COVID-19 and Data Centres
Notes and actions from call 1st May

1   Update from DCMS

Testing policy update: DCMS reported a development in testing policy. *"anyone in England with coronavirus symptoms who either has to leave home to go to work or is aged 65 and over will now be able to get tested"*. This was a new development since the communication about key worker testing on 29th April A circular with details would be sent to group members via techUK later that day. More updates on both testing and recovery were anticipated in the next few weeks and would be communicated to members.

Operator response to testing: Members were very positive about the availability of testing. The number of quarantined staff was very low so as yet, there was little feedback on how the system was working. Several companies had registered. Operators reported that they were keeping track of staff health, updating status weekly in terms of symptoms, infections and those with any shielded family. Anyone post-infection came back to work as normal. Everyone seemed willing to share information.

One to one calls: The one-to-one calls with operators had been very useful and DCMS had updated their risk registers and were developing a better understanding of the sector, especially risks like deferring maintenance, supply backlog and bottlenecks that might hinder return to normal. This would also help inform how Government could assist with the sector's recovery. Once the discussion notes had been reviewed, any key questions or areas of uncertainties emerging could be raised at sector level.

2   Progress on data gathering tasks for DCMS

While most of the work items gathering information for DCMS were complete or near complete, the data on faults and risks was coming in very slowly and Emma asked whether it would be more practical to wait for the outcomes of the one to one discussions before completing this work, since these were likely to be the best source of relevant information. This was agreed.
Members discussed the difference between reactive and proactive maintenance and recommended relevant reading

- The Phoenix Project: A Novel about IT, DevOps and Helping your Business Win
- Understanding System Failures: Why systems fail

ACTION: Fault and risk data to be revisited after conclusion of one-to-one meetings

3   Recovery

Members discussed recovery in detail. Operators were considering how to manage a return to work and some had communicated formal timelines.

Actions operators are taking included:
- Phased return ensuring social distancing measures remain in line with government policy
- Additional cleaning of facilities before staff returned
- Non-medical grade PPE such as masks and gloves issued
- Remote hands services stepped up for customers
- Segregated shifts
- Company communications to staff and customers: monthly all hands calls and weekly updates
- Reduced occupancy of office areas: workstations spaced.
- Timelines communicated to staff and customers: for example normal access not to be restored until 1 June and no large company meetings until at least August.
- Managing expectations regarding low likelihood of an early return to BAU
- Offering those staff for whom isolation was stressful the option to request early return
- Extend the remote working practices already common within management and leadership teams more broadly, with associated change in the way office space is used.
- Acceptance that working practices were likely to change permanently with associated impacts on commercial property values.
- Sales and marketing teams reviewing communications strategies and media, re-evaluating existing approaches and cultures
- Implementing or expanding existing remote monitoring operations where multiple facilities can be managed remotely from one place.
- Implementing infrastructure management and monitoring tools so that customers could see their equipment in real time.

Issues operators are struggling to resolve
- How to onboard new customers and fulfil orders for new capacity
- Accommodating customers who provide remote working platforms and need to upgrade their data centre infrastructure urgently to accommodate demand.
- How to scale measures consistently across multiple sites, especially in different countries with different regimes.
- How to scale up transport for workers: dealing with the logistical challenge of minimising their exposure to public transport without contributing to a dramatic increase in car use.
- How to adapt longer term working practices and policies more flexible working, staggered shifts etc.
- How to adapt office layouts to accommodate social distancing
- How to anticipate changes in attitudes to location

ACTION: A request for input to be circulated to operators and feedback aggregated and then communicated as an overview.

4   Productivity

Members felt that an exercise to explore the impacts of home working on productivity could be instructive. Many companies that had resisted home working had been forced to implement it. There would be widespread data on this but an insight into impacts within the sector would make a useful comparison. This was agreed.

ACTION: a survey or questionnaire would be circulated and the results shared.

5 Areas where government support may be needed

Operators identified several areas where government support would be welcome

- Planning permission: improving consistency and awareness.
- Identifying and resolving policy conflicts (areas where policy instruments clash – eg in demand side response and air quality, or in heat networks regulation and instruments to encourage heat reuse).
- Skills – especially now that new demand would have to be met and that existing skills migration routes were being closed off.

DCMS would work with the sector on problematic policy areas. It was likely that a number of workstreams would emerge and working parties would be set up as needed. This would enable DCMS, in time to provide – or seek as appropriate – an official view.

6 Staff morale and wellbeing

A request was ready to go to members for information on steps taken by operators to protect staff wellbeing and mental health. The information would be aggregated, anonymised and shared along similar lines to that produced on footfall and on precautions against spread of infection.

7 Next call: Thursday 7th May

The next call was scheduled for THURSDAY 7th May, 9.30. The discussion on business recovery planning post COVID-19 would continue.

8 ACTIONS

ACTION: Fault and risk data to be revisited after conclusion of one-to-one meetings
ACTION: a survey or questionnaire on productivity would be circulated and the results shared.
ACTION: A request for input on operator measures to implement to be circulated to operators and feedback aggregated and then communicated as an overview.

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