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Council housebuilding: turning ambition into reality



James McHugh
Senior Consultant

Council housing is back at the centre of national housing policy. But while a more supportive funding and policy environment presents a major opportunity, councils still need credible pipelines, strong governance, trusted partners, and increased capacity if such renewed political ambition is to translate into homes. This article explores the new funding landscape, the differing starting points of councils, ongoing challenges of viability, and turning opportunity into delivery.

A new funding landscape



Under Prime Minister Andy Burnham, ministers have called for council homes to be built on a scale not seen in decades, backed by the 10-year, £39 billion Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP). The first major allocations underline that ambition, with £10 billion allocated to 33 Strategic Partners.

Significantly, these include Cambridge City Council, Eastleigh Borough Council and Newcastle City Council – each of which secured their place at the expense of some larger housing associations with strong track records in development – signalling that councils can once again become long-term delivery partners at scale. Meanwhile at the time of writing, details of the Greater London Authority's programme remain under wraps, but with suggestions of a strong balance towards the capital's local authorities.

For authorities outside the initial Strategic Partnerships, the Continuous Market Engagement route provides another means of bringing forward eligible schemes, while the wider programme supports direct council delivery and partnerships. This flexibility is important because councils are starting from very different positions, with differing pipelines, resources and capacity to translate the new funding environment into delivery.

Different starting points

Some councils already have established development programmes, experienced teams and well-defined pipelines, typically underpinned by a Housing Revenue Account and often through a wholly owned development company. Others are rebuilding capacity after decades in which their direct development role was limited or non-existent.

The best response will vary from area-to-area. For mature council developers, the opportunity may be to accelerate their existing programme, secure longer-term funding, review their current delivery model, and ensure a closer alignment between delivery and need (particularly for larger family-sized homes). Elsewhere, the immediate priority may be to assemble a credible pipeline, build programme management, unlock sites, or establish more effective partnerships with registered providers and developers.

In our experience this often points towards a portfolio approach rather than a single preferred model. While direct delivery may be right for selected sites, other models such as development partnerships, or joint ventures sites may provide better options elsewhere. Councils should start with the housing outcome they wish to achieve and then select the delivery route that best fits the site, market and operating context.

The viability challenge

The new funding programme is substantial but grant alone will not make every scheme viable. Construction costs, site remediation, infrastructure, land assembly and weak market values can all prevent promising sites from delivering homes. Council landlords also face competing demands on their financial capacity, including needs for investment in existing homes, building safety, decarbonisation and regulatory requirements.



Councils keen to develop need to understand which sites respond most effectively to local housing needs, what subsidy they require, whether the proposed tenure mix is viable, who is best placed to deliver them, and how financial and development risks will be managed.

Successful programmes also depend on strong cross-council working. Teams from across housing, planning, regeneration, finance, property, procurement and legal need to work towards shared priorities.

Elected members need to set a clear vision and provide strategic oversight. Senior leadership must be able to make timely decisions, while governance arrangements need to provide assurance without creating avoidable delay.

From opportunity to delivery

The renewed emphasis on council housebuilding inevitably invites comparisons with the post-war period, when council's last played a central role in delivering new homes at scale. Today's circumstances are very different, and there is no simple return to that model, but the underlying principle of councils taking a more active role in shaping and delivering the homes their communities need has renewed relevance and clearly resonates with the public.

> For councils, the challenge is to turn that ambition into a programme that is realistic and sustainable.

For councils, the challenge is to turn that ambition into a programme that is realistic and sustainable. That means understanding what can be delivered, where and by who, and putting in place the pipeline, investment, skills, partnerships and governance needed to make it happen. The answer will look different in different places. Some councils will be well positioned to expand direct development, while others may achieve more through acquisitions, partnerships, unlocking land or building their capacity over time.

Navigating change – unlocking opportunity

Campbell Tickell is supporting councils to work through their choices, from reviewing existing development arrangements and testing pipelines to considering delivery models, partnerships, capacity and investment priorities. We welcome the opportunity to work with the sector to help define what a new era of council-led housing delivery will look like.

If your council is considering how to respond to the new funding environment or wants to assess what a renewed council housebuilding programme could look like locally, please contact:



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Navigating change - unlocking opportunity

Councils and housing providers face increasing pressure to meet housing need, respond to homelessness and temporary accommodation demand, deliver against regulatory expectations, and plan for long-term financial sustainability. At the same time, renewed government investment in social and affordable housing, council house building ambitions and new opportunities for partnership and asset-led development create new possibilities for growth and delivery.

Campbell Tickell works with councils and housing providers across the country to develop clear, evidence-based strategies that respond to today's challenges while positioning organisations to make the most of emerging opportunities. We translate policy, funding and investment opportunities into practical action and measurable results.

We can help you develop and deliver effective strategies:

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- Housing regulation and consumer standards
- Asset management and investment
- Stock rationalisation
- Private rented sector strategy and services
- Partnerships, delivery models and housing investment

To discuss how we can help please contact:

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Rent Convergence



Helen Routledge
Director

At the end of January 2026, the UK Government confirmed how rent convergence will be implemented for Registered Providers (RPs). From April 2027, RPs can increase rents by an additional £1 per week, and from April 2028, by £2 per week, on top of the standard CPI + 1% annual increase. The purpose is to allow rents that sit below formula rent to gradually reach that benchmark. Convergence can continue for up to 10 years or until the property reaches formula rent.

Differences in rent levels have emerged between similar properties depending on when they were let. For example, in 2023, while annual rent increases were capped at 7%, formula rents still increased by CPI + 1% (11.1%), causing actual rents to fall further behind formula rent. The new convergence allowance aims to help reduce these disparities.

Convergence can only be used to reach formula rent it cannot be used to increase rents to formula rent with the flexibility.



For some tenants, especially self-payers, convergence could affect affordability.

Example of rent convergence

Assuming CPI is 2%

	Rent before increase	CPI + 1 increase	Convergence factor	Rent after increase	Formula rent no flex
Apr 2027	100	3	1	104	108.15
Apr 2028	104	3.12	2	109.12	111.39
Apr 2029	109.12	3.27	2	114.39	114.74
Apr 2030	114.39	3.43	0.36	118.18	118.18

Key actions for organisations before December 2026

1. Model the impact of rent convergence on your stock and determine the extra income that can be achieved. Consider if it can all be collected and if the bad debt rate is still appropriate.

2. The Board will need to agree on priorities for this extra finance. How much should be invested into existing homes and new developments? Are there other priorities for this funding?

3. Update your rent policy and consult with your tenants.

4. Check your rent increase processes work.

Key actions for organisations before December 2026

We have developed a rent convergence model to calculate the additional rent convergence can produce.

Find out more about our rent work and how we can support you with convergence, please contact Helen Routledge.

If you would like to discuss this or any issues raised, please contact:



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Risk Appetite

Setting clear boundaries for strategic decision-making



Sue Harvey
Director



Chris Mansfield
Associate Consultant

A risk appetite statement sets out the level of risk an organisation is willing to accept as it works to deliver its strategic objectives. It is a key board tool for setting risk culture, communicating the organisation's broad attitude to risk to stakeholders and giving the executive team clear authority to manage day-to-day business within agreed boundaries.



Setting risk appetite is also required or encouraged by many governance codes relevant to the sector, including the NHF Code of Governance, the British Property Federation's Code of Governance for For-Profit Registered Providers and the FRC's guidance on the UK Corporate Governance Code.

At a time when housing associations' financial capacity has reduced significantly, and government expects the sector to deliver a step change in new supply, clear risk appetite gives boards a practical way to balance ambition with financial resilience. Drawing on our work with boards, this article sets out a practical approach to determining and embedding risk appetite.

Select risk categories

The first step is to determine which risk categories should be included. For each category, the statement should set clear, high-level boundaries within which the executive team can operate. This gives them confidence to make timely decisions while ensuring the board remains clear about the level and type of risk it is prepared to accept.

Financial risk appetite is usually a core category. Others typically include:

- **principal business activities** where risk limits need to be clearly understood, such as development and asset management
- **areas of potential growth**, or activities the organisation is considering withdrawing from, where risk appetite can support strategic debate
- **key legal and regulatory requirements**, including landlord health and safety, where the board needs robust assurance.

> **Clear risk appetite gives boards a practical way to balance ambition with financial resilience.**



Select risk categories

Once the categories have been agreed, the statement should express the board's collective appetite for each one, usually using a five-point scale such as: averse, minimal, balanced, open and hungry or seeking. Narrative definitions for each level help members articulate where they believe the board's appetite should sit.

Financial risk appetite usually involves setting limits against key metrics, including loan covenant headroom, minimum liquidity requirements and maximum exposure to higher-risk activities such as building homes for sale.

These ‘golden rules’ set clear limits on the level and type of risk that can be taken when building budgets, cashflow forecasts and long-term financial plans. They also provide a robust basis for decisions and trade-offs, such as balancing development ambitions against investment in existing homes.

Definitions for non-financial risk areas are likely to be largely qualitative, so boards should be clear about the behaviours, controls and assurance that would demonstrate whether the organisation is operating within appetite.

Surveying board members before a risk appetite workshop can add considerable value. Participants can be asked to suggest the organisation’s appetite for each category and explain their reasoning. Executive team members can also contribute, helping to identify any material differences in appetite before the board discussion takes place.

The results provide useful material for a facilitated board discussion. They show where there is broad agreement, where views differ and where further debate is needed to reach a collective position. Small group exercises can then test what level of risk would, and would not, be acceptable within each category.

Formalise the statement

The first draft of the risk appetite statement should build on the survey results and the consensus reached through workshop discussion. It should translate those discussions into clear boundaries for the executive team to work within. After review by relevant colleagues and the audit and risk committee, the final statement should be approved by the board and appended to the risk management framework or policy.

Embed in planning, decision-making and assurance

Once approved, the statement should be embedded in planning, decision-making and assurance. Board papers should show that budgets, cashflow forecasts and long-term financial plans meet the golden rules, while leaving sufficient resources to support other aspects of the risk appetite statement, such as the safety and quality of homes.

Strategic and performance reporting should provide regular assurance that the organisation remains within its agreed appetite. Finance packs should confirm whether the golden rules have been met, and cashflow forecasts should demonstrate compliance with liquidity requirements.

Major decisions may require additional stress testing to show their impact on financial resilience and the golden rules. The board should consider whether proposals would breach its agreed appetite, either by introducing new risks or increasing existing ones, and ensure the discussion is clearly minuted. Development gateway decisions should also confirm that proposed schemes can be delivered within the board's risk appetite.

Manage exceptions carefully

Any opportunity that would exceed the agreed risk appetite should require specific board debate and formal approval. Boards may need to consider alternative approaches, such as joint ventures, partnerships, reprofiling investment programmes, external specialist advice or more frequent reporting. Exceptions should be uncommon, and boards should be alert to the risk of successive approvals gradually weakening the agreed boundaries.

Conclusion

Risk appetite is a core part of good governance. It gives housing associations clear boundaries for strategic planning, helps boards weigh opportunity against resilience and supports more confident decision-making. Boards should specify the assurance they need for qualitative risks and require regular evidence that financial plans and performance remain within agreed limits.

Campbell Tickell has deep expertise in risk management, control and assurance.
To discuss your risk and assurance challenges, please contact us on:
risk@campbelltickell.com


Sue Harvey


Chris Mansfield

For more information, including resources and contracts, scan the QR code:

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Stock Rationalisation: top tips



Glenn Allum
Director

I recently had the pleasure of participating in Trowers and Hamlin's annual stock rationalisation portfolio event. I was asked to offer my insights around portfolio assessment and integration as part of a panel alongside others who have acquired tenanted homes recently.

What I heard from colleagues tallied with my own experiences of supporting clients to secure and integrate portfolios. Here I share some of the key points from my session for any organisation thinking about disposing of, or acquiring, portfolios in the future.

01 Getting data right

Everyone shared the view that having the right data at the right time is very important. Pre-exchange, preparation is key. This is about making sure that data rooms are fully, and accurately, populated to make due diligence as easy as possible. Post-exchange, it's about a clear understanding of the data required by the buyer to deliver a seamless handover and making sure that data is handed over in a timely manner. Early conversations on the latter, even prior to exchange, will make the process easier.

02 The right resources

Having sufficient resource with the right skills was also felt to be important. Once a deal has been struck, experienced project management resource is needed to collate/review data and be the link into subject matter experts in the wider business. Whether on the buy or sell side of a transaction, support from colleagues across organisations is also key. Making sure they are engaged and clear about what they need to do is an important early task in a transaction.

03 Building solid relationships

Building relationships with your counter party at an early stage can make a lot of difference. Don't forget you'll be working with the people around the table for the best part of a year. Developing good working relationships and demonstrating a commitment to clear communication with the other side will pay dividends throughout, especially when it comes to those tricky final commercial negotiations.

04 Construction and high-risk buildings

This proved to be a theme throughout the day, not just my panel session. With full strategic withdrawal from geographies driving a lot of market activity, inevitably, portfolios are increasingly including high-risk buildings. Whether these are fully remediated, have works under way or will need works in the future, a buyer will want additional reassurance and protections before taking them on. Don't underestimate the amount of additional time and work (especially from legal advisers) that will be required to reach an acceptable position for all parties.

05 Getting it right for customers

We talked about making sure that transferring customers have a good experience. At the core of this was partnership working, with both parties working constructively to make the handover seamless, minimising inconvenience to customers wherever possible. Buyers also need to think carefully about welcoming new customers into their organisation in a positive way. There is only one opportunity to get a new relationship off on a good foot, after all. Simple things, like an initial in-person introduction through door knocking, can go a long way.

06 A good counter party

We were all asked what a good counter party in a transaction looks like. Again, there was a consensus with a good counter party needing to be:

- flexible and pragmatic throughout;
- committed and ensuring the transaction is a corporate priority;
- open, responsive and ensure partnership working;
- well prepared and ready to hit the ground running.

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Find out about how we can help:

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Up and down for funds and for-profit Registered Providers



Greg Campbell
Partner

Greg Campbell unpicks the market mood.

Many institutions and real estate funds continue to focus on investing in UK social and affordable housing. But there are challenges. That's of course not unique to this market: many of the issues they face are similarly faced by other players such as registered providers and developers.

The reality is housing growth is sluggish. Government has effectively abandoned its target of 1.5 million new homes (across all tenures) in this parliament. Indeed, some projections suggest that as little as 60% of the target will be delivered.

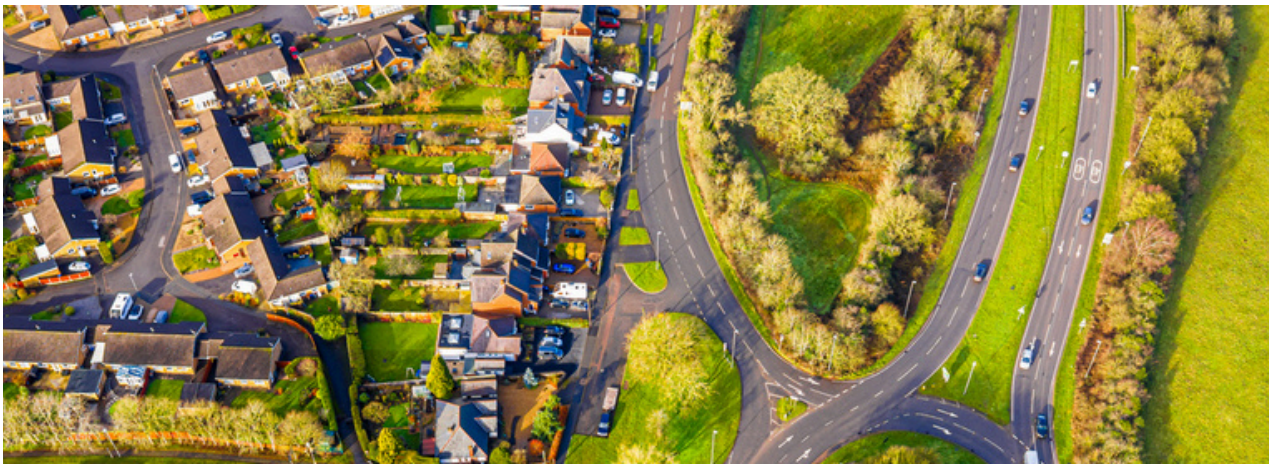
What are the critical challenges?

High interest rates for one. These make the desired levels of return unachievable and the costs of raising investment capital too high for some funds to make it work. Interest rates also of course feed through into mortgage costs, and the property market is weak, especially in London.

At the same time, there is some investor uncertainty over the future direction of regulation, following the Regulator of Social Housing's discussion paper 'More and better social homes', and the planned development of new Economic Standards in 2027. In reality though, it seems highly unlikely that this would adversely affect the view of the social housing sector as a sound place for 'patient capital' to invest.

Alongside this, the Government's approach to the new SAHP grant programme has given rise to some uncertainty, for both non-profit and for-profit RPs (FPRPs) that haven't succeeded in obtaining strategic partner status with Homes England. Only two of the 33 partners announced are FPRPs. While the CME (Continuous Market Engagement) route remains, there are widespread concerns over how well this works. In the round, there is likely to be room for more positive encouragement from government for new entrants.

Meanwhile, the fact that for-profit RPs are ineligible for exempt levels of Housing Benefit when providing supported housing is a disincentive to organisations that would otherwise be keen to deliver in an area where many traditional non-profit RPs have stopped operating (largely because margins are too tight).



It is important to recognise that (a) FPRPs are barred from exempt rent by benefits legislation that predated the advent of FPRPs; and (b) this is not the same as the problems the RSH has highlighted with lease-based SSH (Specialised Supported Housing) RPs, which are normally classed as non-profits. A further issue more recently has been the difficulties experienced with Heylo Housing, which could arguably deter some new entrant investors that are unfamiliar with the circumstances of the case.

Far from all doom and gloom

It's striking though that the appetite from different types of businesses to register RPs seems to be growing. While the total numbers are not huge – there are 92 FPRPs in total registered as of the end of October – there have been 13 new FPRPs registered so far this calendar year alone. At Campbell Tickell for instance, we are at the time of writing supporting the registration of five such new organisations.

The types of organisations coming through represent a mixture: institutional investors, real estate funds, and developers of different scales, for example. We are also seeing some businesses with a substantial track record in the BTR (Build To Rent) sector looking to extend into social and affordable housing. This is unsurprising: the BTR market has been having ups and downs, and these organisations are already providers of rented housing, albeit with different client groups.

There has been an increase too in the number of organisations owning more than one RP – there are currently seven in that category, and likely more in due course. This reflects an interest in being able to accommodate different investor profiles – some investors are more comfortable with shared ownership for instance, whereas for others it will be social or affordable general needs rented homes, or extra care.

There has been growth overall in the number of properties owned by FPRPs, though clearly slower than in previous years, taking account of the challenges highlighted above. And there are now nine FPRPs with more than 1,000 homes, with more that are appreciably scaling up on the way. This also means a growing number of organisations will be seeing more of the regulator, and will be subject to RSH inspection.

Government wants to see far more homes developed in general. While there has been encouragement for investment from the Local Government Pension Scheme, there is a sense they are ignoring – or perhaps don't fully appreciate - some of the potential that other institutions and funds, and FPRPs, could offer. Greater openness to engaging with new entrants and to addressing the concerns noted above, could be a valuable way to encourage the development of significantly more social housing across the country.

This is not of course to suggest that all would-be new entrants into this sector are 'the good guys'. As in every other area of business, it is fundamental to understand whom one is dealing with, their motivations and their plans. There is no substitute for doing your homework and choosing your counterparties carefully.

To discuss any issues raised in the article, please contact:



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Mergers: Top tips for a successful outcome


David Williams
Partner


Glenn Allum
Director

It's no secret that housing providers are facing an unprecedented degree of challenge from their operating environment. The pressure on the delivery of new homes remains strong. At the same time, the sector is facing multiple shocks, which have eroded financial and organisational resilience and increased the challenge set by government to boost housing supply.

Consequently, housing providers have reset their corporate and financial plans, building in additional provision to meet new commitments, reviewing their financial Golden Rules to ensure there is reserved capacity to absorb shocks, and, as a result, ambitious development intentions have either been calmed or in some cases 'strategically paused'. Merger is seen as one solution to re-capture resilience using the combination of scale and efficiency to either restore, and ideally exceed over time, previous ambition.

Those expectations reflect our own view and experiences of the market. We are observing a new peak of interest in merger activity from across the sector, with providers of all sizes and locations looking to reach for resilience through scale as a means of providing a more secure future.

For those considering a merger as an option, here are our top tips to ensure success in what can be a difficult and challenging strategy.



1. Prepare your organisation fully

Spend time with your board to understand the why, how, and what of any proposed partnership.

2. How quickly do you want a partnership to happen?

Do you want to be proactive, test the market and search out a partner? Are you opportunistic, waiting for the right opportunity to arise? Or are you reactive, waiting to be courted by others?

3. Be curious

Approach discussions with a potential partner with an open mind. You never know where a conversation might take you!

4. Avoid pushing what you think are USPs.

You may not be as unique as you think!

5. Don't underestimate resource requirements

Understand the required business effort to deliver a partnership, especially if your business-as-usual requirements are challenging.

6. Be prepared to say no

Sometimes it's easier to carry on with discussions when it would be better for all to walk away. Be ready to make that difficult call.

7. Integration is harder than you think

The challenge of integration shouldn't be underestimated. Getting it right can be the difference in capturing ambition or causing deep frustration. Start integration conversations early, give it appropriate focus and ensure it is appropriately resourced with colleagues who know the territory.

8. Build trust

Mergers fail if trust and confidence disappear. Failed mergers because of technical points like pensions or funding arrangements are far rarer than those caused by a breakdown of relationships. Behaviours are very important.

9. Understand pace

As you develop your plans, make sure the pace is comfortable for both parties and that no one feels pressured or rushed into decisions.

10 Be honest with one another

An open and transparent dialogue, warts and all, is highly important and offers the best route to success

11. And finally – and perhaps most importantly – have as few lines in the sand as you can

Be very clear about them from the start. Try not to make it about who gets which job or about what the combined outfit is to be called.

Over the past few years Campbell Tickell has supported many mergers and partnerships. If you would like to discuss how we can help you form a new partnership, please contact



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Lessons from consumer regulation



Catherine Little, Director

Over half-way through the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) programme of consumer inspections, there are clear lessons for social landlords about regulatory expectations.

Assurance is central to co-regulation

The RSH uses a co-regulatory approach which means Board members and councillors are responsible for ensuring regulatory compliance. Inspections therefore focus on the evidence that the governing bodies rely upon to demonstrate compliance. Effective Boards and Councils are clear about what evidence is needed, its reliability and where it needs to be strengthened. All members of an organisation need to be equipped and confident to seek assurance rather than accept reassurance, however well-intentioned.

The most effective meetings of Boards and elected members that we observe are fluent in challenge, testing confidence in data, triangulating performance with tenant feedback and demonstrating professional curiosity.



Video: Social Housing Regulation: 2 years on - lessons and what comes next

Scan the QR code to watch our 2026 webinar

The ‘so what?' question

A second lesson is the importance of evidencing outcomes, not just activity. Policies, action plans and tenant engagement are essential, but they are only the starting point. Stronger social landlords can articulate how these activities work in practice and the outcomes for services, homes and tenant experience.

The strongest organisations are willing to challenge themselves, with Boards, staff and involved tenants alike encouraged to ask the ‘so what?' question, shifting attention to impact and lived experience.

Insight matters as much as data

Tenants consistently tell us that they want to see and feel change in their own homes, services and neighbourhoods, and in the experiences of those around them. Headline measures such as Tenant Satisfaction Measures and other performance data remain important.

However, expectations around tenant insight have shifted. The focus is now on understanding of diverse needs and how services deliver equitable outcomes.

Looking ahead

Updated regulatory requirements around competence and conduct, tenancy, rents, are likely to feature in future inspections, alongside a sustained emphasis on safe, decent and high-quality homes.

Social landlords with robust assurance in place, a clear outcomes focus and a culture that welcomes challenge will be well-placed to meet regulatory challenges now and into the future.

Safety matters

Safety remains the single biggest driver of non-C1 outcomes, reflecting ongoing sector vulnerabilities in data quality and integrity, the ability to access homes to complete safety checks and completion of remedial works. However, recent judgements also point to issues around tenant engagement and understanding diverse needs.



The most effective meetings of Boards and elected members that we observe are fluent in challenge

If you would like to discuss this or any issues raised, please contact:



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Campbell Tickell is a management and recruitment consultancy providing high quality services, problem-solving and advice primarily to charitable, not-for-profit and public sector organisations. As a certified B Corp, Campbell Tickell has been verified as meeting high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability.

Our mission is to support our clients' excellence in governance, resilience, performance and compliance. This enables the better delivery of their social objectives for the people, communities and organisations they serve.

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