

**C&C and Aster Group proposed merger
- Outcomes of Resident Consultation
October 2021**

Summary

Since the announcement of the proposed merger with Aster Group on June 25th, we have formally consulted with our residents, next of kin (care homes), Service Scrutiny Panel, partners, suppliers, funders and other key stakeholders across the London communities we serve.

We have been delighted with the level of engagement from residents and next of kin, receiving over 200 responses during the ten-week consultation period. Of the 70 written responses received, 30 (43%) showed support for the merger, with the remainder (52%) largely comprising questions or specific concerns; while only a handful of residents (5%) were explicitly against the merger. Verbally, there has been a good level of support though understandably it has not been without anxiety too, with the majority of responses being either clarification questions or specific concerns.

We fully understand how treasured our C&C homes are to the communities we serve. As is central to our values, we have made every effort in our engagement to communicate the proposed benefits of a merger and also to anticipate concerns and provide assurances to residents from the outset.

Most of the questions / concerns subsequently posed during the consultation - such as security of resident tenancies and cost of living - were provided in our initial communications and constantly reinforced.

We have listened to each piece of feedback, responding directly where appropriate and taking positive actions throughout such as creating additional communications and adapting others; extending the consultation period and creating forums for residents to engage directly with Aster senior management.

Through the combination of responding to resident suggestions and employing various touchpoints with our residents, many of those who expressed concerns and/or negative perceptions at the outset became far more accepting of the actual merger intentions and potential benefits.

That is not to say that some residents still do not have anxieties about the long-term impact of the merger should it go ahead, but certainly the process has done much to demonstrate that C&C – and indeed Aster – places a high value on capturing and responding to the resident voice.

Communicating the proposal

- C&C residents and stakeholders were consulted during an initial 5-week period (25th June – 31st July) – then extended until 31st August based on feedback.
- Residents were offered a number of channels to share their questions and feedback throughout.
- Dedicated meetings were held with residents and key stakeholders such as local authorities, health commissioners and partners.
- Channels included: Targeted letters, a dedicated website page, emails, press releases, digital screens (schemes), posters (schemes and care homes), social posts, scheme and home walkarounds (senior management), 1-2-1s, virtual and scheme meetings and internal staff briefings. Scheme officers and care staff were also on hand to discuss queries.

Feedback received

- During this time, we received over 200 individual responses (written or verbal feedback), primarily from residents, but also from family and friends of care home residents and other relevant stakeholders.
- Around 30 of the 70 relevant written responses received (via email or Feedback form) were broadly or strongly in support of the merger.
- In addition, a number of positive responses were received verbally in various meetings.
- Positive comments were supportive of the proposed benefits of the merger to C&C and residents, in particular the investment in services and circa 700 new homes.
- In terms of concerns shared, the overarching theme of the housing resident feedback was around the security of tenancy, and we subsequently delivered a targeted communication (end of July) outlining residents' legal rights with regards to their tenancy. This provided further reassurance.
- Generally, the expectations of residents were aligned to proposals shared though there were examples of residents potentially anticipating rapid renovations, new homes or even better wi-fi. This, of course, was carefully responded to where appropriate and is a reminder that managing expectations will remain critical.
- We received a small number of overtly negative written and verbal responses across housing and care, these related to a few negative perceptions of C&C's current service in general, to perceptions of Aster's motives e.g. inheriting a portfolio that they could develop, and one next of kin's negative experience of a housing association merger.
- Feedback from relevant partners was generally supportive.

Examples of positive feedback received:

"I write to say that I fully applaud you for venturing into this merger with Aster Group." (Resident at Vivian Court)

"I think it is an excellent idea and it has my full support." (Resident at Oldfield)

“Yes, it’s better to merge C&C and Aster for a bigger housing association. Good idea of building more homes.” (Chestnut resident)

“This all sounds very positive for the future.”(Next of kin, care)

“Any greater investment is welcome to guarantee the best care for our loved ones and staff.” (Next of kin, care)

“This is a sensible proposal, it makes perfect sense and sounds very attractive for C&C.” (Resident Panel member)

“This is very good, I am in full agreement with the merger. This will be good for C&C.” (housing resident)

Resident/next of kin meetings

- 15 meetings were held to discuss the consultation with residents/next of kin up to 31st August, including 4 online meetings. Around 150 attendees joined all of the resident meetings, though not all shared feedback/asked questions.
- By and large, the feedback at these meetings was a mix of sharing anxieties and support, and a number of assurances were sought from some residents (see below).
- Two meetings were held at Oldfield Estate and residents relayed many general concerns shared elsewhere. Two local councillors also attended these meetings.
- As a result of the Oldfield meetings, a dedicated workstream was agreed to co-produce a dedicated Oldfield plan (outside of the merger) to address wider issues raised. This work is being led by local management

Common questions/concerns

The vast majority of other written / verbal responses from residents and care relatives related to seeking assurance regarding the security of their tenancies and rent charges, and the future of our care homes (information that was provided in various channels). All concerns shared and questions asked were answered sensitively and in a timely fashion as appropriate.

The common questions were:

1. Am I going to lose my home / pay more as a result of the proposed merger?
2. Are you going to sell off (my) property?
3. Is Aster truly committed to maintaining C&C’s care home presence?
4. What impact will the proposed merger have on the redevelopment of Dora House?
5. Who is Aster / their structure / finances / shareholders etc?
6. Would I be able to transfer to an Aster-owned property?
7. Will Wi-Fi availability improve in our housing scheme(s) as a result?

In care, there were a few next of kin who founded their concerns over the potential of selling our care homes on the previous sale of our nursing homes in

Merton. Concerns were also raised by next of kin around the expertise of Aster in care. Reassurances were provided in terms of the proposal ensuring that C&C would continue to lead care, with Aster learning from C&C's expertise.

Some residents also sought more information about Aster, and an opportunity to meet with members of the Aster Team. This was particularly evident at the virtual resident assembly and the dedicated Oldfield resident meeting

A small number of residents also shared questions/concerns around:

- the make up of C&C's shareholders and whether direct contact could be made
- Aster's Trustpilot score (2.2 from 22 reviews)
- Whether C&C would retain a London office
- Existing issues with property/scheme/care home unrelated to the merger.

Finally, concerns were shared by a small number of residents across both virtual meetings (and the second Oldfield meeting) about potentially losing a connection with C&C senior management as a consequence of C&C being part of a larger group. Again, reassurances were provided that C&C would lead on the over 55 offer and that an over-55 committee, reporting to Board would be formed. C&C's Service Scrutiny Panel would feed into this.

Extended consultation

- As a result of the concerns/feedback received, the consultation was extended until 31st August. After consideration by C&C's EMT, this additional period was deemed appropriate in order to provide additional time for residents to engage directly with Aster senior management and to allow more time for some residents to fully understand the implications of the merger (and the security of their tenures, for example).
- Questions and feedback received during this time echoed those previously received, though were generally more pointed towards Aster, its structure, ambition, regulatory framework, and values.
- Aster prepared a dedicated flyer, which was shared with residents and on our merger proposal webpage.
- The extension was welcomed by a number of residents, and those who attended the additional meetings in this time were grateful for the opportunity to engage directly with Aster senior management.

Challenging perceptions and managing change

As with any significant proposal and consultation process, much of our actual engagement revolved around reiterating and expanding upon the initial messages shared in the outline proposal communications. Through a combination of the various forums, and with housing and care staff also offering a number of 1-2-1 conversations and responses, most of those residents and next of kin who had shared concerns became gradually more accepting of the proposals.

Examples of where our approach helped residents:

- Individual feedback forms and emails (with consent to be contacted) were all responded to individually by a member of the Engagement

- Team. The majority of our responses were met with understanding.
- Assurances regarding questions/concerns were consistently shared in various forums e.g. Virtual and scheme meetings, responses to letters/emails and by housing/care staff on the ground.
 - The page on the C&C website related to the proposed merger was regularly updated with new resident questions and our responses.
 - The presence of Aster senior management at virtual meetings for housing and care, and a second dedicated in-person meeting at Oldfield, helped significantly allay the concerns previously shared by residents. Indeed, this was evident in both of the 2nd virtual care and housing forums that for some residents hearing direct from Aster as well as learning more about the organisation overall, provided the additional reassurance they sought.

Trust needs to be built with small pockets of residents and the consultation process served to highlight the on-going work needed to listen to and involve residents in shaping our services, their homes and communities. Several residents, for example, referred back to previous restructures or legacy issues in their feedback as reasons for their anxieties over the merger proposal.

Wider stakeholder feedback

Partners, suppliers, local authorities and wider stakeholders have offered support for the merger. There were a few questions posed, for example by one health commissioner, who asked if the merger was a consequence of the pandemic. Another commissioner who was very positive about the proposal asked if planned investment in the homes would continue.

Media, website and social

- Nine (trade) publications carried positive coverage of the proposal (no negative coverage).
- A letter from a Camden resident was published in Camden New Journal, with concerns over the merger and several inaccurate claims such as that residents had not been consulted. We did not respond to the letter.
- A follow-up article was planned by CNJ, but our written response led to the journalist, detailing the facts of the proposal, led to the article being pulled.
- The webpage ccht.org.uk/proposed-merger had approx. 1,500 page views during the period.
- We tweeted information around the merger 21 times and shared a similar number of Facebook posts. We also used LinkedIn and Instagram.
- On Twitter, our posts received 14,014 impressions, 101 likes and 26 retweets.