

Housing chief executives COVID-19 WhatsApp summary

22 March 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.

For any media enquiries, please email comms@campbelltickell.com.

Latest highlights, 1 February - 17 March 2022

- Members discussed the recent removal of covid restrictions and end of statutory duties and the 1 April end of mass access to free lateral flow tests announced in the February 'living with covid' PM statement.
- Social landlords expressed concern that the ending of free lateral flow tests could cause asymptomatic covid staff to be unaware of their status. There is consensus between social landlords that employees that display covid systems or test positive should work from home. Some members commented that they would keep providing hand sanitiser, wipes, and face masks in their workplaces.
- Most members that discussed Covid 19 workplace restrictions (facemasks and limits on meeting room capacity) have lifted, are intending to lift, or are reviewing their Covid-19 workplace policies.
- Cyber security assurance was also discussed. Currently, the industry has cyber essentials assurance level as the minimum criteria. However, some procurement, including the cabinet office, require cyber security plus and ISO 27001 accreditation as a minimum eligibility criterion. The cyber security plus assurance can take a couple of years and is expensive for a business to implement. One member noted the benefit of having external experts test hack their business's systems to expose vulnerabilities and mitigate the risk of a cyber-attack.

- Operational technology in organisations was also discussed. One member asked about experiences of internal communication and file-sharing systems used by other members. Staff engagement with internal communications is an ongoing challenge.
- Members discussed the virtual board/committee management systems (board packs) used. The pros and cons of the software packages were discussed. They noted the importance of having user friendly, intuitive, cloud-based, zoom/teams integrated board pack software.
- One member requested advice to reduce their use of labour organisation (DLOs). Social landlords want to move away from reliance on out-of-hours contractors to save costs and offer more flexibility around appointments. Some members suggested hiring in house staff at a flat salary. Others planned to introduce a same day service for repairs and shift to an 8 am-8 pm maintenance service, operating seven days a week. This topic garnered a high amount of interest from members. In response, Campbell Tickell organised a webinar on DLO operating models.
- During Storm Eunice, the WhatsApp group became a source of support. Chat members shared the impact of the storm on their operations. Some members shared their approaches to evaluating and responding to risks stemming from the storm.
- Members discussed their approach to remuneration in light of the cost of living increases and inflation. Most social landlords intend to implement a 3% cost of living salary increase. One organisation is deploying a differential rate, ranging from 4.1% (for staff below the London average salary) to 2% (for the highest-paid staff).
- Organisational pay benchmarking approaches include periodically reviewing economic indicators to calculate appropriate % salary increases and/or calculating a flat figure for front line staff salary increases against 'the real living wage'.
- Members agreed in consensus that using performance-related pay increases does not produce effective outcomes.
- Members also discussed the anticipated impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the social housing sector. A CBI report on the impact of the Ukraine invasion was shared. The implications for the housing sector appear to be rising fuel and energy costs, alongside a shortage of raw materials, such as iron, steel and devices with microchips. Members shared approaches to briefing and discussing the implication of the Ukraine invasion to their Board/Directors teams.
- Members discussed the new Homes for Ukraine scheme. Members expressed support for the scheme but noted that the £350 'thank you' payment to tenants that accommodate refugees will increase the scheme's uptake.
- In light of the Homes for Ukraine program having potential for uptake by social housing tenants, members discussed the need to investigate any organisational issues. Members requested draft policies and FAQs designed for tenants to be shared.

Overview of recent discussions

Covid remains a concern for social landlords. The ending of free lateral flow tests poses a challenge, specifically as asymptomatic staff will be difficult to identify. Methods to mitigate risks, such as keeping sanitiser and wipes available in offices, alongside encouraging symptomatic or positive staff to work from home, will continue to be practised.

Cyber security assurance was discussed widely. Although most procurements require a cyber security essentials accreditation, the requirement for cyber security plus as a minimum criterion is growing. The time and financial costs to achieve these assurances pose a challenge to social landlords.

The role of direct labour organisations (DLO) in maintenance services was a topic of discussion relevant to many members. There is a shift towards decreasing reliance on direct labour organisations to hire more in house maintenance staff.

Members regularly discussed financial matters. Considering the increased cost of living, members discussed their approaches to increase staff pay accordingly. Members shared different benchmarking approaches and discussed the pros and cons of both a percentage and flat pay approach. Of note, Chief Executives who have operated a flat pay approach commented that it benefits front line staff more than percentage increases.

Financial difficulties faced by social landlords appear to be compounded by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. Subsequent inflation and rising costs of energy, fuel and raw materials present an industry-wide challenge.

Chief Executives supported the Homes for Ukraine program. They noted that management issues should be investigated and intend to share drafts of policies and FAQs.

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