

# Housing chief executives COVID-19 WhatsApp summary

3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021

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## A note to readers

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These are the summary recent highlight notes of Campbell Tickell's WhatsApp chat group for Chief Executives of housing associations and ALMOs in all four UK jurisdictions and in the Republic of Ireland. A full summary of discussions from the inception of the group is available on request.

This is a closed group, open only to CEOs in housing associations and ALMOs. It currently has around 220 members.

While discussions are confidential and unattributable, members of the group are keen for the content themes and issues to be shared widely to assist with broader understanding.

**Please note:**

The following digest highlights matters that have been discussed in the group. None of the content should be treated as representing the collective views of the group as such or be attributed to any of its members. The group is an information-sharing forum and not a policy-making body.

## Contact us

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If you are a housing CEO who would like to join, please email: [james.tickell@campbelltickell.com](mailto:james.tickell@campbelltickell.com) or [greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com](mailto:greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com).

For any media enquiries, please email: [zina.smith@campbelltickell.com](mailto:zina.smith@campbelltickell.com).

## Latest highlights, 13 October – 3 December 2021

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- One member asked for good practice to reduce the number of days lost to sickness. One member advised taking a whole systems approach, a combining systematic approach to trigger points and escalations alongside rewards for full attendance and good support and medical programmes.
- A member asked for suggestions on how to test rent affordability – respondents recommended using data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, or the [nomis website](#).
- Members discussed approaches to setting annual rents. Some organisations focus primarily on affordability assessments and will take different approaches across areas of their stock portfolio according to the results, although other members have concerns about the impact of this. Members were conflicted over whether the sector should have greater flexibility to set rents, independently from the regulator's restrictions.
- Several members agreed to collaborate in developing a 'green voids standard' to help improve energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty.
- Members shared the assumptions being used for long term rates of voids and bad debt losses over the next five years, both varying between 1.2% and 2.5%. Several members noted that void rates are currently concerningly high in their organisations.

- Members shared recommendations for legal services for a charging exercise and executive coaches from outside the sector.
- A few members shared approaches to consolidating their approaches for cost of living and other pay increases. They are clearly facing conflicting pressures to constrain costs whilst still rewarding and retaining staff. One organisation intends to set higher pay increases for lower-paid care staff, to continue as a Real Living Wage Employer.
- Group members again shared experiences of responding to cases where issues with damp and mould in homes have been reported in local and national press.
- Members of the group and their HR Directors attended a session to discuss approaches to recruitment and retention.
- One member asked whether other organisations complete a formal 6-month review of the Chair's performance. Almost all respondents said they do this annually.
- Organisations which have decided to raise rents by CPI + 1% discussed the need to proactively communicate this and the reasoning behind it with tenants. Members will assess how many customers will face affordability constraints, and target hardship funds as needed.
- Members shared eligibility criteria for their hardship funds, examples of a 'plan on a page' summarising their strategic plans, and details of governance calendars.
- In response to the new Omicron variant, members shared approaches to holding Christmas parties. Several are postponing or cancelling large events, others are allowing smaller team-based events to continue, while some intend to continue with events in line with government advice.

## Overview of recent discussions

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Covid still remains a topic of concern for housing association chief executives, particularly with the new Omicron variant spreading within the UK. Members have been discussing how to adapt in response to rising infection rates, but also how to respond to the longer-term impacts of the pandemic. However, social landlords have largely adapted their day-to-day operations in response to the pandemic well enough that other matters now form the majority of discussions in this forum.

Several operational issues are discussed frequently. With the ongoing and difficult news stories from across the sector on poor-quality homes, particularly related to issues on damp and mould, members regularly discuss approaches to improving the quality of homes, responses to repairs and the cultural implications of poor engagement with tenants. Members also often talk about the steps they are taking to move towards carbon net-zero; it is clear this is seen as one of the major challenges for the sector.

Members also regularly discuss financial matters. The sector faces rising costs, due to inflation, shortages of labour and materials and the ongoing effects of the pandemic, whilst at the same time residents must adapt to increased cost of living. These issues have made decisions about rent increases and pay rises particularly challenging this year.

The group also continues to be a venue for sharing good practice across a wide range of topics, including governance, performance measurements, HR matters and others.