

Wellbeing at Work in Housing

Executive Summary



Shine a light
on mental health



What the research was about

This research tells the story of working in social housing right now. Its aim is to assess what needs to be done to support the wellbeing of people working in housing and help maintain the high levels of professionalism compassion and effectiveness their roles demand. Our team focused on people in customer-facing roles and those leading social housing and homelessness organisations. We did not have a remit to examine tenant or customer perspectives of what it is like to live in housing – that is a separate question, for another piece of research.

The future of the housing profession depends on attracting and retaining highly skilled young people. We would like this report to be used by leaders in housing and homelessness, to consider how employee wellbeing can be supported in a sector that can be challenging and has been profoundly affected by the wider context of austerity and changing public policy. As you will read in this report, wellbeing is stretched further still during 2020 as we responded to the global pandemic of Covid-19.

From late April to early June, four survey strands were completed by 220 people working in housing and homelessness organisations. This research report ‘shines a light’ on the issues we found, and makes some recommendations to further improve how we support the wellbeing of those who work in housing.

The challenges of working in the housing and homelessness sector

There were already plenty of challenges facing those leading and working in housing and homelessness organisations:

- Brexit and the wider economic and social climate that was already driving up homelessness figures and social housing waiting list numbers
- Insufficient social housing supply to prevent or remedy homelessness
- Particular financial constraints on charitable homelessness organisations, such as unstable short-term funding and the impact on their income from some charity shop closures even before the pandemic
- Limited ability to help those with no recourse to public funds but who were in housing need
- Impact on younger people (under 35) of the local housing allowance and the shortage of affordable options in the private rented sector.



**And then
there was
Covid...**

Key findings

Younger Housing Professionals

1. Younger housing professionals have a very strong sense of purpose and vision and this drives them more than factors like pay.
2. They want to make an impact and they see housing as a career where they can make a difference.
3. **There is not yet a sufficiently clear development path.** Many respondents to the survey would like more structure in career development planning, to see where they are headed.
4. In the main, younger housing professionals said their organisation was supporting them in this new way of working, including lots of initiatives to help emotional health and mental wellbeing. However, some felt that stronger 'structures' of support were necessary.
5. Despite Covid-19 causing challenges in the work environment and widespread feelings of anxiety, some respondents identified 'saving graces' and hopes for a more positive future.



Housing CEOs

6. **A keen sense of responsibility** was felt for all staff and tenant customers – their wellbeing and their livelihoods.
7. CEOs are human too! Whilst feeling a heavy weight of responsibility for their organisation, there were personal caring responsibilities and concerns pressing on respondents, resulting in reports of feeling 'exhausted' and 'lonely' at times.
8. There was a range of activities offered by CEOs, helping people remain connected to each other and the organisation. These mirrored the sort of wellbeing support that younger housing professionals said that they wanted.
9. The majority of CEOs felt supported by their boards, but this was not universal and there were suggestions on how to improve this.
10. There was a very strong focus on mental health, when CEOs were considering the sort of support they needed to offer. There is potential for embedding the **#ShineALight** commitment guide across the sector to help enable this.

Key findings

Homelessness Frontline Workers

- 11. Many frontline homelessness workers felt a sense of anxiety and disconnection from their organisation.** They suggested that communication and ‘checking-in’ from line managers to ask how they were, or to thank them for their work, would improve the situation.
- 12.** Workers felt constrained in what they could do for their clients in isolation. COVID-19 seemed to throw the need for a joined-up approach into sharp relief. For example, frontline Homelessness workers could not provide access to specialist support for mental health and addiction.
- 13.** The survey responses from frontline workers were attuned to the mental health needs of clients, and the need for wider support to provide this. A number of respondents referred to psychologically informed environments (PIE).¹
- 14.** Ideas on future policy solutions very clearly supported accommodation-led approaches, such as Housing First, to stop the revolving door of more temporary hostel-based traditional responses.
- 15.** There were a few concerns from respondents, that they had sufficient equipment to keep them safe (*e.g. appropriate PPE*), but this wasn’t an issue for the majority of respondents.

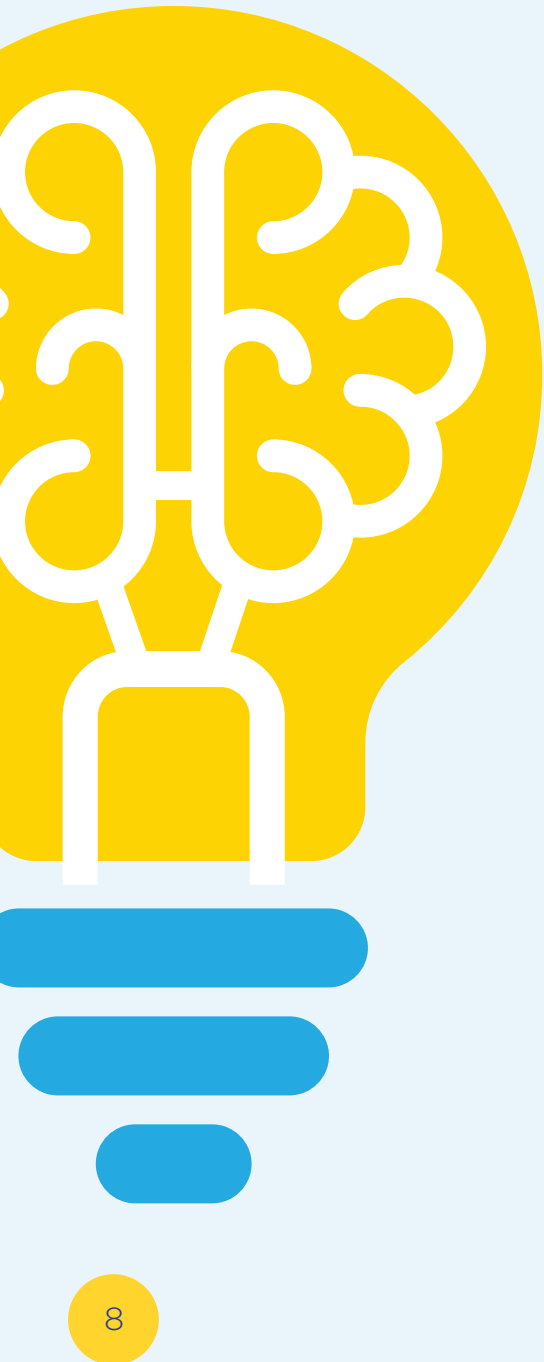


¹ Homelessness organisations already have a strong focus on ‘psychologically informed environments’ but this is not part of the everyday language of housing providers. The Frontline Futures report (Richardson et al, 2014, pg 16) discussed the need for psychologically informed environments (PIE) and particularly through (i) reflective practice and (ii) action learning.

Homelessness CEOs

16. As with the housing organisation CEOs, there was a keen sense of responsibility and concern for frontline workers and for their physical safety and mental wellbeing.
17. Exhaustion and isolation were also feelings that were reported by homelessness CEOs. The survey responses included feelings of anxiety and depression too.
18. Most CEOs felt they had the right level of support from their board members/trustees. However, some felt that the board were getting too involved in everyday operations and that this was using valuable time that needed to be directed to staff and clients.
19. **The disconnect between frontline workers and CEOs was apparent** in homelessness organisations, as it was in housing organisations. Frontline workers wanting more support, recognition and gratitude, and CEOs thinking that they were providing this support in the most part. **Something was being lost in translation.**
20. There were two key themes emerging from the ideas for housing and homelessness policy: (i) the importance of a housing first type of approach and (ii) the necessity of mental health support services for clients and for psychologically informed environments to benefit staff and clients.





Conclusions

From analysis of the findings from all four surveys in this research project, we can draw the following conclusions:

- Housing and homelessness organisations mobilised rapidly to support staff to work at home in 'lockdown' during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Chief executive officers' concern for the safety and wellbeing of their staff and their clients was not communicated sufficiently. **Not all frontline and professional staff understood that their concerns were heard, and their work was appreciated.**
- Across all four surveys, feelings of anxiety, isolation and depression were reported throughout organisations. The language used by those working in homelessness organisations was much more explicitly linked to mental health and to psychologically informed environments.
- Younger housing professionals and homelessness frontline workers have a huge amount of dedication to their tenants and clients, and an underlying wish to have a positive impact on the world around them. It was very clear that **younger professionals want to make an impact externally, as well as progress a career with an organisation.**

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- There is a need to amplify the work on continuing professional development and professional pathways that appears to link with the CIH's current work on professional standards.
 - **Short-term accommodation and short-term employment are detrimental to both tenant customers and employees in homelessness settings.** Stable funding would enable more professional development and improve outcomes.
 - There's a need for strong networks of professional and social support at all levels to enhance wellbeing and thereby support resilience and enhance performance at work.
 - **There was strong and consistent support for an accommodation-led solution, a housing first approach to sustainably resolve homelessness.**



Recommendations

For the whole housing and homelessness sector:

1. Highlight the work of housing and homelessness organisations to show the vital public health intervention during the first wave of the pandemic - keeping tenants safe in their homes and bringing homeless people in off the streets.
2. Amplify awareness of wellbeing and mental health needs by signing up to the Shine a Light commitment guide. It includes excellent ideas on what housing organisations can do to support employees.
3. Consider training and awareness raising of PIE, to support staff, tenants and clients in your organisation.
4. Support and nurture younger housing professionals. Create clear career pathways and continuous professional development plans to support and guide their career progression.
5. Make sure that employees have the stable platform of a long term contract of employment on which to build their career.
6. Harness younger professionals' strong desire to have a wider impact on society. It's more important to them than material or financial reward (although appropriate remuneration should be considered a basic 'hygiene' factor in motivation - it should be a given).



For Board Members/Trustees:

7. Your role is at the strategic level. Check that you're getting the balance right between support for your executive team and heavy oversight of everyday operations
8. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to be the last emergency of its kind. Chairs should work with their CEOs to consider what training might be useful to board members and trustees in an increasingly VUCA² world.
9. Make sure that boards are trained in and comfortable with the language of PIE and emotional wellbeing.
10. Take responsibility for communicating messages of the Board's support and appreciation across the workforce to help reduce the perception of distance between the heads of organisations and the frontline team.



2 Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous



Recommendations

For CIH:

11. Make sure that the developing work on professional standards responds to young housing professionals' desire for clear career pathways.
12. Collaborate with other professional bodies and organisations to develop a psychologically informed environment (PIE) framework, linked to the **#ShineALight** commitment guide. Embed wellbeing and good mental health across professional standards, training and events.





For Government/ MHCLG

- 13. The homelessness response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the greatest public health interventions in recent memory.** Build on this to ensure we don't go back to 'business as usual' for street homelessness.
- 14.** There is clear support at all levels for an accommodation-led, housing first approach to resolving homelessness.
- 15.** During the pandemic, anxiety about the welfare of their tenants and clients was having an impact on professionals' emotional wellbeing and mental health. Their related housing policy recommendations included:
 - a. building more social housing
 - b. revisiting the benefits support system - universal credit and local housing allowance rates, particularly for younger people.
- 16.** Provide long-term funding, particularly in homelessness organisations, to support the secure contracts of employment that enable a professional workforce to be developed and sustained.

Creating a better future



We uncovered some common capabilities, priorities and concerns across all four survey groups. These included:





If we want to create a social housing sector that attracts and nurtures young professionals, we need to help them tackle these competing elements and support them to cope with our VUCA world.

The following inputs from organisational leaders and our professional body could help them thrive and fulfil their potential to help others in turn:

- recognition, thanks, career development pathways
- time for self-care, a framework for mental well-being, coaching and mentoring
- psychologically informed environment, the reassurance of shared plans, specific support for working from home such as online yoga
- confidence that long term solutions will be delivered such as housing first initiatives and an increased supply of social housing.

The research was undertaken during 2020 by [Professor Jo Richardson \(FCIH\)](#) and [Dr Andrew Mitchell](#) at De Montfort University, Leicester. [You can follow Jo's research on Twitter] [@socialhousing](#)

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With these elements in place we can create a better future for young housing and homelessness professionals. One where they are:

Supported and recognised for their positive impact in society

Trained in the approach of psychologically informed environments, to benefit the well being and mental health of colleagues tenants and clients

Ambitious for their future and confident in the career development opportunities and pathways across the sector

Recognised clearly in their organisations for their contribution, before and during the COVID-19 crisis, through more explicit communication and messages of gratitude for work well done

Sustained through a clear and visible package of measures to continue working in the sector, supporting tenants and clients in our VUCA world.