

# **Wellbeing at Work in Housing**

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# Foreword

By Aileen Evans

Mental health is a high priority for me, and I've been using my time as President of the Chartered Institute of Housing to raise awareness of mental health in housing, raise our game in the housing profession, and raise cash for Mind. Housing can be a testing sector at the best of times, with challenges to the wellbeing of both colleagues and customers, so it makes absolute sense that we should work together to #shinealight on the issue.

By the end of March, it was clear that 2020 was going to be a year that tested us like no other. For me, the experience of leading a housing association through a pandemic and national lockdown has been exhausting and inspiring. It's revealed the breadth and complexity of our role in communities; the strength of our partnerships; the commitment and creativity of our colleagues. It's brought home once more just how much what we do matters. But the wear and tear on colleagues has been clear to see, as they weather the effect of Covid 19 on their own families and continue to do their best for our customers.

The future of our housing profession depends on being able to attract younger colleagues, and support them to avoid 'burnout' and retain the compassion that's a critical element of our work. We'd already planned to investigate the wellbeing of younger housing professionals as part of the #shinealight campaign, and Jo Richardson – a leading academic, as well as CIH Vice President – had offered to take on the research. In view of the unprecedented situation, we agreed to broaden the scope of the project, to include housing Chief Executives, and those working in the homelessness sector, alongside young housing professionals. I'm grateful to Homeless Link, Campbell Tickell and the GEM programme for access to their networks.

The research findings are striking. There's so much common ground across the four groups we covered, particularly the concern for customers that came through in all four groups. But there are also issues that affect each group specifically: the uncertainty about future careers for young colleagues in housing organisations; the anxiety of short-term employment contracts that reflect the unstable funding in many homelessness organisations; and the burden of responsibility for Chief Executives, dominated by the concern 'are we doing enough to keep people safe?'

But despite the large amount of common ground, there's a disconnect between leaders and younger, customer-facing colleagues. Even with the acute consciousness of their responsibility, and the systems they'd set up, CEOs' willingness to help wasn't reaching many of their young colleagues. Many felt isolated, unsupported and anxious through the weeks of lockdown.

This report points the way to areas where we need to learn more. But it also makes some clear recommendations for housing and homelessness organisations, the wider profession and Government. My hope is that it will help us learn from 2020 and strengthen both the sector and the profession for future challenges.

# Executive Summary

## 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 was 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.



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.

### **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).<sup>1</sup>
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.

### **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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.
- 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 VUCA<sup>2</sup> 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.

### **For CIH:**

11. Make sure that the developing work on professional standards responds to young housing professionals' desire for clear career pathways.

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<sup>2</sup> Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous

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:

- practicality and adaptability
- helpfulness and supportiveness
- partnership working
- the importance of affordable homes
- the opportunity of 'housing first'
- client focused empathy
- anxiety about the future
- Uncertainty about career progression
- focus on social impact.
- exhaustion

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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.**

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<sup>3</sup> Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous

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## Introduction

This research tells the story of working in social housing right now. Its aim is to assess what needs to be done in order to support the wellbeing of people working in housing. The research team heard from those in customer-facing roles and those leading social housing and homelessness organisations. This project focused on what it is like to *work* in housing; it 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 project team had experience of researching this area, and in particular they wanted to build on work from 2014 which was published in the CIH *Frontline Futures* report<sup>4</sup>.

We would like this report to be used by leaders in housing, to consider how the sector supports the wellbeing of people who work in housing and homelessness. As you will read in this report, wellbeing was stretched further still during 2020 as we responded to the global pandemic of Covid-19. However, even before the pandemic there were colleagues articulating the pressures they felt, of trying to support tenants and house homeless people in a wider context of austerity and change.

The aim of this research report is to share what we have found – to ‘shine a light’ on the issues - and to make some recommendations of what we can do, together, to further improve approaches to support the wellbeing of those who work in housing.

In the next section of the report, we describe what we did – the methodology of the research. Then, we move onto four separate sections taking each survey strand in turn, hearing the detail of what we were told by (1) young housing professionals, (2) chief executives in the social housing sector, (3) ‘frontline’ workers in homelessness organisations, and (4) chief executives of homelessness organisations. Following on from this, the report then draws together the similarities across all 220 respondents in the project to identify the priorities for supporting wellbeing. In the final section of the report we highlight the conclusions and make some recommendations.

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<sup>4</sup> Richardson, J et al (2014) *Frontline Futures: New era, changing role for housing officers*, Coventry: CIH <https://www.cih.org/publications/frontline-futures>

## Methodology

This research project started out quite differently to how it ended up. At the beginning of the year, the brief was to try to understand what young housing professionals thought about their work – so that housing organisations could respond in order to continue to attract and retain these colleagues in our sector. However, just as the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic were starting to be felt, we thought we would include some questions about the change in working practices and what young professionals thought about this period of change. We also realised that these fundamental changes to the way we work were not just being felt by housing officers, but in all areas of the sector. So, we sought ethical approval to widen the research project and included further surveys for chief executive officers in the housing and homelessness sectors and also for ‘frontline’ workers in homelessness organisations.

Online surveys were distributed via a link that was shared amongst professional networks. For the young housing professionals survey, the support of the [GEM programme](#) was key, and the researchers were thankful for the assistance of Trevor Smith and all of the GEM participants. The housing chief executives’ online survey link was distributed amongst a professional network. The research team are grateful for the support of Homeless Link in testing the questions and sharing the relevant survey links for both the ‘frontline’ workers and the chief executives in homelessness organisations.

From late April to early June, four survey strands were completed by 220 people working in housing and homelessness organisations. 218 were paid employees, and 2 were volunteers in the homeless sector.

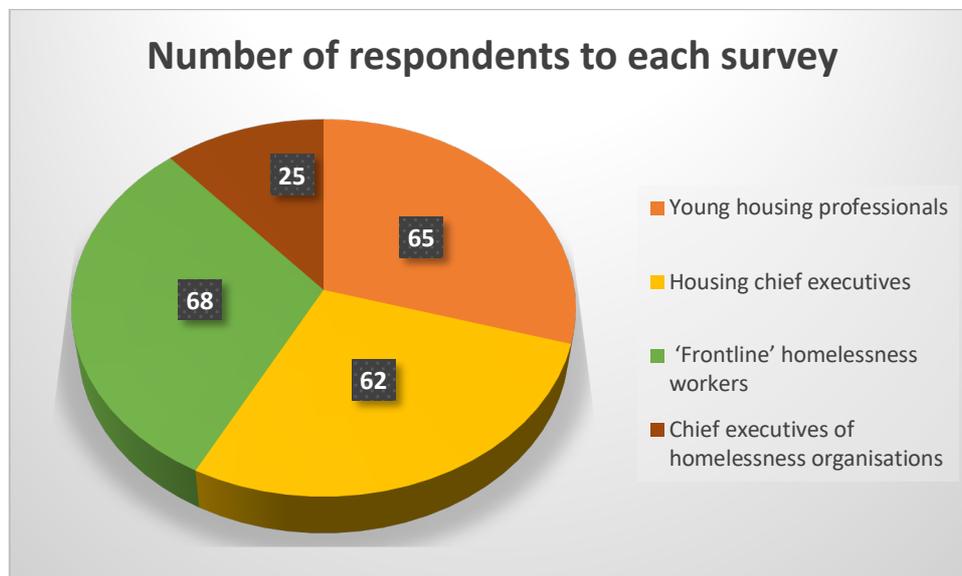


Figure 1: Breakdown of survey respondents - role

The research did not seek to explore a detailed breakdown of the experience of wellbeing by protected characteristic groups, so detailed personal data was not sought on age, ethnicity, ability or sexuality. However, the surveys did ask people to say how they identified on gender.



Figure 2: Breakdown of survey respondents – identified gender (housing sector)

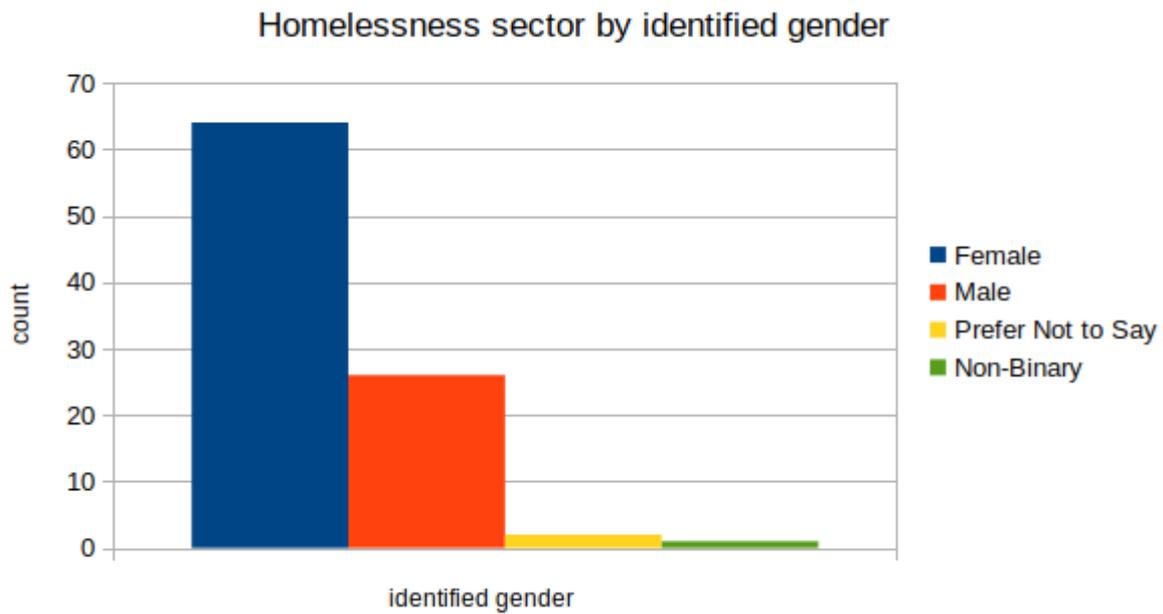


Figure 3: Breakdown of survey respondents - identified gender (homelessness sector)

Overall, more of the survey respondents in the two housing sector surveys were male, and in the two homelessness surveys more were female. However, across the two CEO surveys, there was a slightly higher representation of men. By contrast, there were many more women than men in the sample who responded to both frontline workers surveys.

## Younger Housing Professionals

65 people who were on the GEM<sup>5</sup> programme or were associated with it as part of a network of young professionals (Generation Z, born since 1980), answered a series of questions about life at work. Whilst a number of questions linked to 'post pandemic' working, we also asked participants to consider their housing career more generally – to think back to 'before Covid'.

Generation Z was stratified in the survey, into smaller age-bands. When we looked at age, alongside the type of organisation respondents worked in, those who were slightly older, and defined as male, tended to work for larger housing organisations; whereas younger respondents who defined as female tended to be employed by smaller housing organisations (e.g. with fewer than 9000 housing stock). The size of the sample in this survey (65) means that we can't make assumptions about the sector as a whole, but this was an interesting point to note for this survey. Smaller organisations may have fewer career development opportunities and less access to extensive training programmes, which could be limiting for career progression.

When young professionals were asked to think generally about their housing career, and their expectations from their employer, a number of themes emerged. The responses were divided by gender and cross-referenced according to the age-bands. These were then coded according to the main theme within the response.

### Expectations for role-specific support

The most reported expectation concerned respondents seeking support from their employer for their **continuing professional development**. This theme was mentioned 41 times, and is clearly at the forefront of many respondents' minds.

- Some respondents saw this as value for the employer as well as the employee, or where continuing professional development (CPD) was understood to motivate employees to do good work. This was expressed, for example, by one female respondent wrote:  
*"For an employee to be their best in the workplace then the office cannot be stagnant; instead, it must be an arena for CPD and self-growth".*
- Others were more focused on their own development, as reported by another female, who said:  
*"I would expect my employer to support me in where I wanted to go in my career and to assist me in gaining the relevant skills, knowledge and experience for my future".*
- This was the view most expressed, and is captured by a male respondent:  
*"I would expect opportunities to grow, either through training, expansion of skills and collaboration with colleagues".*

A second key theme emerged in answers to this question, of expecting more **generic support** (distinct from professional CPD). Although the question did not ask about the context of Covid-19,

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<sup>5</sup> Information on the GEM programme is available online [here](#)

people were already working from home in an uncertain context at the time of the survey. Respondents wanted to have their employers' support for when they worked at home.

- As a female participant noted:  
*"Having regular catch ups while we're working from home is probably the most useful thing"*
- While a second female respondent (in the younger age bracket - born between 1995 and 2000) commented that  
*"Especially with the circumstances at the moment, working from home can feel quite isolating. So, it is more important for the managers in the team to support staff to make sure they are okay with everything they need to do."*
- Another female respondent, within the same younger age band, similarly expressed that she  
*"expect[ed] my manager to keep in regular contact with me, to make sure I [am] keeping on track and keep me focussed on tasks and ensure I am doing them correctly and in the most efficient way".*
- There was a need by some for **recognition and encouragement**, within this theme of support, for example from the following four respondents, who said that they wanted:  
*"[For] my employer to support decisions I have taken that I feel are in the bigger interest of the organisation as a whole".*  
*"[To] trust me to do my job/self-motivate".*  
*"Encouragement and support".*  
*"[Encouragement and support] provides you with confidence that they are thinking about your role in the organization".*

In the answers to the question about their career and expectations of their employer, a further theme of **career progression** emerged. This links to, but goes beyond, CPD. A number of respondents identified the value of having a clearly defined route for professional progression.

- Two survey participants (both female), said:  
*"Regular progression talks with my line manager have been essential for maintaining my personal drive to progress within the company."*  
*"Progression is regularly spoken about and advertised on a variety of platforms with various schemes and training running all the time to help enable employees to achieve their personal and professional goals."*
- Other respondents saw the need for a clear progression route map:  
*"There should be a clear route to management and employees must know how to get there"*  
*"[I'd] like to see clear progression opportunities based on the individual's skillset and be given opportunities to prove skillset through secondments and other forms".*

Finally, it is important to notice what was *not said* in responses to this question about expectations from employers.

- Only two out of 65 people mentioned payment, and fewer than a handful discussed flexible working.
- One of the respondents (male) who did highlight pay, said:  
*"I would like to know earning potential as I believe this would motivate me and help me make an informed decision about what route I would like to take in my career".*

It may be that on both of these fronts (flexibility and pay), there was satisfaction amongst respondents and that these were seen as 'hygiene' factors<sup>6</sup> rather than motivational per se. Further research would be interesting to test this.

As we will see in further responses in this survey of younger housing professionals, there is a repetitive theme around **values and purpose** which the housing sector would do well to reflect in their approaches to employing and retaining professionals.

## Goals and Impact

The survey also asked respondents 'what impact do you wish to make in housing' and 'what would you like to see your employer do to help you achieve your goals'?

It should be noted that several participants responded that they were on two-year contracts, some of which were coming to an end, and this led some to express **uncertainty** about their future options, and even their career paths, although most of this group expressed an interest in remaining within the housing sector.

- Of those who reported uncertainty, the following comment from a 25 to 30-year-old female is quite typical:  
*"At the moment I feel quite uncertain about my future career path. I am enjoying my role and would be keen to stay in the housing sector, but I'm not sure what area I'd like to stay in".*

Much as we see precarity of tenure constrain the ability of people to 'create home'<sup>7</sup>, we can equally see uncertainty impacting on professional's ability to focus on career development.

- Most survey respondents addressed their ambitions, and while one former architecture student aspired "to create beautiful buildings", most respondents reflected on their ambition to improve the sector overall, whether this was through being able to provide "better quality and affordable housing", or:  
*"[To help] transform the housing sector in terms of talent recruitment as I feel like not enough is being done to attract young people".*
- Others were more focused on the business efficiencies of the sector, suggesting that they wanted  
*"to make the finance function [of the HA] more efficient and effective so that it can actually assist the business rather than just being a processing department".*
- Some participants sought to become influencers in housing, either at the level of policy

<sup>6</sup> Herzberg, F (1964). "The Motivation-Hygiene Concept and Problems of Manpower". *Personnel Administration* (27): 3–7.

<sup>7</sup> Richardson, J (2019) *Place and Identity: the performance of home*, London: Routledge

*“to help shape housing policy to ensure that everybody had access to a safe, secure and genuinely affordable home”*,

or, from another respondent, in terms of a practice which would lead to:

*“an impact in improving and transforming the processes, culture and services within housing organisations to bolster **the vision of the sector which is to better the lives of its residents**”*.

- Several respondents commented on their ambition to **change the (public) perception** of social housing

*“and make some kind of difference around the perceptions of social housing from both general public and tenants”*

and even to

*“reduce the stigma of being a social housing tenant”, thereby helping “social housing to be great and customers living in it can feel proud”*.

This vision corresponds well with wider sector work – for example CIH’s *Rethinking Social Housing* report<sup>8</sup>.

In answering the question about goals and impact, there were respondents who referred to **training and education** as an important way that employers could support career progression for them.

- One female respondent specifically wanted her *“employer support through funding [her] CIH Level so [she] can get chartered status”*.
- Indeed, as a male respondent observed *“there was quite a gap between the experiences of the officers and the team manager. Attempts to bridge this gap would encourage me to want to stay long term”*,
- while others simply stated that *“I would like my employer to offer more development opportunities in a more structured and transparent way”*.

One answer to this question, very clearly summarises what respondents thought employers could do to support their vision and goals:

*“...a supportive organisation should allow opportunities to be flexible in job role and meet and shadow people in other areas of the business more frequently and allow more opportunity to trial new positions and shadow so people know what is right for them long term and get exposure to all the various strands of housing.”*

### **And then along came a global pandemic...**

The survey asked younger housing professionals how they were feeling about their work at the moment. The aim of this question was to see what impact the uncertain global environment (most readily illustrated by the pandemic) was having on them. This question asked respondents to select from a range of twelve pre-defined options.

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<sup>8</sup> Rees, M (2018) *Rethinking Social Housing*, Coventry: CIH  
<https://www.cih.org/publications/rethinking-social-housing-final-report-1>

Hearteningly for the sector, by far the most often selected answer – by both men and women – was:

*“I am in regular contact with my line manager and can raise issues/ concerns if I need”.*

The second most popular answer selected was:

*“I am clear about what I am expected to be working on”.*

It should be noted that this survey was answered during April and May – a couple of months into lockdown where new working practices were becoming embedded, of which the longer-term effects were perhaps not yet being felt. We should not be complacent in the face of this early response. Time has worn on and there may be effects of fatigue now that were not evident at the point the survey was live.

Indeed, while positive responses were dominant, they were not universal. The third most popular response (selected by six participants) was:

*“Actually, I feel a bit isolated and disconnected from my organisation”.*

More respondents felt their workload had decreased than increased at the time of the survey, but we should be cautious in interpreting this response as the impact of staff reduction through furlough may have been felt later in the Summer and early Autumn.

A majority of respondents expressed feeling very positive about their work, both in terms of their role and also in terms of the sector they worked in:

*“I am feeling positive about working in housing during the Coronavirus outbreak. I have felt proud to work for an organisation who is working with vulnerable residents to support them in ways in which we usually wouldn't”.*

*“I do feel proud to have served my community during this crisis and glad that I could work from home”.*

*“It feels like I am part of the rapid response needed to make sure the business is protected from the risks from the lockdown and that has motivated me more”.*

Not all respondents felt as positive however, with some stating that their organisation could be more

*“understanding with regards balancing working from home and home schooling. This is causing pressure that I think could be avoided”,*

while others reflected:

*“That sustained working from home has taken its toll and I feel disconnected and isolated. My work does not feel as rewarding as I would like, and I attribute this to lack of contact with frontline customers and ability to help colleagues in situations where I feel I am making a difference. I like working with people and am missing the human contact of previous roles and the office environment.”*

*"I feel unfulfilled. Though I am honoured not to have been furloughed (some in my department have), I feel like my remote workload is organisationally irrelevant. Most of my recent work has focused on CIH Level 4 as part of the GEM programme as opposed to my day to day job. This is difficult because I actually want to learn in my role. I feel like I am at a standstill".*

*"Generally positive - I still feel the same as I did prior to lockdown - that this is the sector I want to work in. Pre-lockdown I was looking for my next career opportunity, ideally moving back into a specific housing role - it has been a positive experience working in Local Government but has made me realise that housing is where I want to be".*

The Figure below illustrates the feelings expressed in responding to this question about younger housing professionals' feelings about their work at that time. While overall positive responses predominated, the sentiment word cloud shows a relative balance between words with positive and negative affective tonality



Figure 4: Younger housing professionals' feelings about their work



*“Reflection on what is important in life and work and how we can live and work in different ways and that are more respectful to our planet and people has been at the forefront of my feelings recently.”*

*“I feel that the pandemic has provided a lens to examine by behaviours more widely. As such I've made conscious efforts to improve things in my life such as healthy eating and more productive use of free time.”*

A few respondents appear to resign themselves to the inevitability of the lockdown, and almost reassure themselves that by remaining at home, they are playing a part in keeping the pandemic from spreading. The following exemplifies this sentiment:

*“I have felt less excited about life because there isn't much to do at the moment and I feel it is harder to progress at work when we are at home. I ultimately would like normality back, but I realise that by staying at home, I am helping to solve the problem and doing my bit.”*

Respondents said they felt well-equipped with technology and that organisations had facilitated networks to keep people connected. 25 respondents agreed with the statement that:

*“Working in the housing sector at this critical time (with the impact of Covid 19) has made me realise this is the area that I want to further develop my career in”.*

When asked what more their employer could do to support their **emotional health and mental wellbeing** 48% of respondents said they could not think of anything more their organisation could do to improve this area of support. Of those who gave suggestions and comments on improvements, the most commonly noted preference was to have

*“more contact with line managers”.*

Breaking the comments down further, there was a hope that line managers would initiate conversations to check-in with them, as well as facilitating more informal chats to occur between colleagues. There seemed to be a trend that more female respondents than male noted this preference for greater levels of engagement and support. In comparison, male respondents tended to identify issues around working conditions – flexible working, four-day work weeks, and better understanding of increased workloads.

The survey asked specifically about the **impact of Covid-19 on working lives**. Two males and one female respondent reported having been furloughed as a result of the changes brought about by Covid-19. However, the majority (70%) of respondents reported that their roles were unchanged. Of these, females were significantly over-represented in reporting that their roles were unchanged (71% of females reported this, compared with 48% of males). In contrast, more males than female respondents reported that they were still working, albeit undertaking different tasks or roles (38% of males, compared with 21% of females).

Those respondents who had not been furloughed, at the time, made up the overwhelming majority of cases, and reported that they were currently working from home. Common themes associated with this pertain to juggling childcare and working arrangements, making increased use of technology to maintain contact with the organisation and colleagues, and the obvious decrease in being able to do site visits and meet with clients.

Many reported, in this particular question that their workloads had increased (this difference in views compared to the earlier selection of pre-determined responses may have resulted from respondents thinking more about their working lives as they progressed through the survey). Participants also noted that their working week has become extended due in part to the difficulty of being able to distance from the 'workplace' which is now at home, as well as to the perceived increases in the volume of work required. A number of respondents expressed concern about the possible impacts of the pandemic and the lockdown policies on their clients in terms of loss of income, obtaining supplies, anti-social behaviour and **isolation**.

However, it's interesting that respondents report that using technology and working from home has also **increased their productivity**, with just a few reporting that working from home actually slowed things down. There were no significant differences among gender or age range in terms of the details of the effects of Covid-19.

### ***And the pandemic had an effect on lives beyond work***

We asked a three-part question: 'How would you describe your recent feelings generally (not only about your work in housing, but bringing your whole self into the picture)? Have your feelings changed since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic? Please explain a little more'.

Responses to this question were broadly coded in terms of 'affective tonality', and specific responses were clustered according to whether the comment was mostly positively toned, negatively toned, or expressed mixed emotions. Responses which did not express any discernible feelings were classified as 'other', of which there were very few.

Responses that were positive in emotional tonality tended to express **gratitude** for good health, for secure employment, for the opportunity to work from home without the commute to work, and the chance to spend **more time** with children, partners and/ or pets, to **work flexibly**, to **take exercise**, and so on. Some of these positively-toned responses were expressed as unexpected benefits; as '**saving graces**':

*"Lucky to have a home, secure job and good family support"*

*"contented with being home more with kids and dogs"*

*"the lockdown has enabled me to take stock and acknowledge that I don't always need to be busy to be happy"*

*"I feel very fortunate that I am able to continue working during this time"*

*"I like working from home more and not having the commute"*

Some participants were also **hopeful** for positive changes in the future:

*"there is a bit of hope too in that this could be the point things change in a similar way to how the world wars changed society and introduced the welfare state"*

*“hopeful that the future looks bright for both the industry and the world”*

Those responses which were classified as expressing a more negative affective tonality typically raised experiences of anxiety, of feeling down, depressed, **anxious**, uncertain, worried, and so on. For example:

*“I feel anxious and unsettled leaving the house so avoid it where I can”*

*“My partner now does the shop as I feel too anxious to go there myself”*

*“It has been a difficult time for me, and I am experiencing anxieties”*

*“I have also had my moments of breaking down feeling sad and alone”*

*“overwhelmed with media and news. I feel there is no escape from constant updates”*

*“days with the kids has been tough it’s led me into low moods at times”*

*“Sad that some of the amazing plans we had made can’t happen”*

*“stress (teeth grinding, twitches, low mood)”*

Finally, those responses classed as expressing **‘mixed feelings’** are characterised by expressions of positive and negative affective tonality within the same statement. Some typical responses include:

*“I have experienced good days and bad days during COVID19 pandemic”*

*“Challenging backdrop of working from home but this has made care for dog better and more flexible day”*

*“have been having waves of emotions”*

*“My mental health has been a roller-coaster in the recent months. So many highs and lows”*

Respondents were also asked in this question to think about whether their feelings had changed during the pandemic. Again, there was a mixture of emotions, some positive, but others with a more anxious tonality, and some respondents seemed to be moving between positive and anxious states.

In the ‘positive’ comments there was an interesting level of **reflection on wellbeing**, for example:

*“At first, I felt isolated, worried and generally just hard done by. But having the time to reflect and having to get on without my usual support has led me to start seeing all the positives and appreciate the strength I actually have.”*

*“Physically and mentally I feel better. Covid-19 is beyond my control outside of my direct locality. Therefore, I have become less preoccupied with external events and more focused on my holistic well-being.”*

But there were a number of examples where participants were not feeling more positive over time, indeed **isolation**, and **lack of the social interaction** of work, appear to be key:

*“The pandemic has worried me and made me quite anxious. I have struggled with my health recently. The pressures of working from home and home schooling has had an effect on my mental health.”*

*“Initially quite nervous and anxious however this adapted into a more optimistic and determined outlook to get through it. However, as time has gone on it has become more difficult and feelings and emotions have become more flat.”*

*“Because work is generally a constant- however different the day to day job is you go to the same place and see your colleagues. Also, I live alone so work provides important social interaction”*

*“I enjoy structure and routine, so it has been tough at time without these”*

*“Feeling slightly isolated as I am home all day on my own till late evening and unable to go out in the evenings with family and friends.”*

### ***Networks for connection are important***

We asked survey participants whether they had networks beyond their immediate colleagues. From the responses, it appears that most younger housing professionals were able to identify networks with whom they could connect and derive support. Given the circumstances, almost all of these were mediated via social networking platforms or WhatsApp groups, while a few would use the phone to speak with friends and family.

The majority of network supports were described as being professionally based and active, and – unsurprisingly - a number of respondents specifically identified **the GEM network as particularly helpful and supportive**. Some respondents noted that they were generally quite closed, so tended not to bother with extended networks beyond those of family and some friends. Very few respondents noted an absence of networks, while another respondent reflected that she didn’t want to seem like she was using other people only for her own benefit without giving something in return.

### ***Structured support is also important***

Whilst this largely became apparent in answers to the last question, there were responses throughout the survey which alluded to the need for structure. One respondent, early when talking about how they felt at work now, said:

*“Very happy - trying to balance myself better between work and other interests. This has been somewhat hard with home working, which makes it harder to 'switch off' (literally) at the end of the working day”.*

The emphasis was on the emotion, but in the comment about balance there was an implied reference to structure of the working day which perhaps blurred the lines between home and work, because of the ever-present connection to work as a result of information technology.

The majority of responses to the last part of the survey, which asked about support from the workplace, were overwhelmingly positive. But there were a small number of replies which were not, for example:

*“First, we were promised welfare calls, these have never happened. My manager has never contacted me direct to enquire about my welfare, on a Teams meeting she will ask us how we are and that’s it. I don’t think it’s my company’s intention to make me feel isolated, however I feel there is very little structure”.*

But most statements gave examples of the positive things their organisations were doing to support them:

*“Organisation is fab. I am 2 weeks into an 8-week professional zoom mindfulness course, and I am getting a huge amount out of it. I also did a 10 days of happiness challenge through work and that was good. I’ve learned techniques to apply to my life and not just work. I feel invested in that the mindfulness course is 2 hours a week for 8 whole weeks, which is time for me away from work, but it is paid for and I am encouraged to do it.”*

*“The support has been outstanding. I am in regular contact with my line manager and the wider team. We have morning huddles via Microsoft Teams to help everyone keep in touch. Our team have a WhatsApp group to share jokes and stories to keep people smiling. We also have access to an Employee Helpline and online services which provides a wide range of support. Our people Team have set up a 'Brew with a Stranger' where they randomly select 2 people and you have a virtual chat and a brew with someone in the business who you wouldn't usually work with. We also have a weekly Friday PM quiz for staff which provides entertainment”.*

*“They provide the access through workplace mental health first aiders, or through the employee assistance program (an external company). Also, a mental health group on our in-house workplace app. Work have also sent links to free health fitness apps and memberships”.*

*“Mental health and wellbeing is high on the agenda for my organisation so I am confident if I face problems with health and wellbeing then my organisation would be sympathetic and supportive”.*

When asked what more their organisations could be doing to support emotional health and mental wellbeing, most participants either repeated what their organisation was already doing or said ‘not much more’ or ‘not sure’. The issue of workload was raised in this question, and - as at the outset of the survey - opinions differed. For example, the following two responses were the only ones which mentioned workload in response to ‘what more could your organisation do?’.

*“I am working at less than 100% capacity at the moment due to work slowing down in lockdown yet there has been little acknowledgement of that. I think acknowledging this so*



They were also keen to make an impact in a range of ways, including *“shaping the towns, cities and communities we live into more sustainable and healthy places”*, and by ensuring that *“energy efficient [housing] and sustainability are implemented and reported”*.

Overall, respondents seemed to be interested in making a difference for tenants’ lives by *“helping them overcome any problems they may have”*, and *“for residents to have better quality and affordable housing”*, while supporting *“ethnic minority individuals getting onto the property market at a younger age”*.

When analysing the tone in the responses to questions about the future, whilst there were some areas that younger housing professionals wanted more certainty on, in the main they seem to regard their potential impact and career expectations positively – as can be seen in the figure below.

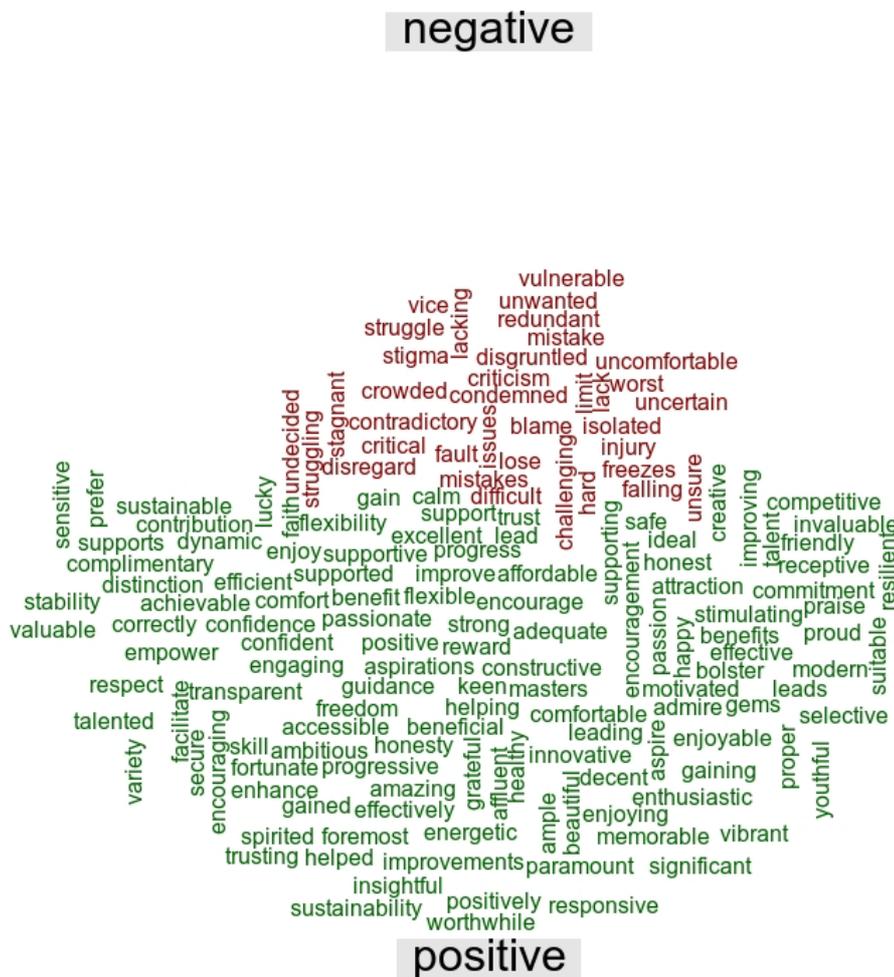


Figure 7: Younger housing professionals’ feelings about the future

## **Summary of findings for younger housing professionals**

Five key findings emerge so far, from this survey strand for 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 for a large number of respondents to the survey, they would like more structure in career development planning, to see where they are headed.
4. Covid-19 has caused challenges in the work environment and feelings of anxiety were prevalent amongst the group, but there were mixed feelings too with some suggesting 'saving graces' and hopes for a more positive future.
5. In the main, younger housing professionals said they felt their organisation was supporting them in this new way of working and that there were lots of initiatives to help emotional health and mental wellbeing. However, there were comments from some that stronger 'structures' of support were necessary.

## Housing Chief Executives

62 people responded to this particular survey, most of these Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) were leading housing associations of varying sizes and complexity of organisational arrangement. Of the 62 respondents, 25 were women (40%) and 37 were men (60%). The survey did not dwell on operational aspects, but instead asked questions about wellbeing – similar to the type of questions asked of the younger housing professionals but contextualised for leadership roles.

CEOs were exposed to a number of pressures pre-pandemic, and some of these were raised by respondents, particularly around themes like the

*“increased legal and regulatory requirements, particularly around health and safety [and] financial pressure from reduced rents and LHA”, while others noted that before the outbreak, “meeting financial covenants and Health and Safety compliance were the biggest challenges”.*

### **And then along came a global pandemic...**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the CEOs’ initial responses in the survey emphasised the need to maintain the health and wellbeing of staff and tenants. Most frequently, this was seen as a priority, for example, the

*“main concerns have been the safety of customers and colleagues”, and “keeping people safe (staff and customers) has been key”.*

Some acknowledged this pressure directly, as in noting the

*“pressure of keeping staff and customers safe has been the main priority”,*

while others noted this and linked it to a specific response strategy, for example,

*“increased pressure to keep customers and staff safe, [and to] move to home working for office staff”.*

The dominant pressures facing HA CEOs are visualised in the form of a word cloud, as shown in Figure 8, below:



Many reported a blurring of boundaries between work and their personal lives, with some commenting on how they could no longer 'switch off':

*"Spending too much time in my study during the lockdown has been an issue. Switching off has become more difficult".*

Similar to the younger professionals' responses, there were some CEOs that noted they could never get away from work now because they were working from home:

*"Working from home has destroyed my key mental health defence mechanism of not bringing work home with me, as my "man cave" has become my home office", and "no release from work, as I can't get away or see family at weekends".*

Others reported on having far too much work:

*"been super busy, working 12-hour days",*

or having to juggle multiple responsibilities while working, such as home schooling, or supporting teenage children who were themselves feeling depressed due to the lockdown and the need to isolate. Several identified remote working as even more tiring than going to the office because they were:

*"always on" with "no downtime" with video conferences being more "intense" than face to face meetings.*

Some respondents directly addressed the emotional changes they had and continued to experience, with one describing her life as

*"an emotional rollercoaster",*

or expressing the significant pressures of caring for elderly parents living in the same home but without external supports. Some respondents reported feelings of loneliness or of being

*"overwhelmed"*

by the increases in responsibility, both personally and professionally. A few expressed feeling powerless, even depressed about their children's future due to the state of

*"the world we have made for them to live in".*

Many reported feeling tired, exhausted, fatigued, and trying to deal with their own anxiety and uncertainty.

We asked CEOs how they were feeling at the time they completed the survey, and we asked them 'what has been waking you up in the middle of the night?'. There were mixed sentiments expressed, representing the 'emotional rollercoaster' noted by CEOs (and indeed by younger professionals in their survey).

## negative



## positive

Figure 9: CEOs' feelings (housing sector)

A large number of CEOs commented on how being able to successfully carry out their responsibilities to staff and clients were at the forefront of their minds, and caused them to worry: *"Worrying about whether we are doing enough to keep people safe"*.

Some of these worries seemed to be due to the staffing arrangements that had to be put into place, as illustrated by this quote by a male respondent who reported being *"acutely conscious that we have a staff team who are currently all dispersed, who may be worried, who may be under other pressures (e.g. home schooling, shielding themselves or family members, suffering the loss of close relatives)"*.

Others reflected that having colleagues:

*"working on the front line exposed to infection risk keeps me awake"*.

Some were waking up thinking about future implications, with one respondent noting that they felt

*"more than usual the pressure of having so many staff employment prospects"*.

It is clear that most CEOs who expressed worries, linked those worries to the health and safety of staff and colleagues, and clients. Other CEOs expressed a more positive and optimistic outlook, for example, that they

*"are broadly on top of things and feedback from tenants and staff is good and supportive of everything we are doing"*,

and some even noted that they

*"feel good, now I know we are ok in terms of the present and the services provided the immediate pressure has eased"*.

Almost all mentioned an increase in workload volumes, exacerbated by a need for suddenly shortened response times at a range of levels, from governance arrangements through to planning work rosters for furloughed staff now working from home.

### *Leading in the 'new normal'*

Many respondents seemed to agree that there was indeed a shift from the crisis of the initial weeks towards a 'new normal'; for example:

*"[We] were all working 12 and 14-hour days in the first week or so, [but] we are now returning to normality" and*

*"Early days - had to invoke Business Continuity Plan rapidly and guidance was changing daily about PPE and other things. People have got used to the new norm, so it is a little easier now".*

However, some respondents still felt under intense pressure to maintain business continuity, reflecting that their time was spent

*"keeping the day to day crisis management running whilst trying to plan next steps..."*

There were some benefits noted by CEOs who felt they had moved from crisis to a 'new normal'; for example:

*"The initial crisis mode has moved to a much more stoical approach with loads of humour and creativity. People are beginning to find their own rhythm. Everyone was in a different place, but I feel we are now in a more synchronised place."*

Indeed, one respondent even commented that they felt "we are into BAU" already, while others complimented staff teams, and clients on how well they had adjusted to the 'new normal', with some pointing to how a

*"crisis creates teams and support and fighting spirit."*

Most CEOs recognised that the initial crisis appeared to be over, at least for the present, although this may lead to further challenges downstream, as the following quote shows:

*"Initial pressures of 'how do we get this done away from the office' have disappeared, though the pressure of how we keep our sense of organisational 'team' is starting to emerge".*

Others reflected that pace may yet be cyclical, for example:

*"The pace eased off but now there is a lot to do to implement the new normal so it's very busy again..."*

One CEO suggested that

*"Staff are getting a better home/work balance, getting the opportunity to rest, spending less money so a chance to order financial affairs",*

while another respondent noted that due to the lockdown and shift towards working from home

*"Colleagues miss being together and want certainty around dates etc... this is of course impossible to give".*

Others were cautious about the longer-term impacts of working from home, acknowledging that:

*"operational pressures have eased, but I anticipate a prolonged period of home working may get tricky for me and my staff".*

These mixed feelings – pros and cons – about working from home as the ‘new normal’ are reflected in the younger professionals’ survey responses. The CEO answers accurately reflect, and anticipate, the feelings that were emerging from the younger professionals in their survey.

Overall, CEOs seem to express a positive confidence in their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, with a few acknowledging that their early adoption of ‘agile’ techniques, in conjunction with forward-looking adoption of on-line technologies was already paying off by affording them and their teams the ability to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic. For example:

*“organisationally we established a new normal quite quickly as we had already been promoting agile and flexible working. MS teams and Zoom have been really good to keep in contact for business and personally”.*

Other respondents pick up on this reliance on technology, in noting that

*“virtual meetings are now very ‘normal’”,*

replacing face-to-face engagement, even though, for some, it was clear that

*“parts of the organisation are nearer a ‘new normal’ steady state than others”.*

Evidently in the months ahead, and especially with the benefit of experience and the emergence of a second wave in the pandemic, all parts of the organisation will need to find successful strategies to manage the risks of face-to-face engagement while maintaining the standards of service required.

### *Looking after own wellbeing*

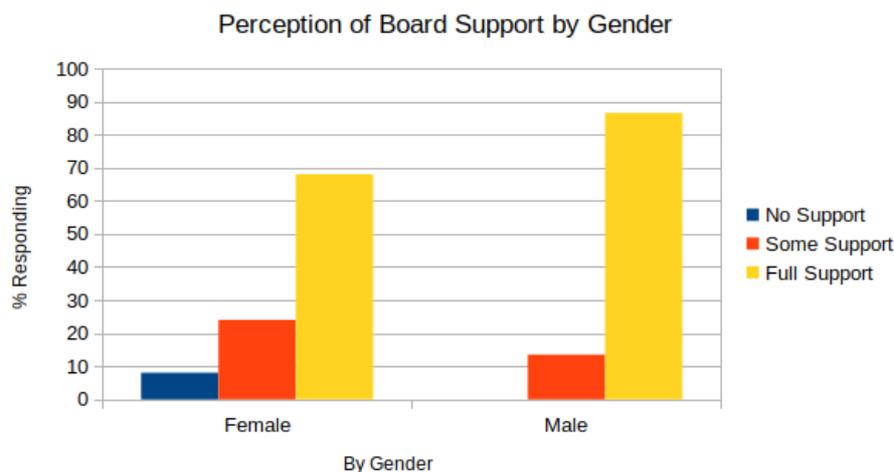
When CEOs were asked to describe their strategies for looking after their own wellbeing, the overwhelming majority of responses suggested they engaged in some form of exercise. When this is deconstructed, the most oft-cited form of exercise was walking. In addition to walking, some CEOs acknowledged the help of life coaches, yoga classes, and even horse riding as ways to alleviate the pressures of their roles and the uncertainties of the pandemic. They also cited the wellbeing benefits of spending time with family and friends. This is illustrated in Figure 10, below.



*“Board are behind our actions and committed to all staff and customers at this time”.*

The responses to this question appear to be stratified by the gender of the respondent. Of the 62 responses to the survey, only 2 reported that they did not feel supported by their board, and both respondents gave their gender as female. On the other hand, of those responding that they felt fully supported by their board, the majority were males (n = 32). In fact, 86.5% of male respondents reported feeling fully supported, while only 68% of female CEOs (n = 17) reported this. Of those who reported feeling some support from their board, this was relatively evenly split between males (n = 5) and females (n = 6). These findings are summarised in Figure 11, below.

Figure 11: Perception of Board Support by Gender (housing sector)



Neither of the two respondents who did not feel supported by their boards replied to this question. Of those who felt some support from their board, it was noted that some board members had

*“let their personal anxieties overrule the normal communications structures”*, where there was an increased expectation that the CEO

*“react quickly to their immediate concerns outside of meetings”*, which was experienced as being both *“draining and stressful”*.

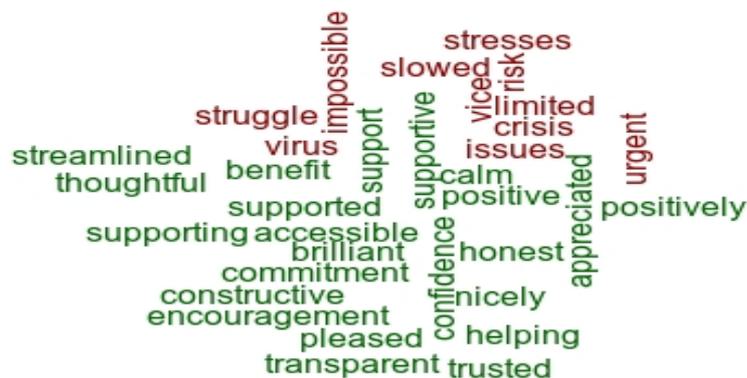
Others noted an absence of communication from board members in the early stages of the pandemic.

Most CEO respondents noted that they had at least some support from the board and that communications were generally supportive, although there are

*“one or two notable individual exceptions, where check and challenge and tone is sometimes ‘over the line’”*, while other board members *“are drifting into operations”*.

The majority of CEOs, however, responded that they felt fully supported by their boards. This is reflected in the tone of the sentiments expressed in Figure 12, below:

## negative



## positive

Figure 12: CEOs' feelings about Board support

CEOs, in the main, reported that their board members have been very supportive, have engaged in regular communication and have expressed compliments and acknowledged the work being undertaken by staff and executive under often difficult and uncertain conditions. These respondents describe their boards as engaged, pragmatic, sensible, understanding, and with Chairs who make themselves available. One respondent acknowledged that the board stayed out of the way when this was the right thing to do, and offered support for the CEO to accept when it was appropriate to do so.

### *Leading organisational wellbeing – support strategies for staff*

Many CEOs report promoting a range of help and support packages, and some instruct managers to contact staff members once a day (this reflects the answers from the younger professionals' survey, with a large number feeling supported but with some reporting that their line manager did not proactively contact them to ask if they were alright). Technology plays a significant role in almost all supports provided. Generally, employee wellbeing is supported through regular, mostly

daily, video and telephone check-ins with staff teams. These range from informal 'coffee' chats through to more formalised briefing sessions, to video blogging and conference calls. For example:

- signposting staff to organisational wellbeing 'toolboxes'
- facilitating access to free and confidential counselling
- providing access to trained mental health first aiders as first points of contact
- posting staff newsletters and bulletins, including video messages
- providing support materials on the Intranet
- setting up technological platforms for staff to engage with each other
- promoting on-line tools with the HR department
- promoting the use of mindfulness sessions
- providing free access to gyms
- officer resilience training and
- regular blogging for the organisation

Technology is also used to host training sessions, with some even using video technology for yoga and exercise sessions. For example, as one CEO notes in a comment quite typical of the responses to this question,

*"We are running campaigns around 'great days at work' and it's fine to not be okay. Mindfulness courses, gym sessions online, regular checking, virtual brews, my blog every few weeks, webinars etc",*

while others report that

*"We have a range of support through HR who have been reaching out to every team meeting; mental health first aiders trained and available to colleagues; confidential counselling service available to all staff; running online mindfulness and physical exercise and yoga classes for staff and tenants."*

Generally, CEOs appear to support staff through "mental health ambassadors" across the workplace, who offer staff support and guidance, and an opportunity to unwind. More formal free counselling services are offered in the form of Employee Assistance Programmes for emotional as well as financial concerns.

Other forms of support collate all the latest government policy and advice in one location, while company intranets are used extensively to post links to support options. Some CEOs have started an "organisation wide discussion on how we will work in this new environment".

#### *Future ideas for leadership to enhance staff wellbeing*

CEOs responded that by and large they wanted their staff teams, and their residents to be more supported. This was expressed by a CEO who wanted:

*"More support for staff / residents **who are carers at home** (and more flexible working practices to help disabled and carers get back into work)",*

a sentiment shared by another CEO who wanted to see

*"Greater awareness and understanding of the challenges of working on the front line" among board members.*



In envisaging support for the future, CEOs anticipated that there would be different expectations of staff working arrangements. Some advocated a four-day working week, or at the least to not *“ever go back to a position where anyone will work in the office for four or five days a week so we need to ensure support for those who live alone or may suffer from a feeling of social isolation”*

In terms of direct interventions, well-being was a key consideration:

*“access to good NHS Mental Health and well-being services would be great for all, issues are not always work related, allowing staff access to appropriate counselling and support is useful”.*

Respondents suggested brief practical measures that would be helpful, such as *“Easy to understand support toolkit”*, along with mentoring schemes, and also a *“recognition of vulnerability”*. For some CEOs this also meant changing the narrative that having mental health issues was *“not a sign of weakness”*.

CEOs noted a

*“Crisis in dealing with mental illness and this [is] massive problem for customers, which in turn [puts] pressure on staff”,*

much of which can be traced back to

*“assessments [being] hard to get, poor when you do, [with] few services available.”*

Meaningful support for mental health would therefore address the issues faced by residents, which would help staff do their work more effectively. For at least one CEO, this was evidently a matter of importance; their reply to the question asking what more support would be needed was simply:

*“A board that took more of an interest in emotional well-being and mental health.”*

The CIH #ShineALight campaign on mental health feels very timely, given the focus by CEOs in their responses to the future support needs in their organisation and in the housing sector more broadly. The commitment guide<sup>9</sup> for the #ShineALight campaign will help the sector take the next steps, to ensure the lessons and good practice highlighted by housing CEOs are embedded for the good of housing workers and tenant customers alike.

Of those who took the opportunity to add a further reflection at the end of the survey, most CEOs seemed to express an optimistic view of a post-Covid-19 world which would use the chance the crisis had offered to make the world a better place. One CEO referred to the

*“importance of capturing opportunities for rapid change – not wasting a crisis”.*

This perspective was echoed by a CEO who commented:

*“Let's make sure the world is more inclusive, more equal. Let's care about the earth we live on. Let's be human beings first. Let's not let this crisis go to waste. Let's remember what we can do when our lives depend on it. Let's keep being in this together”.*

Another CEO reflected hopefully that a post-Covid-19 world could even be more inclusive and environmentally friendly, suggesting that while

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cih.org/media/hiwbcje2/shine-a-light-mental-health-at-work.pdf>

*“this has been a huge tragedy in terms of lost lives and the social impact on those who have had to be isolated from loved ones etc. However, it has given us as a nation and as leaders of significant organisations a unique opportunity to improve and be better than we have ever been, to learn more about ourselves, our staff and our communities than we could have by walking the floor or the streets, we can now (or can at least plan now) go forward with a new sense of purpose, be greener, leaner and far more efficient”.*

## **Summary of findings for Housing CEOs**

The key findings from the housing CEO survey were:

1. A keen sense of responsibility was felt for all staff and tenant customers – their wellbeing and their livelihoods.
2. 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.
3. In terms of supportive initiatives to help staff feel connected with each other and the organisation, there were a range of activities offered by CEOs that mirrored the sort of support that younger housing professionals said that they wanted for their wellbeing during the pandemic.
4. Governing board members were not surveyed as part of this research project. It would be interesting to gain their perspective as while most CEOs felt supported, this was not universal and there were suggestions on how to move towards a more supportive style of communication between board and CEO.
5. 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.

## **‘Frontline’ homelessness workers**

68 homelessness workers responded to this survey (of which two were volunteers). 51 front-line respondents identified as female, with one described as non-binary and two as unspecified. The online survey was kindly distributed by *Homeless Link* to its members and we are grateful for their support of this research.

In the two surveys for those working in homelessness, both this one and the one for CEOs of homelessness organisations, we particularly focused on the impact of Covid-19 on roles and working practices.

Front-line workers generally thought that they had clearly defined work priorities, especially those working in long-term and support services. However, few front-line workers, particularly in short-term services, felt that they had been provided with adequate equipment to do their job well, although the majority, if not all, did say they had been provided with the necessary equipment to keep them safe (it should be noted that the survey was circulated in the early part of ‘lockdown’ and as such the issues around sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) were particularly stark at that time). It was noticeable that the respondents who worked in longer-term service provision did feel more adequately equipped to do their job.

### **Post-pandemic working practices**

The majority of respondents observed that they were working remotely, typically from home, observing social distancing and making use of available PPE. Many reported that their work had become more problematic as a result of the pandemic in that they could no longer attend to clients’ needs in the ways that they had been able to do previously. For example, some clients could now no longer be moved on to more established accommodation, others were more difficult to contact, especially in terms of support services and counselling, while some noted that it was much more difficult to provide sign posting services as a number of target agencies were not open or were already on reduced capacity.

- *“One to one support difficult as many [clients] are living in shared houses and our offices are too small to be private. Cannot take clients in our cars. a lot of our clients are struggling with mental ill health and Covid19 has made this far far worse, staff are also feeling the strain and we cannot get together in the same room”.*
- *“We cannot offer the same 1-1 support that we were offering before the pandemic, we are now having to change our working practices and work from home the majority of the time.”*

Overall, the pandemic and the policy responses were almost universally described as a significant disruption to the business-as-usual approaches. When asked about workloads, those in organisations offering temporary accommodation all said that their workload had increased. In line with service closures linked to lockdown, those working in day centre services noted a reduction in workload during the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, when asked whether current roles were clearly defined, those working on long-term services were more likely to reply in the affirmative – this same group were also more likely to have worked with a mentor or a coach and have accessed a work-related support network.

No respondent working in a long-term service reported feeling disconnected, although two thirds (67%) identifying as working in unspecified services, and 43% of those in centre-based services did report feeling disconnected. Overall, those working in organisations that provided only short-term temporary accommodation, tended to feel less connected, less clear on their current role, and less likely to stay in that part of the sector for their future career. This is interesting as it suggests that the transient nature of the accommodation provided not only has an effect on residents, but it also appears to have precarious connotations for those employed within it, during the uncertain context of Covid-19.

Clearly, across all survey respondents working in frontline roles, there were mixed feelings about working in the sector during the pandemic. This can be seen in the following two, varied, responses:

- *“Quite simply, I love my job. It has proven difficult with staff issues who have been unable to work due to risks to them from COVID 19 but, I have had clear leadership and support from those set above me which I have reflected towards those I manage.”*
- *“I have reached a point where I feel my skills are no longer needed and my preferred way of working is no longer possible. As a result, I am looking for an exit strategy”.*

### Feelings about work during the pandemic

The majority of answers to the survey from frontline homelessness workers talked about ‘anxiety’ and ‘worry’. Only 21% of front-line workers described the changes as somehow positive. This optimism mostly concerned the response by local authorities to emergency housing provision, and potential changes to the sector for the better, post-pandemic.

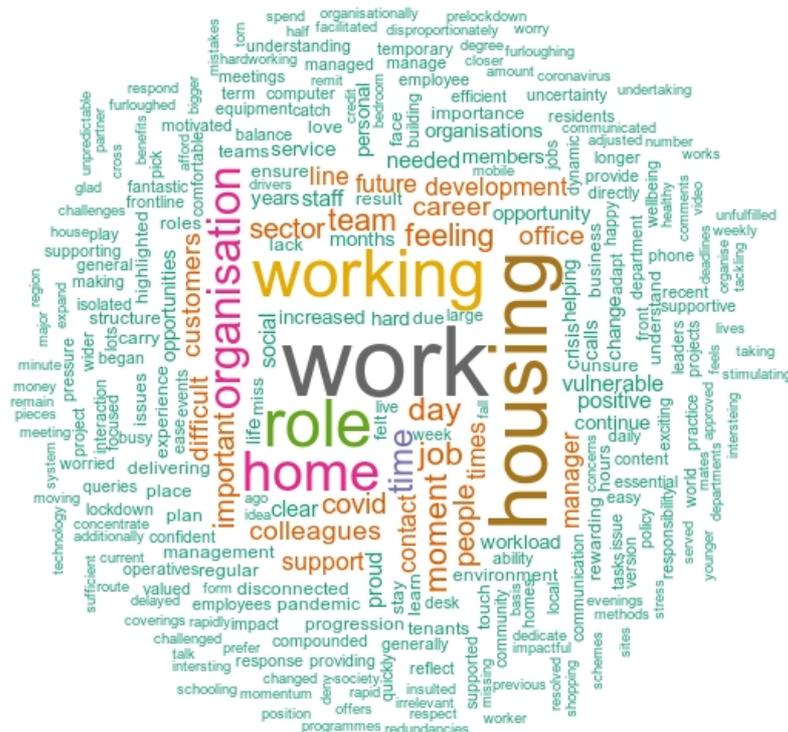


Fig 14: ‘Frontline’ homelessness workers’ feelings about work during the pandemic

Frontline homelessness workers described feelings of anxiety, for example:

- *"I am anxious coming into the work environment as I feel that there is a difficulty in the set up to ensure social distancing. I work with staff who I regularly have to remind to keep a distance, and with people who have been very vocal about not caring about our space".*
- *"I feel that this is a difficult setting in which to socially distance and protect ourselves against the virus. Residents often do not understand or do not regard the virus as a real threat. I have often been in situations with clients that are impossible to social distance in, such as intoxicated clients that have no boundaries around personal space, let alone social distancing"*

And, indeed, feelings of anxiety about the mental health of homeless clients:

- *"There has been a pause in terms of being able to move people on. Other services are not running or are working from home, so it takes longer to contact those we need to. Most of the activities and appointments that clients would engage with have stopped. There has been an increase in clients' mental health deteriorating with a decrease in the level of support from mental health services available".*

But others responded with more positively toned statements, including:

- *"I'm quite happy as we have put all support in place for all workers"*
- *"It has proven difficult with staff issues who have been unable to work due to risks to them from COVID 19 but, I have had clear leadership and support from those set above me which I have reflected towards those I manage".*

Some comments reflected a feeling of not-knowing, neither particularly positive, nor negative in terms of outlook, but a feeling of suspense, as the following respondent shows:

- *"It feels as though everything is paused. We don't have meetings and we are lone working more so that we spend less time around other staff. We no longer have visitors from other projects, staff and organisations"*

Some of the key feelings from frontline homelessness workers are captured in the following chart, which summarises the percentage of all responses indicating a range of sentiments (note: each response indicates multiple sentiments):

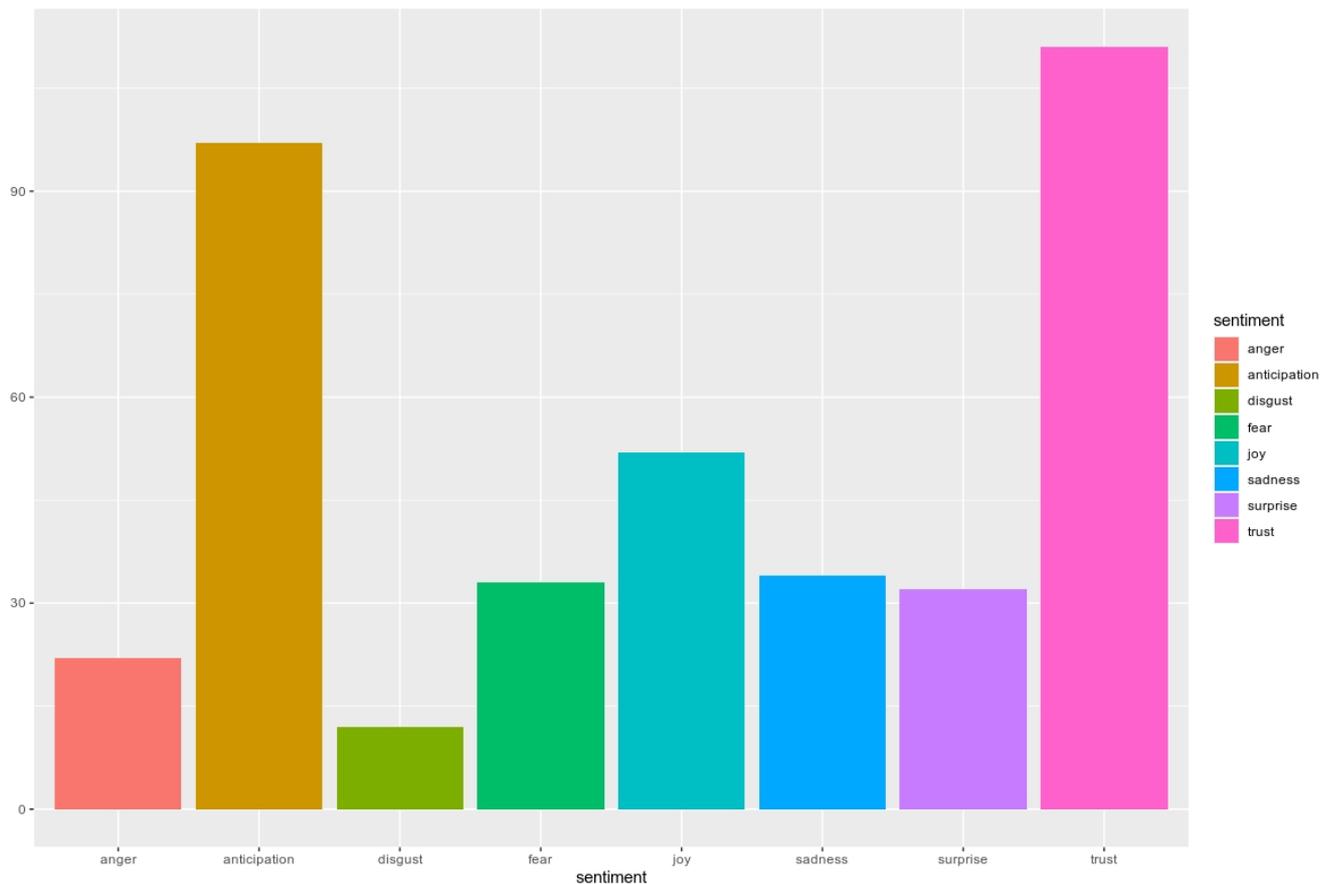


Fig 15: Feelings about work (frontline homelessness workers)

### Support for frontline homelessness workers

Front-line workers in service for young people and in long-term services tended to report having access to work-provided support networks (77% and 75%, respectively). Overall, just over half (52%) of front-line workers responded that their organisations were providing them with the necessary supports for their emotional and mental well-being, although 16% expressed an unequivocal disagreement with this statement. 57% of male front-line workers identified having active networks beyond immediate colleagues which were supporting them, compared to only 43% of female respondents.

In relation to ‘support’ we asked respondents in this survey to consider the following:

- Do you have networks beyond your immediate colleagues?
- Are your networks active?
- Do you feel supported by your existing networks?

In terms of a gender breakdown, 57% (8) of those identifying as ‘male’ responded positively to all three options, compared to 45% (23) of respondents identifying as ‘female’. Most of those identifying as ‘female’ who selected all three options worked in organisations described as either a support service (35%) or a young person’s service (39%). Generally speaking, those working in young person services tended to select all three of the options more frequently (65%) than any other group. This was followed by staff working in centres, who selected all three options 57% of the time; with those working in support services selecting all three options 48% of the time. It was of some concern that 75% of those working in hostel-based organisations reported having only

one or none of our identified network support options, compared with only 40% of those working in support-based organisations.

We also asked what support people identified for themselves, apart from their work organisations. Although about 18% opted to not respond to this question, of those who did, the majority identified family members and friends, while fewer identified prior colleagues. A couple of people noted members of their church congregations, while another identified his neighbours as part of their non-work-related support networks. All noted that they found these networks beneficial.

Although some recognised that confidentiality restricted, the amount that they could share with their networks, they still felt supported by them via telephone and social media contact, as well as video conference platforms. Most suggested that they found helpful to just have an opportunity to let off steam, express their feelings, or share concerns. However, others reported that it was having a chance to not have to think about and to discuss work that they found most helpful. Those who identified church as a support reported feeling that it was the prayers of their network that most helped them.

When we asked respondents specifically whether they thought their organisation was providing them with the support they required for their emotional and mental wellbeing, approximately 52% (35) of respondents agreed that their organisations *were* providing the support they required, while 16% (11) responded with an unequivocal 'no'. This suggests that some 32% were more ambivalent in their responses to this question.

- *"We have more frequent team meetings to help us feel connected as we don't have the sort of casual contact that we normally would have in the office".*
- *"Yes - I think they have been very responsive to individual needs and have put a lot of thought into managing the current situation. There is of course still a level of stress and anxiety which is unavoidable".*
- *"Yes. we have access to clinical supervision once a month, the opportunity for a phone call appointment with same and regular meetings and catch ups with the rest of the team".*

Some respondents commented on inconsistencies within their organisation between management and staff, for example:

- *"I believe we have all worked through this Covid situation independently. Staff have been supported to self-isolate if experiencing any symptoms and follow guidelines. I believe higher management all worked from home and not even from their offices. this sets a sense of discord when ground workers are working on the frontline".*

Others noted a lack of meaningful support on offer:

- *"I am self-sufficient and built up resilience before this environment. However, there is limited support and this has also strongly affected other staff, including myself".*

A few observed that personal constraints impacted on the extent to which they accessed any supports on offer, for example

- *"As a shy person I can find it difficult to reach out to colleagues via video call etc. during these times, which does sometimes leave to me feel a bit isolated in my job, which can mean I find the more challenging aspects of my role more difficult to manage by myself and can get more stressed as a result".*

There were some comments and responses in the early part of the survey (concerned with changes in working practices) which also linked to support (or perceived lack thereof). For example, this excerpt from a long answer:

- *"The majority of the wider organisation are working from home, this has caused a massive distance between frontline staff and the rest of the organisation, we do not understand each other, and frontline staff feel the organisation and the non-frontline staff could be doing more about this. It takes a lot longer for social workers, support workers, mental health teams, or other specialist/support services to respond to us on the frontline. This is hard to deal with and understand. As a frontline worker I feel that if someone is working from home, the minimum they should be doing is calling their clients every day and responding to referrals and other emails, keeping professionals updated etc. This has caused friction between internal teams and external agencies."*

While some respondents expressed some sympathy and understanding for the lack of support they received, for example:

- *"No - no-one could plan for this and I think people were trying to support with emotional and mental wellbeing but missed the mark. I think unless you have worked in a frontline service during COVID you cannot understand the impact this is having on the workers right now, and probably it will continue to affect us further on in life and our career"*
- *"I'm not sure anyone knows how to do this as we have never experienced anything like this before!"*

Others were quite forthright in expressing how they felt unsupported, especially given the increased workload, for example:

- *"Absolutely not. The organisation acts like it cares, and sends out bulletins and blog posts on mental health well-being, yet when you are struggling, they do not support or help you, and just pile more and more pressure on."*
- *"No, there is a distinct lack of communication"*
- *"No. My line manager has never directly checked on my wellbeing or if I have the equipment needed to do my work at home. The organisation is focussed on keeping the charity as an organisation surviving but not looking after the staff".*
- *"No, I don't. We have reported to HR the fact we all feel our physical and mental wellbeing has been forgotten/ignored by management. They have arranged for us to talk to our line managers to find out why we are feeling this way and what they can do about it. All we have asked for is the correct PPE, so we can do our job as safely as possible, but the manager has cancelled orders of masks and thermometers, as she feels they are too expensive, or unnecessary. Leaving us all to feel that our safety and the safety of our families don't matter"*

Frontline homelessness workers were asked what they thought could be done to support them in the course of them doing their work. 79% of the 68 respondents answered this question. Of these

54 responses, 21 (39%) said that they couldn't think of anything else, or simply responded with "n/a", or, for example:

- *"I haven't really needed any extra support, but I think enough is being done"* and
- *"My organisation are doing all they can to support me and my colleagues"*.

Of the remaining 33 responses, 9 (27%) specifically requested more support, mostly in the form of asking supervisors and/or managers to make contact with staff; to check in with them about how they were coping; offer emotional support and links to external services; and also demonstrate their understanding that some staff had multiple responsibilities (e.g., caring) to juggle simultaneous to their work-related responsibilities.

The 24 other responses to this question were more mixed. They ranged from the desire for more PPE or other forms of resources, including staff and funding, while others were specific about wanting management to 'check in' with them periodically, to communicate with them about forward planning and decisions being made. Others simply expressed the desire to have their efforts recognised by managers and perhaps to be thanked periodically. For example:

- *"Order the correct PPE, so we feel safe while doing our job"*.
- *"Provision of personal protective equipment early into the pandemic"*
- *"External mental health services need to provide preventative care for struggling clients, who staff often have to deal with without formal mental health training for multiple days lone working, including psychosis and delusions"*
- *"More communication from CEO & directors - thanking those of us who have remained at work - just a 'thanks' would be nice!"*
- *"Senior management acknowledging our work and being supportive rather than being distant"*.
- *"Recognition that I am just one person and I can't possibly do the jobs of 6 others as well as my own instead of putting informal capability processes into place. For some physical support - although my manager has a large area, she is mainly working from home and doesn't have the same environment to work in"*.
- *"More could be done to boost well-being - video calling would be useful, more check ins from managers or meetings. I've seen another organisation carry out online well-being sessions with therapists etc and making time for staff to attend, more rewards/perks etc. like extra time off or pizza delivery can help boost morale"*.
- *"Keeping us informed about what changes are happening and what is going on. Emotional support and releasing some of the pressures"*.

Communication and openness seem to be key in the answers from respondents who said they were happy with the support they received, and in the answers from those who suggested what more could be done. In some surveys (across all four surveys) we were thanked 'for asking' how people were feeling. One recommendation for immediate improvement across the sector, but particularly for frontline homelessness workers, seems to be that channels of communication for feedback and gratitude need to be opened more widely and more frequently.

## Changed feelings during the pandemic

The survey asked frontline homelessness workers whether their feelings had changed since the start of the pandemic. The majority said that their feelings had changed. Some, for example, expressed frustration

*“that people are not taking the treat of Covid seriously enough and worried that could lead to a second wave”,*

a concern that was unfortunately prescient as events have shown.

Others reflected on the impacts of the lockdown and working from home, highlighting how doing so inflicted “pressures” which “has had an effect on my mental health.”

While some saw the changes triggered by the pandemic within a bigger picture, as exemplified in the following quote:

- *“Following this shift in culture within our country (albeit because of a terrible virus) I have had time to slow down and appreciate what I have and where I'm going, get outdoors and experience my local area and beyond on a bicycle. From a housing standpoint I feel the Pandemic has shone a spotlight on the North-South divide in Great Britain; a gap I feel very passionate about highlighting and bridging within our sector.”*

For others, they considered that

*“COVID- 19 has forced organisation and people to be more agile and this is a good thing in my opinion” even though they also expressed worry “about the future of my company and the outlook of the economy beyond the pandemic.”*

The chart, below, summarises the positive/negative sentiments used by respondents in response to this question of changed feelings:



Fig 16: positive/negative sentiments in response to changed feelings

Looking in more detail, at how feelings have changed, the research team noticed a dramatic elevation in the ‘negative’ textures e.g., sadness, fear, anger, etc., a slight elevation in joy, and a corresponding drop in emotions such as trust and anticipation. Using an estimate of the word values on the ‘positive/negative’ graphs produced for each of the questions about feelings – relating to work and to ‘life in general’- including the question reflecting on whether feelings had changed since the pandemic first had an impact. The approximate percentage changes in certain emotions ‘from then to now’, were as follows:

Emotions	Change
Anger	+85%
Anticipation	-18%
Disgust	+35%
Fear	+49%
Joy	+9%
Sadness	+43%
Surprise	+11%
Trust	-41%

*Table 1: Estimated changes in emotions expressed by Homelessness Front-Line workers about work and about life generally*

### Looking to the future for housing and homelessness policy

As our final ‘while you’re here’ end of survey question for frontline workers and CEOs in homelessness organisations, we asked participants to think about a rapid change they would like to make to housing and homelessness policy right now. This question attracted a range of responses, with all but a small handful of respondents having a go at answering.

The majority of responses covered well known themes, such as the need to increase funding for the sector as a whole. Others noted that, in the wake of the pandemic, local authorities had been able to find temporary accommodation for many rough sleepers and that, on this evidence, it should be a priority to prevent people going back out onto the streets post-pandemic. A similar idea was expressed by a small group of responses urging that currently empty or void spaces be used, assuming they were appropriate and safe.

- *“If we can house all homeless people in hotels etc, then why on earth aren't we doing this under normal circumstances. No one should have to live on the streets”*
- *“More money needs to be poured into the homeless sector. Here in [name] the council have rented out holiday parks and other temporary buildings to accommodate homeless people for this brief period, I think that this should be expanded”.*
- *“I would love to see [the council] continue the accommodation of the homeless community even after the danger of the pandemic ends. Obviously, this would reshape what our charity does, but this is a huge opportunity to make changes to our city and to the lives of the members of the homeless community”.*

A number of responses encouraged wider policy endorsement of the Housing First model (early access to secure – rather than specialist - housing with tailored support), while an equal number of responses noted the need for specialised, typically mental health and addictions, services. A number of respondents pointed out that housing was a right, and that more of it should be made available and affordable; that housing should be accessible, and taken out of the hands of private rent landlords who were perceived to exploit the system for profit.

- *Affordable social housing available for all of our clients, increased housing benefit rates to cover existing private rents*
- *Obviously more housing and 1 to 1 support for people who are struggling with addiction.*
- *Housing first provision then other challenges of clients (drugs and alcohol, domestic violence) can be handled/dealt with while they are in secure accommodation. Heightened inter-agency work.*
- *Longer term solutions for rough sleepers. It's been great that they've been accommodated throughout the pandemic but a massive concern that they will be back out on the streets again, with little support, in the near future. We need to look at what options we have for the hardest to house people - not just accommodation but a robust multi-agency support package.*
- *Stop putting people into tiny PRS studios at maximum LHA. It is not the solution.*
- *I would have the housing first model employed throughout the UK.*
- *Be good to see local and national government invest in accommodation there is lots of empty properties that could be used at a lower cost than new build. The private housing sector is making a fortune from housing people in crap substandard accommodation this needs to change.*
- *Adopt the housing first model alongside building suitable self-contained accommodation. From previous and current experience, it is clear that most clients are benefiting from having a safe, solid base to jump from. Some of our clients that have been housed under the Covid contingency have made huge leaps forward in their wellbeing, and have managed themselves well and improved their circumstances as they feel safe and supported in their accommodation. They have had the opportunity to build good working and trusting relationships with their keyworkers there, increasing their self-worth and confidence and becoming less reliant on our service solely. We have noticed a marked increase in clients making regular contact with us, wanting to get their finances sorted out, looking for help with budgeting and wanting to address substance or alcohol misuse. Requests for help with accessing art supplies that they can use to be creative so that they are not sitting in their rooms doing nothing and asking if our yoga and exercise sessions can be online if they have access to the internet.*
- *More funding for housing first schemes, taking the opportunity of having so many in emergency accommodation at this time to make personalised housing plans to longer term and more person centred. Often this will be shared/hostel accommodation. However, more funding for independent living (i.e. sublets) would hopefully lead to longer time in tenancies.*
- *Make more social housing available*
- *I would provide more housing.  
More direct housing (housing first) so that people don't automatically get put into hostels inappropriately.*

- *Stop housing as a business and prioritise people's true needs. It's a basic right, it is not there for a relatively few people to make profit from.*

There were responses that discussed changes that should be made to policies implemented by local authorities, for example:

- *"[To change] the one offer policy. Clients have to accept the first property they are offered or risk losing their homeless duty. Every human should have a right to choose. It reinforces the feeling that they have no choice or control over their life. The thought of living far from friends/family or in an area they have issues with can lead to mental health issues".*
- *"Remove intentionally homeless from local authority thinking".*

There were concerns that policy needed to change for young homeless people, particularly in relation to the limited local housing allowance rate for younger people, for example:

*"We are doing all we can presently, however I personally feel it stems from the local housing rate through government, I feel that most young people under 35 have to struggle more as their L/H/R is so low. So finding suitable accommodation is problematic. I believe this is a wider issue across the country".*

There were also responses directly related to mental health, and more entrenched issues around the longer term trauma that some homeless people suffer, and the need to change perceptions and provide more security to people to give them space to recover from long-held trauma:

- *"To give people a chance and don't judge them on their past but give them a chance going forward. Sort out mental health and the trauma they have gone through which has led them to where they are. Recently I have had a pregnant street homeless woman who has already had 2 babies taken away. The 3rd baby has now been adopted out. She has struggled to stay in her hostel and has since been evicted and back to drink and drugs when all she needed was a chance to get sense of the trauma she has been through and receive support".*
- *"...And finally, I would make it policy that there is funding for at least one psychologically informed complex needs service in every local authority".*
- *"Mental health services must be preventative, and not wait for "something bad to happen" before responding".*
- *"For young people, investment in services, youth clubs, research and study into new models of organizing cities to provide opportunities for THRIVING. Including the research into psychological models which build on strengths rather than just working with diagnosed MH issues or deficits".*

There were practical policy considerations too, around the impact of digital exclusion and the access of services, for example:

- *"For me the government enforced lockdown has highlighted the need for internet access in every house - especially those housing the vulnerable and not so well off. Some of the residents are struggling to keep in touch with their Job Centre work coaches, make Universal Credit journal entries, apply for jobs or simply utilise on-line entertainment to combat the boredom of staying inside".*

## Summary of findings for frontline homelessness workers

The key findings from the frontline homelessness workers survey were:

1. There were a few concerns from respondents, that they had sufficient equipment to keep them safe (e.g. appropriate PPE), but it should be noted that the majority of respondents did not raise this issue.
2. Many frontline homelessness workers felt a sense of anxiety and disconnection from their organisation, and they perceived that communication and 'checking-in' from line managers to ask how they were, or to thank them for their work, would improve the situation.
3. Workers seemed to feel constrained in what they could do for their clients in isolation – for example there were comments that access to wider services for mental health and addiction were necessary and that this was not something a frontline worker could provide by themselves. A joined-up approach is needed, and the impact of Covid-19 seemed to throw that into sharp relief.
4. 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).
5. Ideas on future policy solutions unveiled a very clear message on the need to focus on accommodation-led approaches, such as Housing First, to stop the revolving door of more temporary hostel-based traditional responses.

## Chief Executives of homelessness organisations

25 homelessness organisation CEOs responded to the survey, again this was kindly distributed by *Homeless Link*. Of these respondents, 13 were women – approximately half. There was a far higher percentage of female to male front-line workers (75%).

CEOs almost all identified that the current state of the housing and homelessness sector was a significant contributory factor to their capacity to respond to the pandemic. The prolonged lack of meaningful funding and support, the patchwork of services, and the disconnect between housing management and support funding were among common concerns expressed. The vulnerability of the sector's infrastructure had been heightened by a steady increase in the number of people requiring services, leading to a number of organisations being able to provide only core services.

### Pressures experienced by CEOs in the homelessness sector

The survey asked CEOs in homelessness organisations to consider the pressures and challenges that were already apparent *before* the impact of Covid-19. Overwhelmingly, respondents commented on the various deficits in and lack of resources they dealt with as a baseline precursor to the pandemic.

CEOs reported a lack of appropriate supporting services:

- *“Lack of mental health support for young people”,*
- *“lack of co-ordinated pathways for Rough sleepers”,* and
- *“reduction in support from statutory and other services”.*

They also spoke of a general paucity of financial and other resources:

- *“lack of funding means little capacity at the centre”,*
- *“Lack of appropriate funding for years”,*
- *“Under-resourced infrastructure to support the charity”,*
- *“shortage of affordable studio/1 bedroomed accommodation in the city”,*
- *“reduction in support from statutory and other services”,* and
- *“Loss of influence and income”*

Such deficits have consequences in terms of the services that can be realistically be provided:

- *“there is a complete disconnect between housing management and support funding and we have to limit the amount of support we can provide because of limitations on external funding*
- *“Generally urban locations have higher numbers of homelessness, however there are fewer new development opportunities to increase the supply of affordable housing to this group”*

Limited funding and service availability have downstream consequences:

- *“Not being able to sign up prospective homeless applicants to properties - hard when you know that some people are out there homeless/sleeping rough”*

This question elicited a number of observations about how the demand for services has been increasing:

- *“big jump in numbers of rough sleepers”*,
- *“rise in demand for services”*,
- *“We have almost doubled in size since I started, to try to meet that need, and set up new services”*.

These increases in demand are reported to have been made more problematic with an apparent rise in the degree of complexity of presenting needs, such as:

- *“higher and more complex support needs presenting among clients”* and
- *“demand outstripping supply of appropriate support, especially the specialist support needed for our customers”*.

Almost to a person, CEO survey respondents commented on how the homeless support sector is neglected; either under-funded and brittle as a result, or lacking genuine engagement with the local authority and community. A number of organisations are able to only provide a core service, while those which cater for more complex needs or to support immigrants and refugees face more pronounced pressures.

The foregoing are responses which reflect a snapshot of the sector *prior* to the spread of the virus and subsequent lockdown. One respondent noted that

- *“since the lockdown, the numbers of rough sleepers has increased from around 30 to 60 despite the LAs’ attempt to offer accommodation”*.

The second part of the question concerns the impact of Covid-19 on the provision of services, on staff and on clients as service beneficiaries.

### **And then along came a global pandemic...**

By and large, CEOs appeared to be able to make the switch to remote working, although some commented on how their homes weren’t set up for doing so, and that they didn’t have the equipment they needed. Although most seemed to be able to make the adjustment, this brought its own set of problems with many CEOs commenting on the difficulty they experienced in ‘switching off’, especially during the first few weeks. Other CEOs reported on how the services their organisations provided had shifted, from the handing out of hygiene packs (soap, hand towels, etc.) to the more obvious engagement with clients via the telephone. Many CEOs expressed concern about staffing arrangements, with some commenting on shortages, closure of charity shops and a loss of income, and acknowledging the increased pressures the lockdown arrangements were placing on staff.

Several respondents noted that remote working meant that they were no longer able

- *“to show the normal visible leadership I’d show in other crisis situations”* and that working remotely has resulted in a
- *“disconnection with front line staff”*, with the challenges presented of having

- *“had to provide leadership and manage the change process from a distance”*.

This feeling noted by CEOs directly reflects the feelings of frontline workers, who reported that they felt isolated from their organisation and that there was a disconnect between management and frontline.

Others found the experience of working from home (WFH) difficult due to the erosion of clear work-private life boundaries, as illustrated in the following quote

- *“Lots of pressure of knowing how to switch when working from home - 9-5 is easier to manage/when you're working from home it can be difficult to switch off”*.

Some respondents reported the challenges of working from home more generally, whether this is due to the lack of appropriate home office equipment, for example:

- *“working from home has present[ed] enormous challenges not having access to photocopy or printer, files”*,

while others reflect on how these changes impacted on them when other family members are expected to do similarly, as this respondent notes:

- *“very difficult to adjust to WFH, especially as my whole family (5 of us) was also doing the same thing. It has been harder to concentrate and take information in”*.

Other respondents reported on the difficulty of using remote access communications technology to do their day job and to relate to others, as noted by the following three responses:

- *“We collaborate with other agencies. Harder to do on Zoom”*, and
- *“the switch to mainly computer-based work is a strain, with a lack of variety, in the absence [of] normal face to face meetings”*,
- *“Remote working has benefits, but is hard and doesn't allow for quality interaction”*.

In addition to working from home, other changes associated with the shift to a lockdown policy **affected how services are delivered**. For example, some respondents noted that they had begun to shift their provisions slightly by starting to

- *“[give] out hygiene packs with soap, hand towels etc to encourage good hygiene in the home”*;

however, in some cases previous services had to be suspended:

- *“we are speaking to residents over the phone and responding to what they need from us mainly as we cannot refer on to other organisations”*,

while for others this meant that the services offered had been pared right back to the bare minimum:

- *“The few resources that were available to help provide a network of support for [young people] has been thinned even more. No mental health support unless a [young person] is on the brink of suicide”*.

Indeed, a CEO noted with reference to their young person client base that, as a result of lockdown,

- *“Their social isolation and anxiety is becoming more entrenched and other indicators of poor mental health are becoming a daily reality”*, and that
- *“financially marginalised young people [who are] at home all day are telling us that they have less money available for food and gas/electricity costs”*

In this context, a number of CEOs commented that they were needing to rethink how they offer services, for example:

- *“bringing in new systems and procedures to support all effectively and keep the project open and as safe as it can be”,*

while others sum the situation up as needing to

- *“focus on keeping a service to our clients physical disconnection with management team led to more isolation and finding new ways of working”* and
- *“COVID-19 changed the way in which we looked at delivering our services as a whole, including allocations of social housing and homelessness”.*

The third main impact arising from the virus and the lockdown policy concern staffing arrangements. For some organisations, this has meant staffing shortages wherein some organisations had

- *“stood down all our volunteers in Mid-March, due to their general age and health profile, and furloughed shop staff and some fundraisers”,*

leading to struggles with

- *“managing absences understanding the new HR landscape around this including testing, isolation conundrums with at one point 30% of the staff off”.*

Naturally, many CEOs expressed concern about

- *“Staff management: health, wellbeing, working from home, communication”,* in part because *“Responsibilities [are] adding up for all staff members even more so than before”.*

Again, it’s interesting to not how this reflects sentiments from the frontline survey. The CEOs are clearly aware of the increased pressures on frontline staff, and they are aware of a disconnect. This survey was undertaken in the early part of lockdown and it may be that the disconnect has lessened as people got used to the ‘new normal’. CEOs may now be communicating their knowledge of the frontline pressures, and recognition of frontline workers’ efforts more successfully.

The virus, and its impacts, have led to an understandable increase in uncertainty, both for the organisation itself and for the implications this would have for clients:

- *“uncertainty about the future both of our own organisation and how the lives of our clients will be affected by the current situation”,*
- *“Lack of certainty re: future for our organisation and for [young people] who will be affected most acutely by post COVID changes”,*

There were specific concerns about funding arrangements:

- *“Uncertainty whether we will receive all of MHCLG grant we had understood we would be getting for April 20-21 after September 20”.*

Some respondents were already reporting the impacts of such uncertainty on service:

- *“With the day centre closing there is considerable guilt as we are aware that the teams funded by the Covid fund may not be supporting in a compassionate manner and this is clear from the number who have disengaged from the Hotel”.*

Several respondents noted that this uncertainty was – if not exacerbated by – then certainly not helped by the government’s advice, with some noting that they had

- *“No confidence in decision makers and policy makers at National level”*

due in part to the

- *“mixed messages from government [which] thereby increase risk”*
- and a
- *“lack of clarity and often late information with quick turnaround times for delivery [which] has created a very challenging environment”.*
- Others noted that processing updated guidelines and advice presented an additional level of responsibility, because
- *“New regulations and guidance for safe working [need] to be understood and implemented”,*
- There was therefore a
- *“need to read so much more data issued by gov.uk to reassure staff and customers to keep them safe and secure”,*
- because the
- *“new information [needed] to be assimilated, assessed and introduced”,*
- so that there could be a
- *“Balancing [of] the political/science guidance with people’s interpretation of staff and customers”.*

### And the pandemic created anxiety, and worry

We asked CEOs how they were feeling at the time they completed the survey, and we asked them ‘what has been waking you up in the middle of the night?’. The overriding affective tone of respondents to this question is characterised by anxiety, concern and worry. These appear to be the most frequently used adjectives to express how respondents feel. These feelings are reflected in all four of the surveys and are the overriding emotions across the housing and homelessness sector noted during the early stages of the pandemic. Some CEOs of homelessness organisations write, in the survey responses, of feeling ‘*depressed*’, ‘*exhausted*’, ‘*frustrated*’ or emotionally ‘*flat*’. Two respondents reported feeling ‘*fine*’, while several others write of feeling better now (during April/May) than they did at the start of lockdown.

Although only one CEO expressed concern about the future tenability of their own position, many highlighted an uncertain future relative to Covid-19. For example, one expressed concern about the threat posed by a second spike in the disease, and another noted their

- *“concern about [a] potential outbreak and having enough staff at any time to keep frontline services running”,*

while a third was

- *“still concerned about the risks posed by Covid once lockdown starts to ease”.*

In addition, respondents report budgetary pressures, service delivery concerns, and the expected impacts on clients’ well-being.

- *“Future fundraising is our chief concern as is the availability of learning / economic opportunity to our clients in the short to medium term. There is nothing for them currently and they already had often very little in terms of family support networks. A very isolating time”.*
- *“Been hard to sleep as I now work late into the night and worry about the plight of some of our tenants who might face emergencies which we are not able to deal with due to lack of face to face work”.*
- *“I am putting my family at risk by going to work”*

- *“The thought as to what will happen when the temporary accommodation provided by the LA by way of a holiday caravan park and a hotel ends as there seems to be no plan to house these people and they will flood back on the streets. This is in addition to the large number of new rough sleepers anticipated due to people losing their jobs and not being able to pay the rent or mortgage”.*
- *“I feel tired and lacking energy. It's difficult to concentrate, my stamina is very low. Colleagues are very supportive, but I worry that I am missing important information and making poor or no decisions”.*

### **Leading in a ‘new normal’**

As with the housing CEO survey, homelessness organisation CEOs were asked whether they thought things had eased a little as people got used to the ‘new normal’. Overall, respondents appeared to be taking adjustments in their stride, and several noted that this adjustment has been significantly helped by the practical support from local authorities. However, a few respondents reported budgetary concerns arising from the loss of income streams, e.g. from charity shops that could not be open, and having to draw on existing reserves to weather the transition period. A number of CEOs welcomed the furlough scheme to help adjust.

Several CEOs commented on the intensity of pressure arising from long working days, worry about the welfare of self, staff and clients, and a lack of certainty about the future and the longer-term impacts. A few reflected that tasks now take longer to accomplish than they used to. This was attributed in large part to a significant increase in the amount of computer time, and reliance on remote communications in place of face-to-face conversations. Others were concerned about how some clients could now no longer meet with staff, or how such meetings were made more difficult due to the constraints of remote working.

Respondents noted that some things had begun to ease up after the initial lockdown, with fewer after hours calls and staff now making the adjustment to remote working. Generally, however, most CEOs still felt under significant pressure and having to make continual adaptations to how they worked, decisions in the face of uncertainty and occasionally conflicting and unclear advice from government, and challenges about resources and the future.

- *“At the start of the crisis, when we had less than a month's free reserves and had no idea how much our income may be damaged (e.g.: by having to close shops and cancel fundraising events), I was very worried about our financial position. As it turns out, as an essential frontline service, our income has generally held up well, and our emergency fundraising has had excellent results. The government has also helped through the furloughing scheme and grants to help our charity shops. However, frontline service pressure has been intense throughout the crisis, working to help the Council house and maintain 130 rough sleepers in local B&Bs”.*
- *“From an initial point of very sudden instances of infections and management of those (which in shared housing is immensely tricky) and introduction of a social distancing staffing rota for 3 months we now look to longer term implementation of attempting to resume activities in a safe way and find a new normal while still being aware we may need to switch back to an emergency mode at any point.”*

- *“The reality that this is going to go on for a very long time, possibly some aspects for ever, is incredibly depressing”.*
- *“For the first 3 weeks after 16 March, the pressure was immense, working long days in solitude. Trying to support staff on the frontline and reassure them whilst dealing with my own anxieties about my own health was at times overwhelming. The pressure has lifted as time has passed, and funding and the financial position settled. Then just as you felt you could breathe again, exit planning and, working to re-open services starts. This period has been unrelenting and extremely lonely”.*
- *“Leading a strong, socially aware and profitable business that delivers great customer service to our residents is our focus. During the pandemic this hasn’t changed, however navigating the expectations, fear within others and uncertainty of the future has been difficult and a new pressure not seen before”.*

### **Leading organisational wellbeing by example: care for self and staff**

In this part of the survey, we asked homelessness CEOs how they took care of their own wellbeing, and also how they supported staff wellbeing. In relation to the former, most respondents reported one or more forms of physical exercise, with walking and cycling being the most frequently cited - yoga and Pilates were also mentioned on several occasions. This reflects the CEO in housing organisations survey, where walking was reported as a popular form of physical self-care.

Other respondents noted the need to take regular breaks from the computer, to get up and change the scenery, walk around and do something different: such as eating a meal in the garden (weather permitting) or engaging in some other activity. For some however, this didn’t seem like an option and these respondents raised concerns about not being able to take any meaningful breaks from work, either physically or cognitively due to worries and concerns.

A high proportion of respondents mentioned the importance of communicating with friends and family and making a deliberate effort to *not* discuss work-related pressures or concerns. Others took care of themselves through eating properly and trying to get enough rest and sleep, or by engaging in other interests, such as gardening and DIY; while a couple mentioned spiritual activities, such as prayer and church. A few mentioned work-related Zoom/video meetings with colleagues to chat and share.

Overall, respondents generally identified doing something different – taking breaks from sitting at their workstations, exercise, getting fresh air and talking with friends and family. The strategy behind these efforts appears to be ensuring a disruption to the continuity of their working experience.

We specifically asked whether CEOs were able to connect with others, to talk and share. 71% of respondents reported that they did have people with whom they could talk. Most of these tended to be colleagues and work-related support groups. However, a couple of respondents noted that being a CEO was quite isolating. Only one respondent noted that they had no-one with whom they talk to share concerns.

Homelessness CEOs were asked about measures to support staff wellbeing that they led in their organisations. All responding CEOs reported having implemented one or more measures to support their members of staff. Most of these measures were the provision of optional counselling upon request and/or increased contact with staff members to check in with them, give them a space within which to raise concerns, and so on, and also staff wide briefings and access to on-line resources.

- *“Our organisation recently started developing a mental health and wellbeing support package, so this has been expedited including Zoom Wellbeing staff training - a bespoke 6-week mindfulness course. Staff generally report struggling to relax on off days as most hobbies and leisure activities are not available. Also finding there is a reluctance to take annual leave for the same reason, which will cause pressures later in the year”.*
- *“At the start of the crisis we put in place a really helpful reflective practice and psychotherapy counselling service for all service [staff] (and potentially also service users), which has been very beneficial. We also encourage our staff to participate in mental health support available through the local NHS [name]. We were halfway through rolling out Trauma Informed Services training to ALL of our staff when lockdown started, so will continue that training once easing of lockdown permits us to. But that has helped staff to understand and relate to the behaviour of service users and their own emotional responses”.*
- *“Keeping whole organisation (front line to Board) continually briefed, maintaining effective management processes throughout the organisation, employee well-being service”.*
- *“Offer of free online counselling and support, time off, online social activities have worked well, creative use of social media, encouraging learning and promoting access to reading and training resources”.*
- *“We have increased all communication and I have sent out a range of information and several ‘thank you’s. We have promoted a number of Care First helpful documents and internally produced a range of vlogs using some of our employment and skills team that we produced for customers but made available for staff. We are fortunate to have a few tutors and also mental health workers who have helped out.”*

The provision of staff support was identified by smaller organisations as being more challenging due primarily to resources, but without exception all CEOs saw this provision as a priority, even if this was, as one respondent noted, giving staff a ‘duvet day’ in which they could take a care day for themselves without being penalised for doing so.

### **Support from the board**

Only one CEO did not answer this question and of the 24 who answered, two thirds (67%) reported that they had full board support, while the others reported that they had ‘some’ board support. CEOs tended to identify that what they would find most helpful would be for members of the board to “not get involved” operationally, but rather to maintain a strategic perspective, and to let the CEO get on and do their job. This reflects some of the sentiments in the housing CEO survey, where the preference was for the board to remain strategic, rather than operational, in focus.

A couple of CEOs acknowledged that the board itself was experiencing difficulty adjusting to the situation, due either to their own inexperience and newness of appointment, or because of a lack of ability to understand what needed to be done strategically, even if this was simply acknowledging individual members of staff and commending them on their efforts.

- *“I have been disappointed with a lack of proactive contact or encouragement from most. I have singled out staff and ask the Board to encourage/appreciate, but the response has been mixed.”*

By and large however, CEOs appeared to be generally satisfied with how the boards were responding and felt supported by them, despite the challenges of the circumstances they all found themselves in.

- *“The Trustees have been very supportive throughout, and have been happy to back off and let me and my senior team run the organisation during the crisis. They have expressed this as a vote of confidence in our abilities and their desire not to “get in the way”. So we initially ceased Trustee meetings, including sub-committees, with us updating Trustees at least weekly via our All Staff briefings. Over the last six weeks or so we have started to resume sub-committees via Zoom and will hold our first full Trustee Meeting that way in a couple of weeks' time, but the Chair has asked for minimal written reports/papers as he is anxious to avoid unduly pressuring us when it is more important for us to be actively managing the charity at this time”.*
- *“It’s okay and after the initial panic is about right as we have managed to give assurance and after a Board meeting, an online Away half Day and an Audit & Risk Committee it’s been good”.*

### **Future ideas for leadership to enhance staff wellbeing**

CEOs were asked to identify support for the future that they require either from their organisation, or for the sector as a whole. The issue of increased and secure funding was raised by a few CEOs in responding to this question, but most respondents identified the need to have increased investment in staff well-being initiatives, while others expressed interest in clearer guidance on how to access specific grants.

- *“I feel there is already excellent access to support, thank you. If anything, one of the biggest issues during the crisis has been over-supply of information which has at times been quite overwhelming (and, often, repetitive). Regarding beneficiaries, the weak point in service provision locally (and nationally) has always been mental health and particularly dual diagnoses, so those are areas we are keen to improve. We have been trying (so far unsuccessfully) for nearly two years to get funding for us to employ our own mental health workers to try to address that.”*
- *“I think my staff team are doing fairly well and we have regular team meetings to check in with one another. I have encouraged them to do wellbeing workshops that we have been invited to.”*
- *“I would like clearer processes for receiving grants from MHCLG/Council”.*
- *“A sustained increase in funding to help cover the extra costs of cleaning staff cover and to recognise fundraising abilities have been curtailed due to the pandemic so running events which we usually do and indeed sourcing easily accessible funding*

*sources. By that I don't mean "here's an idea of something you could do" I'm not short of ideas, more of a "here is something we will do for you" if that makes sense? very time poor at present".*

- *"Increased mental health support. Increased funding in the sector."*

A number of CEOs used this question to reflect on how services could be improved for their client base, from simple, practical ideas – *"I do feel we could maybe do more for our residents, and wellbeing sessions that they can access through WhatsApp would be very valued by them"* - to a more strategic perspective with one CEO identifying a number of the infrastructural hurdles facing young people who are attempting to get support and help, especially in terms of accessing specialist health-related services. Others noted that local authorities were also facing challenges of their own and were withdrawing (or had withdrawn) from the levels of support previously offered. Others noted the need for a meaningful and effective government-led strategy for ending rough sleeping.

- *"Mainly the government developing and delivering an effective and sustainable strategy to end rough sleeping"*
- *"A government that gives a sh\*t about the vulnerable"*
- *"We are keen, like the rest of the sector, that rough sleepers currently in B&Bs are not just returned to the streets, and we are anxious about the likely rapid increases in new homelessness caused by the economic impact of Covid (and Brexit). So our chief concern is around ensuring there will be sufficient affordable housing available to accommodate people. The support we need is really around the sector continuing to pressure government on these major issues, e.g.: the LHA rate, housing supply for social rent (not "affordable housing" to purchase), and tackling unfair evictions, etc."*

CEOs also wanted to learn from the current experience to prepare better for next time, and they called on the government itself to be better prepared and more responsive to such crises in terms of advice; the provision of PPE; emergency funding; and making access to such support easier. Overall however, the greater emphasis was on the need for core funding, that was secure rather than just reactive, and that the increase in funding should be sustained. Others identified that they expected clearer and *"honest advice from government"*, provided with longer notice periods for agencies to be able to respond properly. A few respondents spoke of practical issues, such as the provision of Perspex screens and Wi-Fi cubicles within which to meet clients; better and more sustained support for mental health concerns; and supports for smaller charities impacted by the virus.

### **Looking to the future for housing and homelessness policy**

As with the frontline homelessness workers, we asked CEOs what suggestions they had for rapid changes that could be made to housing and homelessness policy right now. Some respondents identified a 'Housing First' priority in policy making, with quicker access to quality accommodation, while others noted the restrictions of the six-month tenancy agreement as actually stifling the delivery of a meaningful service. Other respondents took a longer term, more strategic view, proposing that better housing provisions were needed, that better and more accessible support for those at risk was needed, and that better-quality emergency responses were needed.

Secure and sustainable funding support was frequently mentioned, together with a meaningful commitment by government to building affordable housing, which would improve access to suitable accommodation. One CEO recommended a shift in perspective from homelessness being a housing issue to being a public health and social care issue.

A couple of CEOs expressed very specific and detailed responses, for example about allocations policies and S106 allocation criteria in particular, or increasing Homes England capital grant rates to facilitate the purchase of social housing from the private sector, to increase the supply of affordable homes to those in need. It should be noted that the survey ran before the publication of the widely criticised White Paper *Planning for the Future*, published by government in August 2020, which discussed the scrapping of locally negotiated S106 planning gain agreements as a lever to increase social housing in new development.

There was a range of ideas for future housing and homelessness policy:

- *“Remove application of 'no recourse to public funds' condition from people on the 10yr pathway to settlement. Remove right to rent regulations that force landlords to act as immigration officers and lead to discrimination. Ensure all vulnerable people have access to housing first”.*
- *“We are keen, like the rest of the sector, that rough sleepers currently in B&Bs are not just returned to the streets, and we are anxious about the likely rapid increases in new homelessness caused by the economic impact of Covid (and Brexit). So our chief concern is around ensuring there will be sufficient affordable housing available to accommodate people”.*
- *“Govt funded Housing First”*
- *“Accommodation with support for all”.*
- *“Start building council houses”*
- *“A greater focus on Housing First”*
- *“Ongoing support from NHS and [mental health] services. Proper funding for non-statutory services that support [young people]”.*
- *“Build more well-designed social housing in local towns so people can stay in their home towns. Those who need it (particularly rough sleepers) need much more support to help them keep their tenancies. Increase the housing allowance so it actually covers the rent of a reasonable house/flat. End discrimination from landlords (it still exists). More mental health support for those who need it, Current waiting times are far too long.”*
- *“No one back on the street including NRPF [no recourse to public funds]. 2. Increase LHA rates to 50th percentile and certainly keep what was a temporary restoration to 30th as permanent. 3. Increase Homes England capital grant rates to enable purchase of new homes being developed by private sector so we can bring in social sector and at truly affordable social rents. 4. Make all Housing Associations prioritise homes for people moving from temporary and supported housing and homelessness. 5. Increase support contracts so frontline staff can be paid a better wage as has been identified for care and NHS staff”.*

Overall, CEOs' ideas for the future can be seen as an endorsement for prioritising homelessness as a public health issue, supported by links to the NHS and particularly mental health services. The recognition of 'housing first' as a necessary future approach was a strong theme – housing, with support, being the start point of recovery from homelessness. Certainly, one could see the 'Everybody In' campaign that saw homeless people brought in off the street during the lockdown, as one of the greatest public health interventions in recent memory.

### **Summary of findings for CEOs of homelessness organisations**

The key findings from the CEOs of homelessness organisations were:

1. 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.
2. Exhaustion and isolation were also feelings that were reported by homelessness CEOs. The survey responses included feelings of anxiety and depression too.
3. Most CEOs felt they had the right level of support from their board members or trustees. However, as with the housing CEOs there were some who felt that the board were getting too involved in the everyday operational aspects and that this was a distraction, and using valuable time that needed to be directed to staff and clients.
4. The disconnect between frontline workers and CEOs was apparent in homelessness organisations, as it was in housing organisations. Frontline workers wanted more support, recognition and gratitude, and CEOs believed that they were providing this support in the most part. Something was being lost in translation.
5. 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.



As Fig 17 suggests, the affective tone of their responses is slightly more negative than positive, with many raising concerns about issues such as 'death' and 'dying', identifying 'risks' and that the world was now 'unsafe' in one or other form, and for some this left them with a deep sense of 'grief'. Others noted that they felt 'worn' down, 'sad', 'lonely', and 'frustrated', and could see the 'tragedy' of the situation that was unfolding.

Across the four surveys, there were frequent references to working from home, which is understandable given that most respondents will have been either furloughed or required to work remotely. Many appeared to be feeling positive about the arrangement, although the expression of a sense of isolation was also a relatively frequent association with these arrangements. This was often expressed directly, as in reports of feeling 'isolated' and 'disconnected', while others reported missing their teams, colleagues, and clients. A small number of respondents wrote of challenges with technology, while others noted the challenges of balancing work and home-schooling commitments. Still others noted the 'blur' between work and their personal lives, finding it difficult to 'switch off'. A very small number mentioned that working from home afforded them the opportunity to have some reflective time, which they wouldn't have had at the office, and that they found this to be valuable.

Many respondents across the four surveys expressed an understandable mix of emotions:

- *"[t]his is both an exciting opportunity to re-imagine our services but also poses some challenges in terms of change management,"*

while others recognised the more personal ambivalence which one described as

- *"rang[ing] from feeling very excited and enjoying the challenges (fight mode), but feeling that [I'm] on a hamster wheel that we'll never get off. Working from home blurs the boundaries between work and home life".*

A number of respondents focused specifically on their feelings with respect to the changes the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had on their responsibilities at work. Some, for example, acknowledged that while they felt

- *"anxious about the amount of work ahead and tired",*

even though at the same time they could also recognise

- *"the opportunities given by Covid to re-evaluate strategy and accelerate needed change".*

The CEO of one homelessness organisation describes the pressures faced as they struggled with the unknown, and the uncertainty of the future:

- *"all the balls I am used to juggling to keep the place going as well as give due attention to all sorts of other coronavirus related stuff is putting me under pressure. e.g. impact of track and trace on potentially multiple and successive staff self-isolations and costs of this is mind boggling. The fear of having to close due to lack of suitable staffing is still with me."*

Other respondents reported feeling anxious or worried about their clients, with one respondent noting that *"80% of the clients"* were suicidal, which naturally presents its own special concerns. Others worried about keeping staff, clients and themselves safe from infection, and some expressed concern that they were missing out on important information.



Of those who responded that they could access personal support networks (which tended to be the overwhelming majority across all four surveys) these networks were almost always comprised of a group described by respondents as *“friends and family”*. Support networks are clearly personal, safe relationships with an on-going connection. While respondents acknowledged the importance of professional networks (e.g. WhatsApp groups), responses to this question are saturated with references to families and to friendships, who are seen as sources of generic security and support. These responses reflect the wider experience that the most significant and meaningful sources of support are those with whom one has a personal relationship, usually sustained over a period of some time.

Some respondents did focus on their professional networks, with Housing CEOs in particular referencing their *WhatsApp* group. For younger housing professionals, the *Yammer* platform, along with *LinkedIn* appeared to popular alternative forms of social media. For example:

- *“I use social networking and video calls to stay in touch”,*
- and as one respondent puts it:
- *“Networks and communications are more important than ever at the moment and platforms such as Yammer and LinkedIn are fantastic ways to keep in meaningful contact with those around us. Yammer has been an invaluable support during this period through which I can reach out to networks across the business, catch up and ask for advice”.*

Other respondents appear to have a range of social media platforms to draw upon. For example,

- *“we use Workplace- a platform like Facebook though use is not widespread and just a few colleagues posts so this feels like a clique. We also have a team WhatsApp and a GEM WhatsApp (GEM's also use Yammer). I have found Twitter has been my best platform for housing though this is housing related but non-work. Twitter has been very helpful in recent weeks”.*



- *“deal [with clients] without formal mental health training for multiple days lone working, including [clients experiencing] psychosis and delusions”.*

However, for some respondents, these services should not be restricted solely to those with client-facing roles, suggesting that

- *“all managers should receive mental health champion training”,*

and that this should be

- *“mandatory training for managers”,*

so as to help

- *“facilitate more supportive conversations”* with staff members.

Even among those respondents who indicated that they were broadly satisfied with the support they received to do their jobs, a focus on wellbeing was still supported:

- *“I think we have enough in place, but additional virtual wellbeing initiatives wouldn't hurt”.*

Overall, there was a common call for

- ***“more sharing of issues and challenges”***

and while

- *“small network groups”*

were seen as helpful

- *“to share and support each other to deal with issues”,*

what was required were

- *“more examples of how mental wellbeing has been improved in the housing press.”*

Of those who responded by considering support needs for staff groups, the following quote summarises these needs:

- *“We need more funding, we need better trained agency staff, we need help from the wider organisation, the local council and the government. We need counselling for staff, and for residents. Free trauma therapy for frontline workers. A pay rise. Better working conditions/better office/building for staff and residents.”*

This is a perspective clearly endorsed by other respondents, one of whom noted that

- *“We find a lot of staff stress issues arise from outside the workplace, relationships etc. I think access to good quality listening services would be helpful.”*

Indeed, this may be an issue for staff and clients alike, as one of the respondents makes clear, that what is needed is

- *“more support for staff/residents who are carers at home (and more flexible working practices to help disabled and carers get back into work)”.*

It is clear, across all respondents that family, friends, colleagues, and team groups were seen as critical supports for respondents. However, it is also clear, both from the term frequency word clouds and from the actual responses, that all participants valued the support of opportunities to talk, to share, even to allow oneself to be vulnerable within a safe and supportive space, where others would listen. This is reflected, across the board, in the sort of further support that is required for the future – spaces to share and listen, structured in mental health support for professionals, tenants and clients alike. These are the findings in common across the sector. What follows is a reminder summary of the key findings from each of the survey strands analysed earlier in this report.

## Summary of findings

### Key findings for younger housing professionals

There were five key findings for younger housing professionals:

21. Younger housing professionals have a very strong sense of purpose and vision and this drives them more than factors like pay.
22. They want to make an impact and they see housing as a career where they can make a difference.
23. There is not yet a sufficiently clear development path for a large number of respondents to the survey, they would like more structure in career development planning, to see where they are headed.
24. Covid-19 has caused challenges in the work environment and feelings of anxiety were prevalent amongst the group, but there were mixed feelings too with some suggesting 'saving graces' and hopes for a more positive future.
25. In the main, younger housing professionals said they felt their organisation was supporting them in this new way of working and that there were lots of initiatives to help emotional health and mental wellbeing. However, there were comments from some that stronger 'structures' of support were necessary.

### Key findings for Housing CEOs

The key findings from the housing CEO survey were:

1. A keen sense of responsibility was felt for all staff and tenant customers – their wellbeing and their livelihoods.
2. 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.
3. In terms of supportive initiatives to help staff feel connected with each other and the organisation, there were a range of activities offered by CEOs that mirrored the sort of support that younger housing professionals said that they wanted for their wellbeing during the pandemic.
4. Governing board members were not surveyed as part of this research project. It would be interesting to gain their perspective as while the majority of CEOs felt supported, this was not universal and there were suggestions on how to move towards a more supportive style of communication between board and CEO.
5. 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 for frontline homelessness workers

The key findings from the frontline homelessness workers survey were:

1. There were a few concerns from respondents, that they had sufficient equipment to keep them safe (e.g. appropriate PPE), but it should be noted that the majority of respondents did not raise this issue.

2. Many frontline homelessness workers felt a sense of anxiety and disconnection from their organisation, and they perceived that communication and ‘checking-in’ from line managers to ask how they were, or to thank them for their work, would improve the situation.
3. Workers seemed to feel constrained in what they could do for their clients in isolation – for example there were comments that access to wider services for mental health and addiction were necessary and that this was not something a frontline worker could provide by themselves. A joined-up approach is needed, and the impact of Covid-19 seemed to throw that into sharp relief.
4. 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).
5. Ideas on future policy solutions unveiled a very clear message on the need to focus on accommodation-led approaches, such as Housing First, to stop the revolving door of more temporary hostel-based traditional responses.

### Key findings for Homelessness CEOs

The key findings from the CEOs of homelessness organisations were:

1. 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.
2. Exhaustion and isolation were also feelings that were reported by homelessness CEOs. The survey responses included feelings of anxiety and depression too.
3. Most CEOs felt they had the right level of support from their board members/ trustees; although, as with the housing CEOs there were some who felt that the board were getting too involved in the everyday operational aspects and that this was a distraction, and using valuable time that needed to be directed to staff and clients.
4. 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.
5. 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.

### Overall Findings Summary

Professionals working in housing and homelessness are clearly resilient (although that is not a word respondents used about their own feelings or approaches). They have adapted to a ‘new normal’, but this has not come without a cost. Housing professionals on the front line, and those leading organisations are reporting a host of negative emotions, including anger, exhaustion, isolation, worry and anxiety. However, they are also imagining a future which learns from the homelessness response to the COVID-19 pandemic; which provides psychologically informed environments and wellbeing frameworks that benefit staff and

clients alike; and which shows clear pathways for job satisfaction and self-actualisation in the housing and homelessness sector.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

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. There is 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.
- 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<sup>10</sup>, to support staff, tenants and clients in your organisation.

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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).

### **Recommendations for board members/ trustees**

17. 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
18. 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 VUCA<sup>11</sup> world.
19. Make sure that boards are trained in and comfortable with the language of PIE and emotional wellbeing.
20. 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.

### **Recommendations for the CIH**

1. Make sure that the developing work on professional standards responds to young housing professionals' desire for clear career pathways.
2. 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.

### **Recommendations for Government/ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

1. 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.
2. There is clear support at all levels for an accommodation-led, Housing First approach to resolving homelessness.

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<sup>11</sup> Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous

3. 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:
  - c. building more social housing
  - d. revisiting the benefits support system – universal credit and local housing allowance rates, particularly for younger people.
4. 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:

- practicality and adaptability
- helpfulness and supportiveness
- partnership working
- the importance of affordable homes
- the opportunity of 'housing first'
- client focused empathy
- anxiety about the future
- Uncertainty about career progression
- focus on social impact.
- exhaustion

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

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 wellbeing and mental health of colleagues, tenants and clients**

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<sup>12</sup> Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous

**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.**