

Housing chief executives COVID-19 WhatsApp summary

1st February 2022

A note to readers

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

If you are a housing CEO who would like to join, please email james.tickell@campbelltickell.com or greg.campbell@campbelltickell.com.

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Latest highlights, 6th December – 31st January 2022

- Members shared the structure of their Board calendars.
- In response to the government's Plan B Covid guidance, work guidelines changed. Most organisations plan to leave their frontline service running in the same way as the first lockdown: they will keep buildings open to the public but with visitors observing strict Covid rules (such as masks and social distancing). Some Chief Executives mentioned that staff will continue on-site face to face meetings on an appointment only basis, as they have tenants with support needs. The consensus is that non-customer facing staff should all work from home unless they want to go into the office.
- Similarly, most organisations have switched from face to face to fully virtual Board meetings. However, these members want to return to having some face to face meetings as soon as possible. One member shared their current 'blended' approach; all-day events, workshops, and strategy days are face to face, with all other meetings taking place virtually.
- Discussions continued on the increased cost of living and pay increases. Most members that responded expect to offer between 3% and 4% cost of living pay increase. This will be a big gap compared to local authorities, where pay rises are capped at 1.75% this year.
- One member asked for advice on getting Restorative Justice Council accreditation. Suggestions for training providers and positive experiences of the training courses were shared.

- One member asked the group to recommend a consultant that can help re-embed EDI into their organisation. Members shared their experiences and recommendations.
- One member asked for views on whether Covid related sickness should trigger staff sickness monitoring systems. Respondents currently exclude Covid from sickness monitoring. On a similar topic, generally people do not pay full sick pay for unvaccinated staff who need to self-isolate after coming into contact with someone who has Covid.
- Members discussed their approach to rent increases, particularly how to communicate rent increases to tenants. Members advised that communications should emphasise the support available to tenants who cannot pay their rent, and that notification letters should be short and signpost tenants to additional information available online.
- One member asked the group about approaches to satisfaction surveys, noting that if they do not undertake phone surveys, they see a significant drop in response rates. Some members see significant benefits to digital surveys, one thinking they gather more honest feedback, but several noted concerns such as digital exclusion and difficulty in benchmarking effectively.
- Discussions took place on how corporate goals are currently used to generate staff bonuses. Several members do not believe performance-related bonuses work in this sector, while others shared approaches which are at least partly linked to team or organisational performance.
- Members shared recent staff satisfaction results. Many have seen recent falls in staff satisfaction, which several attribute to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and the difficulties this presents in delivering a quality service to residents.
- Members discussed the growing pressures on local authorities, expecting that many will continue to cut funding to non-core services.
- As moves took place towards the relaxation of Plan B guidance, the group discussed how they intended to respond to the relaxation of work-from-home guidance. Respondents were either keeping work from home guidance in place due to high local infection rates, or described a partial return to the office with mitigation policies in place. Some have introduced flexibility in working hours so that staff can avoid travelling at peak times.
- One member asked where routine and planned/cyclical repairs sit within organisational structures. Most people who responded had them both in the same team, although a couple split planned/cyclical repairs into a Housing or Property Directorate, with routine repairs in Development or Neighbourhoods instead.
- A member asked to benchmark salary protection periods. Responses varied from 1 year up to 6.
- Two members asked whether other organisations would be willing to rent out a small number of office spaces, indicating ongoing changes to working practices.
- Several organisations are intended to adopt the 6-year limit for Board members introduced in the new NHF Code of Governance, but with some flexibility to smooth recruitment and phase departures.

Overview of recent discussions

Covid still remains a topic of concern for housing association chief executives, particularly with the new Omicron variant spreading within the UK. Recently, members have been discussing how best to deliver services and run staff and Board meetings given changes in restriction levels. 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. Members are concerned about how best to communicate rent increases to their residents, and how to support those who face the most acute affordability pressures.

CEOs are also concerned about the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on staff wellbeing and satisfaction. Additionally, members continue to discuss how best to balance adequately rewarding staff to attract and retain the best people, within constrained budgets.

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