemic. Now that the restrictions are beginning to ease, local authorities are considering the remobilisation of services.

To assist its local member councils, APSE convened a series of remobilisation groups for each of the frontline services to establish the challenges and opportunities for remobilisation, the steps that are being taken to remobilise the service and share best practice. The APSE Building Maintenance remobilisation group has identified a number of challenges and opportunities that can be categorised into the following areas:

- I) Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity
- II) Operational activity
- III) Regrouping the workforce
- IV) Technical consideration

This report outlines some of the plans and scenario options which local authorities are considering as part of their remobilisation of services.

1. Remobilisation Group

APSE convened a series of remobilisation groups for each of the frontline services to establish the challenges and opportunities for remobilisation, outlining the steps that will be taken to remobilise the service and share best practice.

The Building Maintenance remobilisation group was made up of representatives from local authorities across the UK and met in six virtual sessions, the initial two provided information for the scoping report (appendix 1) which outlined the challenges and opportunities as they look to remobilise services. The remaining four sessions provided a particular focus on each of these categories:

- Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity
- Operational activity
- Regrouping the workforce and
- Technical considerations

These four broad headings have helped to highlight the approaches and best practice being considered by local authorities to overcome the challenges identified.

This report provides information on the plans being developed and options being considered in relation to the areas identified within the scoping report to progress the remobilisation of services. It was recognised that as devolved UK Governments are amending/lifting restrictions at different points in time and through various means, recovery plans may differ across the UK but it continues to be vitally important to share learning and experiences. The sections below outline the potential options and plans being considered and developed within Building Maintenance services.

2. Budget, finance and re-establishing commercial activity

From the discussions held as part of the remobilisation sessions, it is clear that the full extent of the impact on finances and budgets remains unknown. Like all other areas of the economy, the longer the restrictions are in place limiting the services which can be undertaken, the bigger the financial impact for service budgets and service delivery.

The projected losses across the UK are being recorded in a number of ways, including feeding into corporate finance in order that council-wide budget impacts can be assessed. Also, for example, in Scotland, local authorities have been submitting their projected losses due to COVID-19 to COSLA for discussion with the Scottish Government. These figures, similar to local authorities across the UK, will continue to change as services move forward and will be dependent on which services can be re-established and when.

It was also highlighted during discussions that, as well as income being affected, so too will costs. Potential costs included any increase in the cost of materials, increased costs due to the length of time required to complete tasks, and increased costs from additional equipment/vehicle requirements. A number of authorities within the group reported that they had taken the decision to extend some of their current contracts until next year in order to try to mitigate any potential impact on budgets.

The vast majority of local authorities reported that they have assigned COVID-19 related expenditure to a COVID-19 cost code allowing the service to track specific COVID-19 spend. Due to the restrictions, the way the staff operate has changed considerably, with staff working on a rota basis, being deployed to support other services, and working to changed duties. Therefore, some authorities noted that they were collating comprehensive spreadsheets to help track information, this includes information on staff and vehicles which have been re-deployed to other services as part of the authority's COVID-19 response.

As part of these discussions, there was also a recognition that moving forward there could be significant gaps in services provided by private organisations to communities, due to going out of business or withdrawing from that particular market. Therefore, there may be a potential need for local authorities to meet the increased demand to ensure these services continue to be offered to local communities.

To support local authorities in establishing the impact of COVID-19 in terms of cost and productivity, APSE Performance Networks are currently developing a data template with a concise list of performance indicators that will allow local authorities to have their COVID-19 data independently verified and make comparisons with other councils.

3. Operational Activity

Given the current Government guidance, Building Maintenance and Building Services departments are, at present, undertaking emergency repairs and gas safety checks but, going forward, they are considering which operational activities will be achievable to deliver safely in the short and long term

Dealing with any repairs backlog

Local authorities in the first instance will be looking to tackle any backlog which has built up during the lockdown period, with a number highlighting that they will be transferring operatives from within their planned works to responsive repairs to help with this issue. In addition, a number of those within the session intend to work on their repairs backlog for a short period of time (e.g. two weeks) before they look to re-establish their non-emergency repairs reporting systems for new requests. This is to provide staff with a suitable period of time to reduce/remove any backlog, especially as tasks will inevitably take longer to complete due to the social distancing measures which will remain in place for the foreseeable future. For some local authorities taking the decision to halt all repairs has caused a number of those initially logged to move into the emergency repairs category.

Social distancing and types of work

One of the biggest factors to be considered by all is the impact of social distancing on tasks; this is especially significant when assessing internal works which require multi-tradespersons to enter a tenant's home. With this in mind, local authorities involved in the session confirmed some of the areas of work they were considering in the first instance to re-start, these included:

- Phasing in the types of repairs to help with potential pressure points
- Concentrating on VOID properties
- Looking at external work programmes including roof replacement and painting programmes

- Considering options to decant tenants for a short period to allow multiple tradespersons and works to be completed within homes
- Utilising their multiskilled building maintenance staff
- Compliance works such as smoke alarms and electrical re-wiring

All of the above options look to minimise the physical interaction with tenants and also operatives/colleagues. This may also mean, moving forward, different ways of working to ensure adherence to the social distancing measures and safe working practices.

Engagement

As has been confirmed in guidance issued by the UK Governments and the HSE, it remains extremely important to ensure tenant engagement throughout this current crisis. All local authorities within the session confirmed they were continuing to undertake this and ensuring all records of communication are also logged throughout the process. Engagement with tenants covers a variety of aspects including, changes to the services provided during this time, ensuring updates on any repairs required to be undertaken, and processes should a tenant be shielding. This is also covered within section 5 of this report (Regrouping the workforce).

4. Regrouping the workforce

Given the redeployment of staff to other services and the potential for increases in sickness due to COVID-19, Building Services across the UK are looking at a variety of ways to regroup their workforce. In recognition of the services provided and the interaction with tenants as part of the work being undertaken, this regrouping is being reviewed and implemented with the safety of staff and tenants as a priority.

HR policies and procedures

In terms of HR policies and procedures covering leave, sickness and mobile working and so forth, the majority of local authorities confirmed that existing policies were being followed unless it was specifically COVID-19 related. In these circumstances particularly for recording sickness, local authorities confirmed that they had a number of COVID-19 categories and sickness was being recorded against the appropriate category. Those within the sessions highlighted that these policies and procedures were being dealt with corporately. In addition, it was also noted that local authorities were communicating with Trade Unions on a regular basis in order to discuss any potential policy or procedures being introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With regards to annual leave authorities within the session confirmed a number of different options which were being explored across the UK, these included carrying over leave into the next two years, carrying over a proportion into the next year, providing the option for an additional number of days to be carried over. These days were over and above those currently set out in existing HR policy (e.g. ability to carry forward ten days instead of the traditional five).

As part of the management of sickness and new COVID-19 categories, local authority building services departments are looking at their workforce and undertaking a review of those with underlying health conditions. This is to enable individual risk assessments to be carried out for all of these employees to ascertain what tasks (if any) they will be able to undertake going forward.

It should be noted that this will all be carried out in line with the current governments' guidance (which may vary across the UK) ensuring the safety of staff. Currently and during the early stages of an easing of lockdown measures, local authorities will be looking to utilise rota systems and employees without any health issues to undertake any additional services to be introduced in the first instance.

Safe working practices

Part of the considerations for regrouping the workforce includes looking at how local authorities will bring staff back into a safe working environment. As we try to navigate our way to the 'new normal', a number of new procedures and practices will have to be introduced. It was confirmed that Health and Safety colleagues within local authorities are already discussing and preparing plans to enable staff to return to buildings and depots safely. Some of the plans include risk assessments and safe systems of work which will look to cover:

- Reviewing the capacity of buildings and adjusting to ensure the number of staff within at any given time, allows for social distancing, e.g. buildings which traditionally hold 1,000 members of staff potentially adjusted to hold no more than 250
- Looking at the entry and exit points within buildings, including the necessity of touchpoints/entry systems
- Introducing one-way systems within the buildings
- Staggering staff start times and utilising rota systems
- Restricting particular areas which will not allow for adequate social distancing
- Reviewing and enhancing current working from home policies. This includes reviewing and enhancing the current mental health and well-being procedures if required
- Looking at the current guidance from governments to consider options with regards to the number of operatives within a vehicle. This includes taking into consideration what the guidance deems as 'reasonably practicable':

- Reviewing and/or halting any hot desking policies
- Reviewing restroom facilities/lift access and washing facilities
- Any additional PPE requirements including the potential need for face coverings

Linked to this is staff and tenant safety with regards to entering and working within tenants' homes as well as sheltered accommodation. Again, those within the session confirmed that they were working to the current guidance which has been issued in terms of carrying out work within homes. This included providing regular updates to tenants and information on the process and procedures which would be followed during this time. It also included providing tenants with information on how they could minimise potential contact by leaving all internal doors open and ensuring they remained in a separate room from where the work was being undertaken.

As part of these issues, consideration has been given to the need for processes to review and monitor social distancing and ensuring the correct procedures are adhered to. Those within the session confirmed that discussions were underway in terms of how this should be reported and whether the current Council complaints process/systems should be used to take these calls/reports. As part of these discussions it was also confirmed that local authorities were communicating to members of staff to ensure they were aware of all procedures and safe working practices, including new or enhanced ones, to be followed but also providing information on how they can approach management and/or Trade Union colleagues should they wish to report incidents where these procedures and practices are not being adhered to. A number of local authorities highlighted that ad hoc inspections and site sign-in/out forms would form part of a suite of measures to check and monitor COVID-19 procedures were being followed by members of staff and also any contractors carrying out work on behalf of the local authority.

The HSE has published guidance regarding talking to workers about preventing the spread of COVID-19. Details of this document can be found via the following link: [Talking with your workers](#).

Communication

During the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities have also been ensuring they keep regular contact and communication with their staff members. Many have used this time as an opportunity to cross-check all contact details such as contact email addresses and telephone numbers. Given the ongoing changing situation, many methods of communication have been utilised, including internal council apps, newsletters, emails and WhatsApp groups allowing for instant messaging. These will continue to provide important methods of communication for ensuring all members of staff are fully aware of how the service will begin to operate as the restrictions are lifted.

As part of this, to ensure that members of staff receive all of the relevant training to enable safe remobilisation, local authorities are intending to provide staff inductions and training through a variety of methods. These include online videos and information, reduced numbers of staff within training suites, and staggered times for training, to ensure social distancing measures are adhered to at all times.

Apprenticeships

Building services have a long-standing commitment to promoting and supporting apprenticeship schemes, however, the current COVID-19 pandemic and Government guidance has meant that the vast majority of local authorities have had to send their apprentices home. This is with the exception of fourth-year gas apprentices, as they are still carrying out works in relation to gas safety checks and servicing. During the period of being at home, local authorities have been providing their apprentices with project work and course work to complete in order that learning and development is still being undertaken, with regular communication between supervisors and mentors taking place. In addition, a small number of authorities have re-deployed their current apprentices into other services, including refuse. Local authorities have been contacting colleges in order to try to gauge any potential impact on college work going forward, with positive responses being received in that colleges still expect to be able to carry out learning with the apprentices—the caveat being that this learning may be undertaken

in various forms including online classes. For authorities within England, it was highlighted that the colleges had added an additional three months to the college year.

There are still a number of concerns for local authorities and how they will be able to continue apprenticeship training during social distancing measures, but responses during the sessions also highlighted potential opportunities for apprentices to help with any backlog of repairs and other services, which may have resulted from the service reductions during the lockdown period. Looking ahead local authorities are also reviewing the upcoming intake of apprentices, with the majority of authorities confirming it was still their intention to recruit for the coming year, but at the moment this process has been delayed. However, some local authorities did confirm that due to the impact on budgets and ensuring they have all of their risk assessments and method statements relating to COVID-19 completed or in place, they do not intend to take any apprentices on this year. In relation to those still intending to recruit, considerations included what the process for recruitment would involve, what types of work would be undertaken and how assessment by supervisors would be carried out moving forward. Some of the options included changing the types and numbers of apprentices being taken on, undertaking tests online at the recruitment stage, staggering inductions, reviewing the skills test, as well as developing risk assessments and method statements for each trade and year (these would all potentially differ given the different tasks/work undertaken by individual trades and years).

Health and well-being

The health and well-being of all staff continues to play an important role in all aspects of the regrouping of the workforce. Local authorities within the sessions reported that although new ways of working - such as larger numbers of staff moving to home working - has been critical to continued service delivery, this brings with it challenges, e.g. working from home with small children or spending large parts of your working day in isolation from colleagues. Therefore, similar to all other service areas across the council, building maintenance managers will be using the corporate resources available in terms of health and well-being to support staff in all areas.

5. Technical Consideration

Risk Assessments

As has been outlined earlier in this report, there has been a high level of emphasis on risk assessments and potential revisions/enhancements to incorporate the risks associated with COVID-19. In the first instance, councils have reported that they have reviewed their existing process for producing and reviewing risk assessments to ensure that all are still practical and robust.

The current guidance requires employers to publish their risk assessments; therefore there will be various examples available, and the HSE have published information and templates for employers to use ([Managing risks and risk assessments at work](#)).

Procurement and supply chains

Procurement and supply chain robustness also form part of the considerations for remobilisation. Local authorities within the sessions highlighted they are and would be continuing to monitor these, contacting contractors and suppliers to build a picture for going forward. Some local authorities noted that there had been some difficulties with sourcing certain materials, including plasterboard and internal doors. Therefore, as building services departments consider the types of works to be re-introduced, consideration will have to be given to the materials required and whether they have, or can get, the necessary stock to proceed.

Rationalisation of assets

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the introduction of mass working from home across all services wherever possible and moving forward, as restrictions ease, social distancing measures will mean the number of staff permitted to work within a building will reduce. As highlighted earlier in this report, local authorities will, therefore, be reviewing their working from home policies as the number of staff undertaking duties remotely will increase. It is likely that this will, in turn, lead to council-wide reviews of assets in order to rationalise any buildings and depots.

6. APSE Comment

APSE would like to thank all the authorities that participated in the remobilisation group for Building Maintenance and contributed to the information contained within this report.

APSE has a range of services that are designed to support member authorities through this challenging time. These include the following:

[APSE COVID – 19 Information Hub and WhatsApp groups](#)—The hub has been set up to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time.

[APSE Online Training](#)—APSE Training is designed to help local authorities invest in their greatest asset – their staff. With staff working at home, or remotely, APSE Training can assist staff with developing new skills during this time to help maximise opportunities.

[APSE Performance Networks](#)—The Performance Network teams have developed a variety of ways to support Councils with data collection. This includes a new suite of indicators which will explore the impact of COVID-19 on service cost, quality and productivity. The reports will be produced in June, but APSE strongly recommends ensuring the collection of data is ongoing, so changes in service performance are explicable during budget setting processes or when revising business plans.

[APSE Solutions](#)—Providing in-house consultancy and interim management services, available to both APSE members and non-member authorities and organisations.

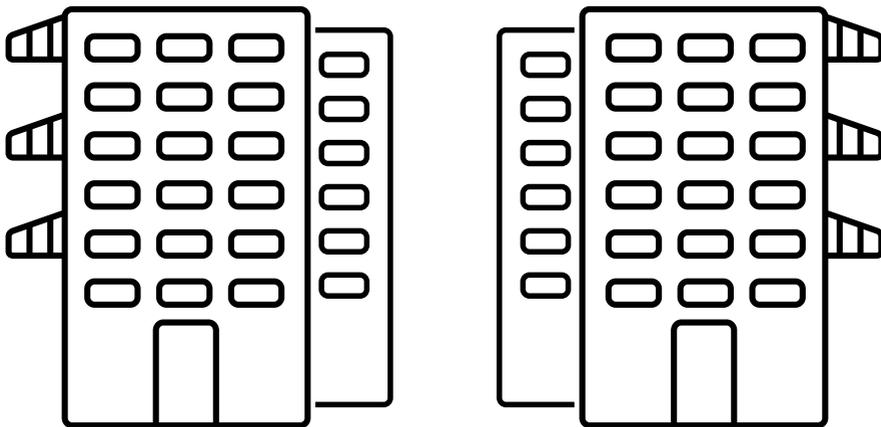
[APSE Energy](#)—Working on greening frontline councils' services, including energy management issues, which may be critical to saving money in services where budgets have been impacted by COVID-19.

[APSE membership resources](#) remain committed to supporting our local member councils with the ongoing briefings service, network queries, access to Principal Advisor advice and online meetings, advisory groups and events.

There are opportunities for councils to share best practice and learning through virtual advisory groups and thematic sessions. Details of these sessions will be communicated to APSE Members as the sessions are arranged.

For further information on the services that are available, please contact Louise Melville, Lmelville@apse.org.uk.

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