



Chartered
Institute of
Housing
Cymru

Joining the Dots part 2

Local Government Housing Professionals Survey Report



Introduction

This report is the second in a series reflecting the views of staff from housing departments in local authorities across Wales. The first report was published in Spring 2020 following research undertaken in February 2020. The following months saw the beginning of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis which has prompted huge changes in how people live and work across the globe, not least for people working in housing. This has given us a unique opportunity to return to local authority housing professionals to understand the impact on their working lives, priorities and what they see as the opportunities for the future.

The time since the start of the pandemic has demonstrated how quickly services can radically change to help people find accommodation, stay connected to their family/community networks and remain safe and comfortable at home.

At the heart of much of this activity were the staff based in the housing departments of local authorities. These professionals cover a range of roles including; housing advice, homelessness prevention, private landlord engagement, housing strategy and planning. They ensure that people are kept safe now and communities are developed that will work for future generations.

Given the vital nature of the services provided through these roles, it opens up discussions about how staff can be supported to work flexibly, overcome barriers in their daily work and how local authorities prioritise housing.

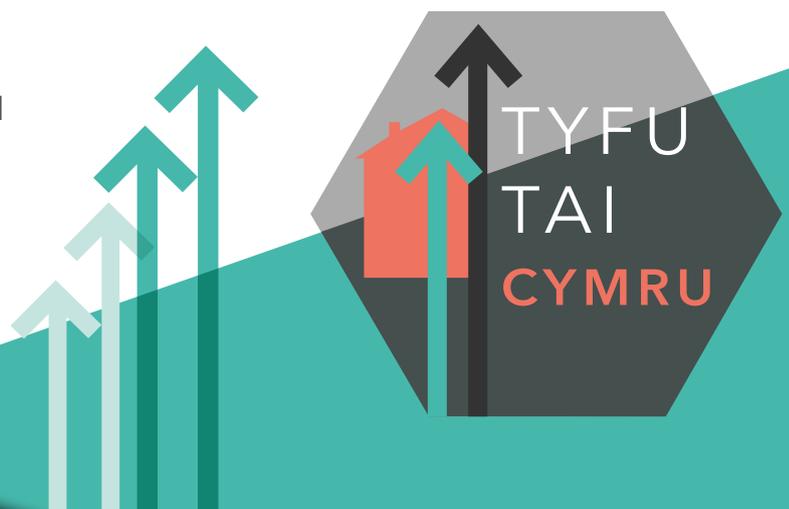
Our second survey was carried out between November and December 2020 and we received 52 responses (the same number as the first survey). Responses were all anonymous and we have included some quotes where we feel they help illustrate the narrative.



Executive Summary

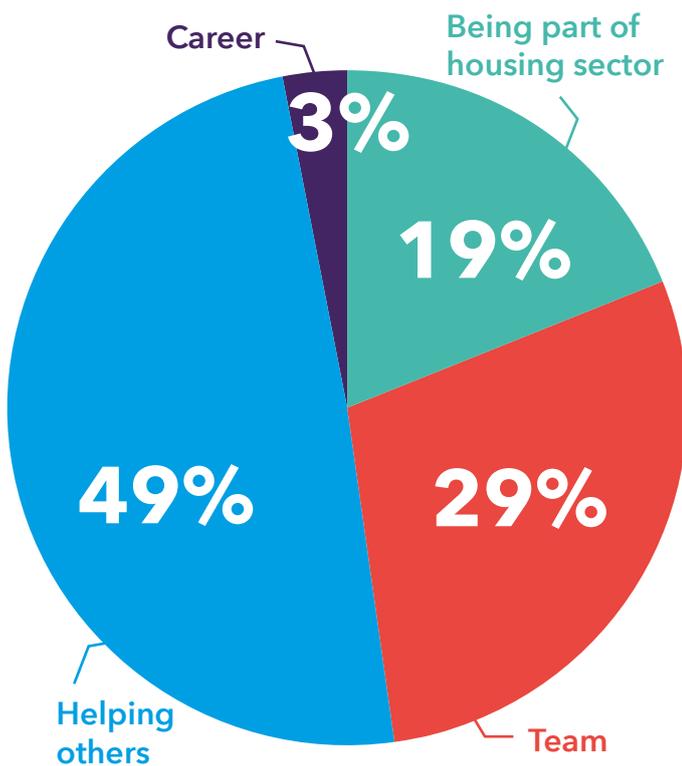
Leadership under pressure

- For some professionals, the pandemic has meant becoming overnight leaders, overseeing rapid changes to how services move to be delivered digitally.
 - Despite positive progress, staff strongly felt under pressure due to COVID-19 placing additional requirements on top of already busy day jobs - respondents felt that this was compounded further by a general lack of staff and affordable housing.
 - Helping others and working as part of a team are the main drivers behind job satisfaction for local authority housing professionals. Interestingly, career prospects have little bearing on this, suggesting either the desire to progress was low amongst respondents, or the practical opportunities to do so are limited.
 - Respondents felt that more staff would ease pressure, in addition to more resources and additional affordable housing. Interestingly there was some evidence suggesting Welsh Government pressure/deadlines, if alleviated, would also help staff.
 - Staff felt strongly that the lessons around being able to work from home and work flexibly need to be taken forward - while being tempered with calls to ensure that staff isolation be considered in this context.
 - From an organisational perspective, there was some support for better crisis management preparedness and the need to consider how IT could provide savings by reducing travel required to attend meetings.
- Over a third of respondent felt they had needed support with their mental health during the pandemic - largely as a result of work pressures and changes to their working environment. While many had felt supported by their local authority, people told us they had struggled with challenges including isolation and juggling work with childcare.
 - Ensuring everyone can Stay at Home from an operational perspective and the move to provide accommodation to people sleeping rough and provide support to vulnerable tenants was seen as a success. Linked to this collaboration within teams and with external organisations was viewed positively.
 - 19% of professionals felt their local authorities responded well allowing staff to work from home.
 - Nearly 80% of respondents highlighted the need for more land and resources for local authorities to reach targets to deliver more affordable housing, suggesting that additional capital investment will need to be a focus.
 - This report demonstrates a mixed picture in terms of housing people placed in temporary accommodation due to efforts brought in to protect people sleeping rough during the pandemic. Marginally more respondents felt feeling confident or quite confident in their authorities ability to find sustainable housing solutions.



What do you like about your job?

We asked housing professionals about their motivation at work and they told us of their commitment to working with communities and helping others. The low level of responses (3%) in relation to career progression is an area that could benefit from further attention.



Impact of COVID-19 on working practises

Changes in roles

Most people were in the same role they had been at the start of 2020 but about a third told us their role had changed focus, often involving an emphasis on leadership and they had taken on additional responsibilities.

“What we’re managing is changing - clients are presenting with new problems, at a much higher rate.”

“Include affordable and specialist housing, developing a digital service, strategic focus rather than frontline, becoming a team leader.”

Organisational response

Understanding what was done well is important in terms of lessons for the future but also to acknowledge the drive by staff to keep people safe during the pandemic.

Almost a third (30%) highlighted activity to support people experiencing homelessness as one of the key changes done well by their authority. In addition, the move to flexible working was seen by many (19%) as a positive change.

Respondents told us about efforts to increase temporary accommodation to accommodate people sleeping rough and provide support safely. This was all done at great speed, while facing a public health threat at scale.



Other areas highlighted were the local authorities working in partnership with health colleagues, with the voluntary sector and working as a team on the day job while delivering on new and unanticipated pressures.

What did your LA do well in response to COVID19 and lock down?

Quick move to staff working remotely	19
Expanded temporary accommodation	10
Accommodate people sleeping rough	9
Working in partnership	9
Supporting vulnerable tenants	8
Facility for homeless people	7
Clear communications	7
Continue day-job	8
Team working	7
Delivering on Phase 2 homeless grant	4
Early response	4
Emergency services for covid response	3

"1. Immediately bringing rough sleepers off the street, 2. Immediately sourcing alternative provision for all non-priority applicants 3. Pulling together with other agencies e.g. RSLs to allow direct nominations for properties"

"Completed welfare phone calls to all our tenants, opened up a facility for homeless people to access, allowed people to work from home"

"Redeployed some staff to Track and Trace, supported Providers by dropping off PPE and increased communication with them to offer support"

"Rehousing single homeless people; helping to build the Enfyf hospitals; reconnecting with tenants on-line"



Learning lessons to support housing departments

While there was clearly some impressive accomplishments, respondents also highlighted lessons that should be learned about operating in similar conditions. Learning from operating during the pandemic could be used going forward.

The move to working from home was viewed as both positive and negative. Respondents felt that the use of IT to save travel and other costs needed to be balanced against the need to address staff isolation and maintain morale whilst working remotely.

Respondents also highlighted the need to improve aspects that underpin partnerships with external contractors e.g. COVID-19 safety, better crisis management and better prioritisation.

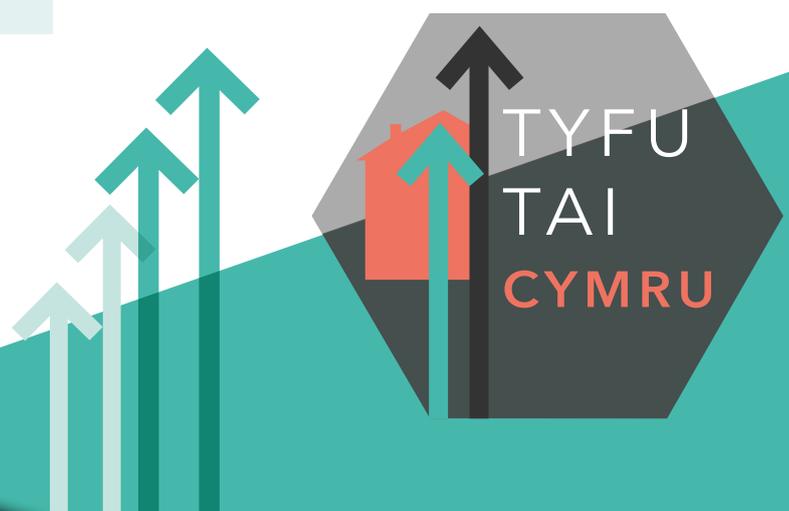
“Crisis management training needed - plan for future pandemics. We need to keep up with the latest technologies to ensure services can be delivered. Need to consider how we can get tenants to digitally access services”

“Recognising that homelessness issues cannot be resolved by housing services in isolation.”

“Need to consider the equality implications from changes to service provision.”

“The most important lesson is the realisation that things we have always done can be done differently, we have now done so for the last 9 months and there is no reason to revert back to the old bureaucratic ways of doing things.”

“Further recognition that working from home is an acceptable and successful way of working”

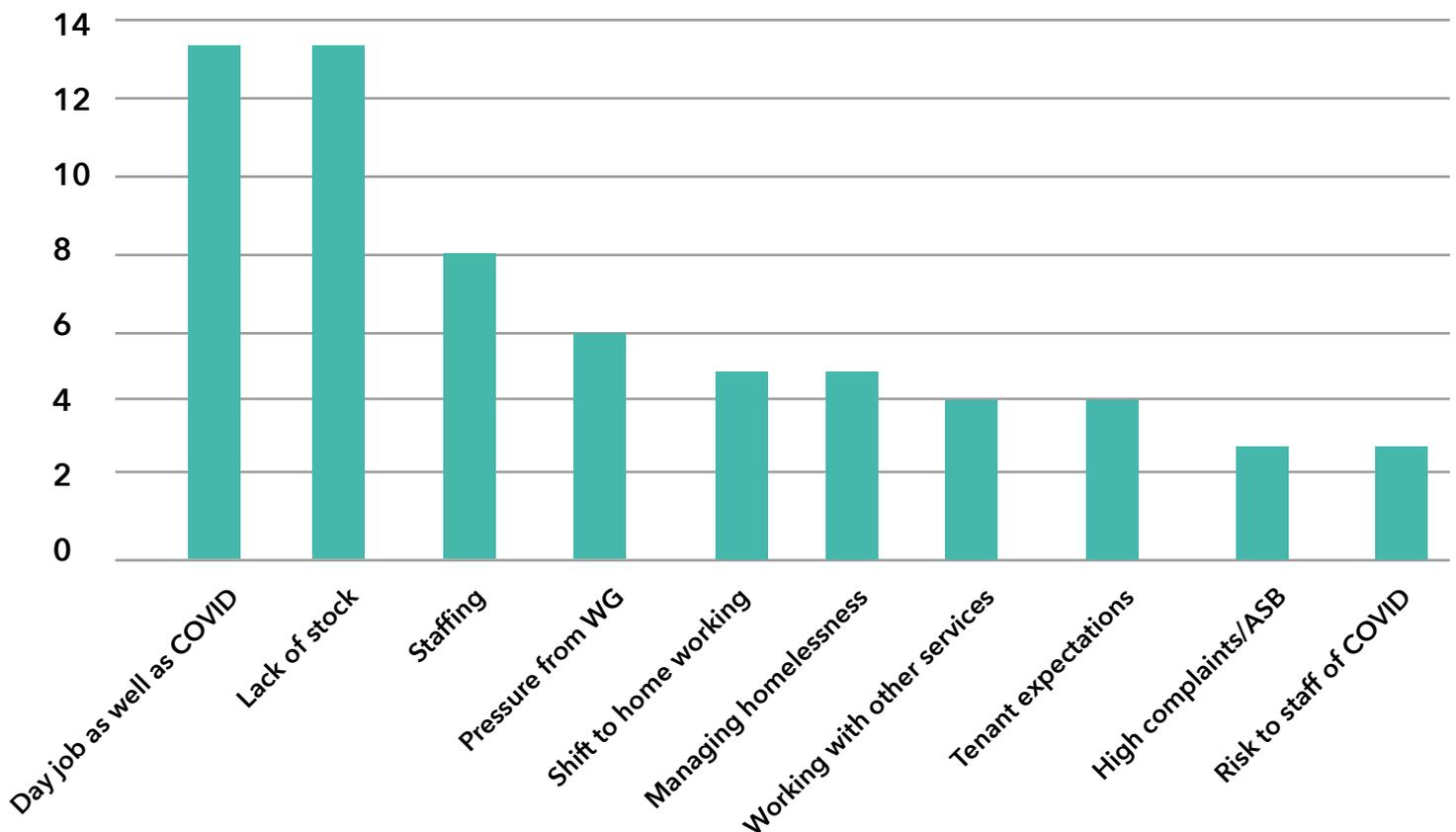


Supporting housing professionals to thrive

Identifying the pressures

Respondents told us about the pressures they are under, for many they have had to deal with their regular role with added responsibilities because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents also reported that issues that existed before the onset of the pandemic (eg lack of affordable housing and staff capacity within teams) served to increase the pressure further.

What pressures are you under?



"Finding affordable accommodation in the private sector, getting support providers to assist us in our role, lack of emergency accommodation to offer people."

"1. Increased number of temporary accommodation units (doubled) 2. Increasing number of ASB within temporary accommodation. 3. Difficulties in having residents to comply with COVID guidance placing increased risk to staff."

"1) Meeting Welsh Government's often unrealistic timescales in order to apply for grants etc 2) Lack of resource to progress at the speed Welsh Government believe we

should be expanding our stock. 3) Trying to do my best without all the IT/infrastructure tools needed"

"Much higher workload and higher demands to move clients into permanent accommodation. Due to the senior team having greater workloads it is difficult to turn to them for support so the role can feel quite isolating."

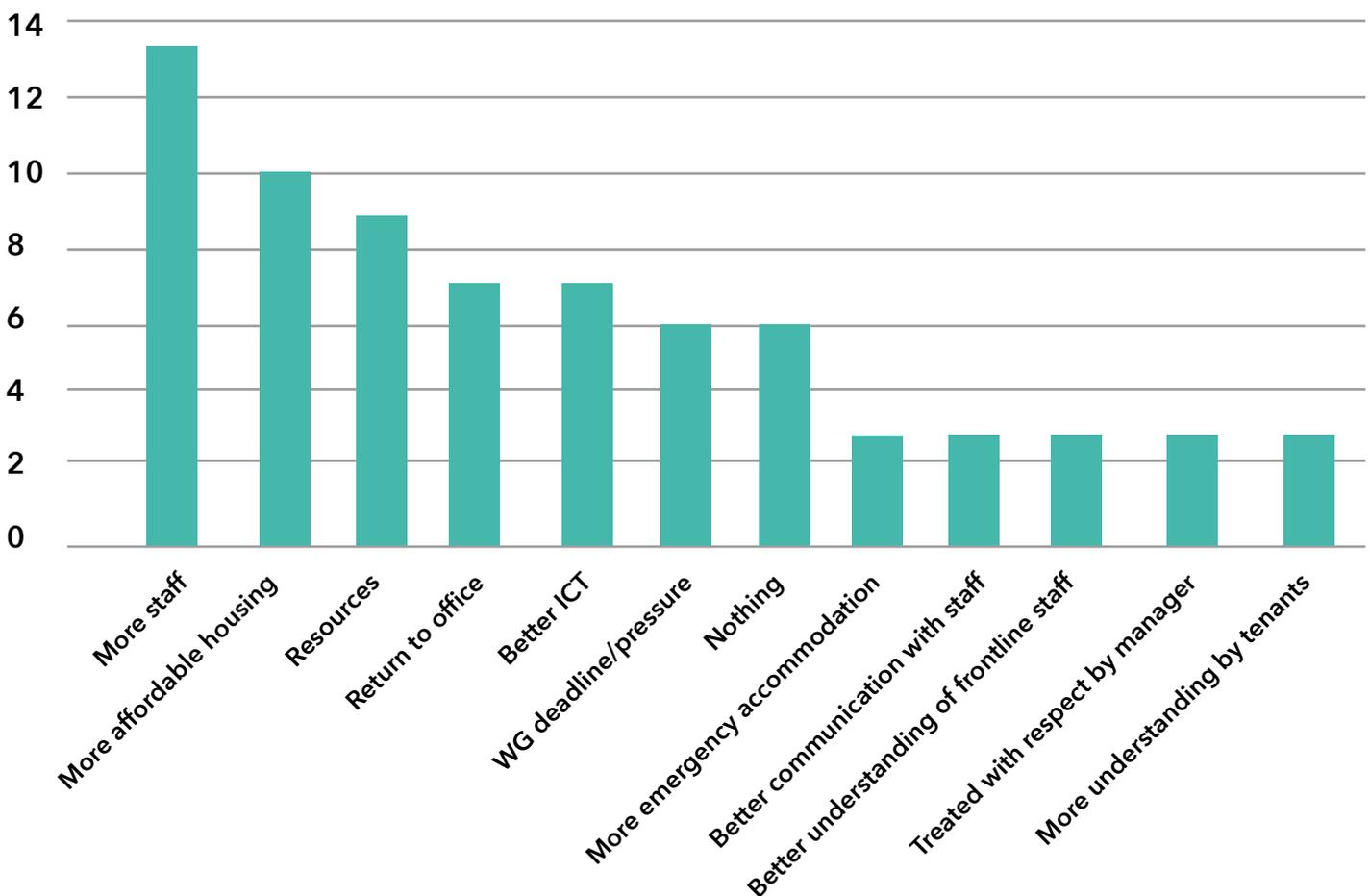
"Single person homeless presentations have increased, slower turn around of properties making delays in allocations, customer expectations."



Overcoming challenges

The responses to the question “what would make your life easier?” clearly demonstrated the perception that there is a need for more staff to support work, and also more housing for prospective tenants. While not at the top of the list for some staff they would like more validation than they currently receive in their roles from managers, colleagues and tenants. On a practical level, people identified a need for better ICT, the opportunity to work in the office and an easing on pressure from Welsh Government to meet deadlines.

What would make your role easier?



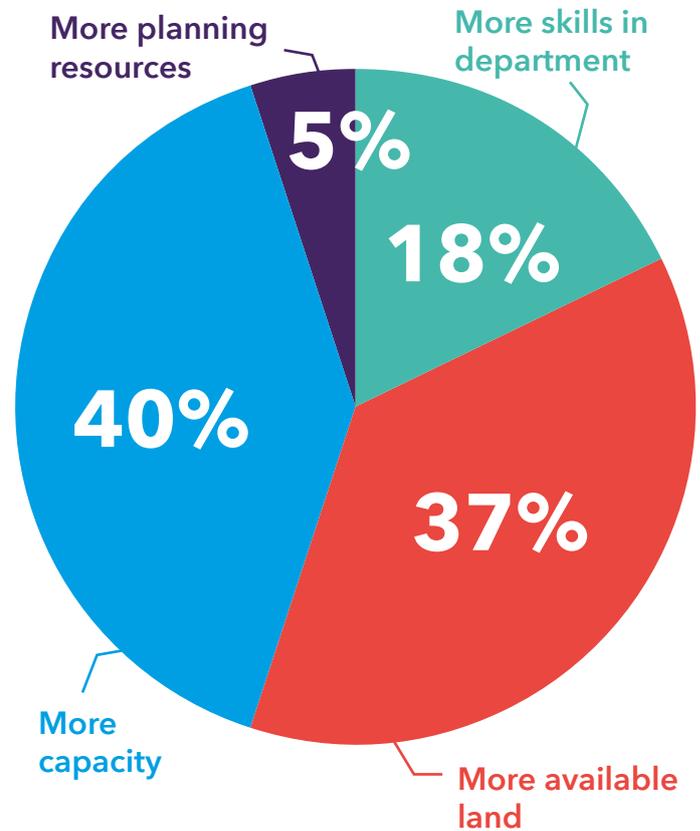
Organisational outlook and response

Housing's status and resourcing

We wanted to know the extent to which housing is seen as a priority by local authorities. Only 10% thought it was low, with 48% seeing housing as a high priority.

We asked respondents if they thought their local authority's ability to deliver new homes had changed over 2020 - 46% thought it had improved and only 17% suggesting it decreased.

Nearly 80% of respondents highlighted the need for more land and resources, suggesting that additional capital investment will need to be a focus to reach housing targets.



"More staff, a highly skilled advice team, able to answer more queries to free up Housing Officer's time."

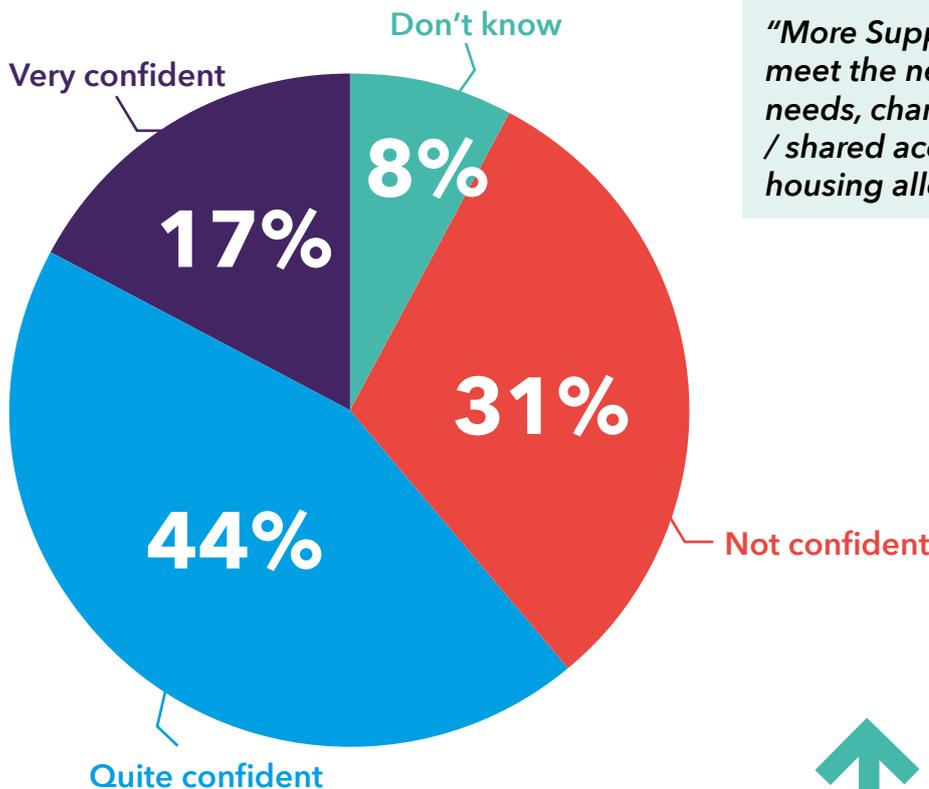
"1. Certainty of funding post Phase 2/3 and a three-year budget. 2. More experienced staff. 3. Allow Covid-safe night shelter provision. Being able to return to the office a couple of days a week and seeing colleagues."



Providing sustainable housing solutions

Respondents reported feeling under pressure to ensure there are permanent housing solutions found for people currently in temporary accommodation. In achieving this in the present climate, 61% of respondents are confident that their local authority can achieve this.

We then asked what additional measures staff felt were needed to improve their local authority's ability to adequately house people in temporary accommodation. A large majority of respondents (81%) highlighted the need for more housing, of different types, including affordable, private and emergency. Within this 40% of respondents highlighted a growing need for single-person accommodation.



"The provision of interim / temporary accommodation has been achieved, but the challenge of finding move-on / settled accommodation later on is likely to present significant challenges"

"Need suitable accommodation for single people with complex need: substance misuse, offending behaviour, mental health problems, chaotic lifestyles, multiple previous evictions"

"Additional resources and more affordable homes/incentives for private landlords to come on board. Review LHA levels"

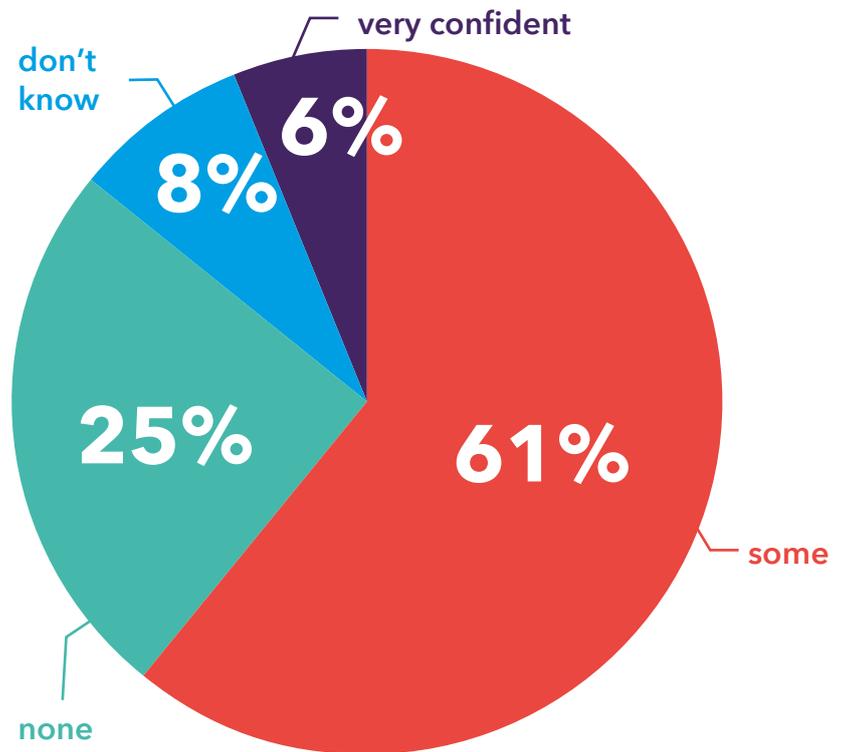
"Close working arrangements with RSL partners, set up of a Social Housing Letting Agency."

"More Supporting People provision to meet the needs of those with complex needs, change in attitude towards HMOs / shared accommodation and change in housing allowance, build more housing"



Working across health and care

Recognising the need to ensure strong partnerships between housing departments and health bodies we asked about the confidence of staff in the partnerships between the two. 61% have "some" confidence in these partnerships, 25% have "none", 8% "don't know" and 6% are "very confident".



"General support and partnerships with health not great."

"Some partnerships emerging from pandemic."

"High expectations on housing to stomp up at last minute with housing solution to hospital discharge"

"Bouncing people between services."

"Very little partnership. Health ask for accommodation for clients who should not be discharged at no notice."

"Great relationship with individuals but overall it is one of the biggest barriers e.g. bouncing people between services."

"They have no capacity to support the immense issues faced by homelessness."



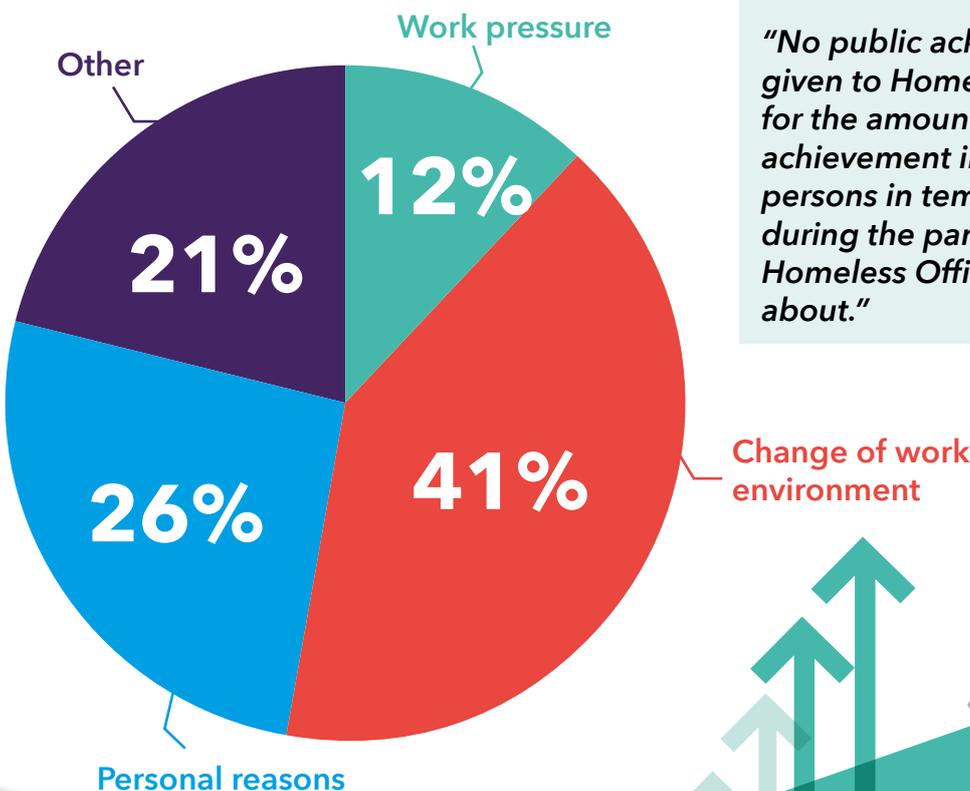
Staff well-being

Supporting staff well-being

One-third of respondents felt they needed support with their mental health. This was due to a range of reasons but included work pressure (41%) and a change of work environment (26%). We then asked people if they had felt supported by their local authority. The majority of staff (87%) did feel supported by their local authority and their manager.

Those who had felt they needed more support highlighted the following issues:

- Staff feeling isolated, sometimes undervalued with insufficient communication with managers/team
- Struggling with childcare and home-schooling, combined with high workloads
- The financial costs of working from home



“Lack of communication from manager probably due to the pressure they personally are under. Feel that the section has become fragmented due to lack of communication and sharing of experiences”

“The LA talked a good game in prioritising family time etc, but the workload kept coming. I need general support in my role as I am doing it all myself, and cannot cope well in the long term with the additional work and pressures of lock down and childcare!”

“A phone call now and again to check I was doing ok would have been good”

“Better availability of counselling, when needed. Acknowledgement of work done by housing and support staff from senior officers and members”

“No public acknowledgement has been given to Homeless Teams within Wales for the amount of hard work and their achievement in getting all homeless persons in temporary accommodation during the pandemic. Feels like Housing/ Homeless Officers have been forgotten about.”



What's changed?

When we carried out the previous survey of local authority housing professionals in January/February 2020 we could not have foreseen the extent to which lives and work were about to change.

In that report we found that housing professionals are driven by their desire to help people and they feel that their local authority recognises housing's role in creating sustainable communities.

When we repeated the survey to ask further questions, we wanted to know the extent to which circumstances had changed. In the first survey respondents told us that they had high workloads, second time they told us that their already heavy workloads had been intensified by the pandemic.

One area which has noticeably changed is that in January limited budgets were identified as the second greatest concern by staff (after workload). In our repeat survey budgets were not identified as a concern. Conversely lack of affordable housing was a key area of concern by 8% of responses in January and that this had increased to 25% by December.

When we asked respondents about what challenges they face and what would make their role easier, the answers to the first and second surveys had not changed substantially. They highlighted the need for more staff and better ICT.

However there are new issues that people highlighted: wanting to return to the office and better availability of emergency accommodation.

Another change has been a perception of local authorities ability to reduce homelessness which in January showed 50% support for, good, or, very good, this had increased to 61%, on repeating the survey - an 11% increase in positive perception.

This increased positive view was also reflected by responses to the questions about the collaboration within their local authority to deliver more housing which in January was highlighted as 58% and had increased to 67% by December.

The second survey also brought up new areas including working with other services, pressure from Welsh Government and the shift to home working which have affected staff across local authorities. Staff also told us of an increase in anti-social behaviour and their broader concerns about staff catching COVID-19.





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