



Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing  
Cymru

# Joining the Dots part 3

Local Government Housing Professionals Survey Report





## Introduction

This is the third and final report produced by Tyfu Tai Cymru which describes the experiences of housing professionals from local authorities in Wales working during the Covid 19 pandemic.

This unique study details how local authorities supported people from homelessness into accommodation and many staff made the move to working from home in record time. Our report also details the opportunities and challenges that developed during this time when it became clearer than ever that people's homes are central to their health and wellbeing.

This report sets out the findings from the survey which we conducted in May 2022, we had 43 separate responses; a slight decrease from the previous iterations which received 51 each. The second section of the report reflects the findings of the three surveys, setting out what lessons can be learnt for future planning. As with all the work of TTC, we have ensured the voice of the housing professionals are central to the report and we will be sharing our conclusions with the key people responsible for decision making about housing in Wales.

The responses in our reports are all anonymised, but they are from both stock retaining and non-stock retaining authorities and they cover a range of roles including housing advice, homeless prevention, private landlord engagement, housing strategy and planning. We have included quotes where we feel they help illustrate the narrative.

Our first survey was conducted in January 2020, the second in November and December 2020, and this final one in May 2022.

## Executive Summary

Our research found that people work in the housing sector because they are driven by their desire to help people and communities

Respondents to our surveys have continued to highlight concerns about ensuring people have permanent accommodation to move onto after being temporary housed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While housing is a priority for local authorities, respondents told us they have concerns about failings in the system, relating to the lack of land and capacity.

When asked about overcoming homelessness, respondents identified concerns that local housing allowance rate caps combined with high private rental rates means more people being priced out of local areas.

We asked participants, "How has your LA done a good job in responding to COVID-19?". Participants responded positively to this question with many stating how proactive their Local Authority was in response to COVID-19. In particular the supply of emergency accommodation and support was highlighted as a positive and timely response. Participants described how they had created strong relationships with their tenants and improved partnerships through the pandemic.

Although most participants found that their Local Authority responded well to COVID-19 in providing housing and support, people told us that they felt that services had become overstretched which had a detrimental effect on staff members and their mental health, leaving some feeling exhausted.

When supporting people experiencing homelessness, respondents told us found that offering a person centered approach was a great flexible way of working and that this approach should be used. It was also highlighted that more accommodation is needed, and that the accommodation offered needs to be better.

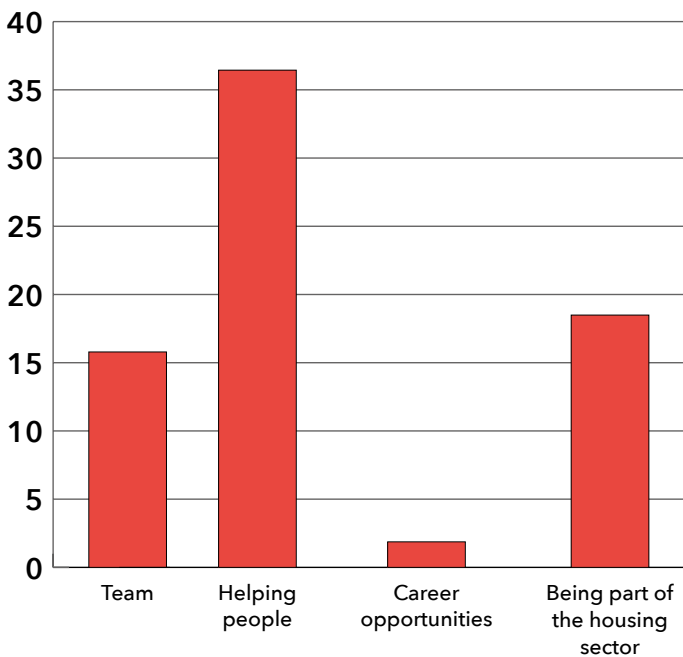
Participants highlighted how barriers decreased as the government eased policies and provided financial support for those that needed it throughout COVID-19. This is something that participants feel should be replicated to help those affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

The most concerning finding is that over 75% of responses told us that they felt their mental wellbeing had decreased since January 2020, and that workload pressure was a key factor. People also identified lockdown measures, poorer physical health, home schooling, worsening relationships with colleagues and working from home as having negatively impacted on their mental health.

# Findings from Survey 3

## Motivation and job satisfaction

As with previous reports in the 'Joining the dots' (JTD) series, people's main motivation for working within local authority services in housing strongly reflected a desire to help people and have an impact on significant societal challenges.



*“Being involved in and establishing new schemes to ensure an increased supply of suitable housing.” - Survey respondent*

We asked respondents to reflect to what extent their role had changed since January 2020, and if it had, to provide information on the nature of this change.

42% of respondents are now undertaking a different role, while 21% have seen some changes to their current role and 37% are doing the same role.

The main changes identified were because of staff leaving, internal promotion, workloads increasing, and new policies/legislation being introduced.

*“I have taken on the responsibility of being the clerical officer for Renting Homes, as well as Tenant & Community involvement.” - Survey respondent*

## Existing pressures and potential remedies

We asked respondents to reflect on their priorities and the main pressures they currently face.

**Homelessness prevention** featured as the dominant theme from respondents reflecting on the key housing priorities for their local authority.

*“Dealing with the homeless crisis move on into permanent accommodation and appropriate support” - Survey respondent*

The second greatest priority for respondents was the development of **new social and affordable housing** – through the local authority directly delivering new homes or supporting housing association partners.

*“Increase the net number of homes available, including for example new build by the Council and conversions of redundant commercial property into homes.” - Survey respondent*

Developing and implementing **rapid re-housing plans** and preparation for the implementation of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 also featured a number of times as priorities within the responses.

In terms of pressures facing staff, the following topics featured prominently:

- Impact of the cost of living crisis on communities and availability of appropriate services to provide support
- A lack of suitable accommodation to support people to move-on from temporary accommodation
- More broadly a lack of affordable housing options locally and concerns over landlords leaving the private rented sector
- The ongoing impact of managing rent arrears
- Heavy workloads, a shortage of staff and low staff morale
- Local issues also featured e.g. phosphate issues halting development of new homes, second homes and air b'n'b accommodation adding to local housing support issues

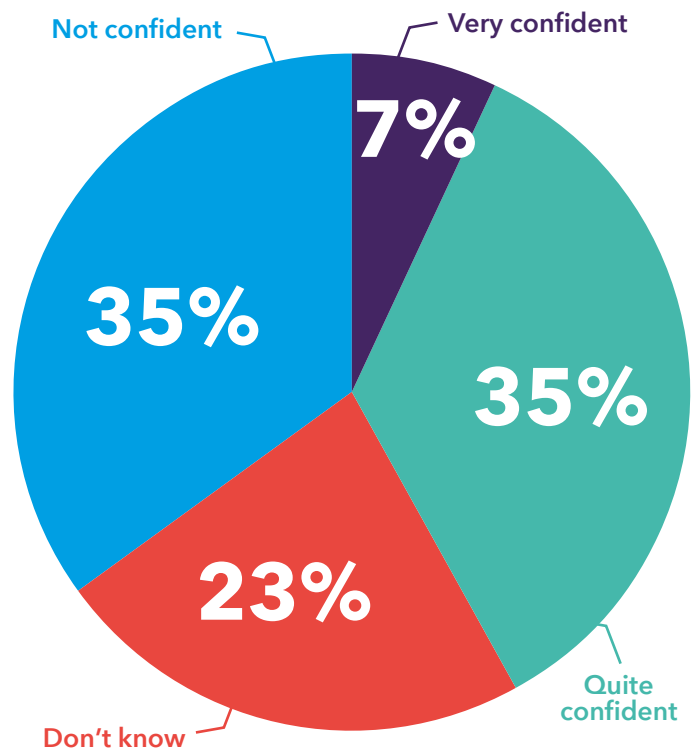
In terms of what respondents felt would address these pressures in practice, the following elements/activities came out strongly in the responses:

- Accelerating the delivery of affordable housing locally
- Increase in staff numbers to support services to meet demand effectively
- More access to specialist staff, such as therapists and mental health practitioners
- Reducing workloads, creating more time to think, and less bureaucracy/paperwork for staff
- Sustain increased financial packages of support for communities to support cost of living crisis
- More powers to address local housing market challenges (e.g. second homes and rising rents in the PRS)
- Modernised IT systems and equipment

### How much of a priority is housing within your LA?

We were told by 87% of our respondents that they felt that housing is a priority in their Local Authority. 13% felt it was not, a slight increase from 10% in the previous survey.

### How confident are you in your Local Authority's ability to meet Welsh Government target of 20,000 low carbon social homes?



### What is your perception of your LAs ability to build?

The area of most concern for respondents was around capacity and land, both of which had over 50% of responses as unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory. More positively, 63% of staff told us that they thought their LAs ability to address homelessness was good or very good, and 74% thought the skills in the LA were good.

	Skills	Land	Address homelessness	Planning resources	Skills in local comm	Capacity
<b>Very good</b>	18	2	9	1	3	5
<b>Good</b>	14	5	15	13	14	9
<b>Neither good or bad</b>	7	14	6	20	18	6
<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	4	12	12	8	7	15
<b>Very unsatisfactory</b>		12	1	1	1	8
<b>Blank</b>		1				

## What additional measures do you think are needed to improve your authority's ability to adequately address homelessness?

The high number of detailed responses to this section sets out how important this issue is for many housing professionals, and the need to listen to the insight of staff into the pressures on the current homelessness relief system.

Respondents told us that they were very concerned about a lack of supported housing for people at risk of homelessness, for young people and people experiencing mental health issues.

The role of the private rented sector is highlighted by some respondents who have concerns that current local housing allowance rate caps combined with high private rental rates means more people are priced out of areas.

Answers also focused on the issue of burnout for those staff who have been working to house people during the pandemic, and the increased pressure they are now facing to house people from Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis meaning a sustained heavy workload.

*"More investment in Supported Housing for those under 25-year-olds who have complex needs and are vulnerable"*

*"go back to the less bureaucracy in planning like we had during covid"*

*"Tenure security as the default would reduce homelessness as one of the biggest causes of homelessness is caused by insecure tenancies."*

*"Increased capacity to work intensively with individual households that need support."*

*"Staff are leaving, and quite frankly I don't blame them. The public are rude and they think it is all right to swear down the phone at you. It is a dire situation."*

In each of our surveys we asked staff how much confidence they have in the partnerships between housing and health colleagues. Responding to this recent survey 58% told us that they were very or quite confident, a decrease from the previous survey of 67% which may have reflected closer working relationships during the pandemic.

## How has your LA done a good job in responding to COVID-19?

Overall, the participants responded positively to this question with many stating how Local Authorities were very reactive in how they responded to COVID-19. As emergency accommodation and support was made available to everyone this has been highlighted throughout the responses as one of the main positives to have come out of COVID-19.

*"Very reactive response, thought outside the box, dramatically increased TA supply (all be it on a temporary basis), introduction and continuation of homeless cell meetings, introduction of rapid rehousing protocol, very strong relationships with our RSL partners"*

*"Excellent with the available emergency accommodation"*

*"Much better informed on who is rough sleeping and their support needs. Outreach services have been developed and temporary accommodation has been developed to support specific cohorts which has created better engagement. Over 100% increase in temporary accommodation. Drop-in clinics for vaccinations for the rough sleeping community."*

Participants explained how it gave them the opportunity to create strong relationships with their tenants and better working partnerships with an increase in joint working.

One participant said how tenants now feel more comfortable in approaching their housing organisation due to the relationships built throughout COVID-19.

*"From a housing perspective the department responded well to covid19 - welfare checks were made with all tenants during the lockdown period to check on wellbeing which were well received. Good relationships formed from these calls which has a lasting effect. Tenants feel more comfortable in speaking to officers."*

*"Yes, we have gone above and beyond as a unit to respond to the pandemic and continue to do. Personally, I see it have created better working partnerships within our own authority and lots of joint working whereas previously it was not always the case."*

Participants found that a positive was that all policies were looked at and amended accordingly, providing emergency accommodation and support to all that needed it meant there was nobody left being homeless.

*"They empowered their staff to take action and help those in need."*

Although most participants found that their Local Authority responded very well to COVID-19 in providing housing and support to everybody, it was highlighted throughout the survey that services became overstretched which had a detrimental effect on staff members and their mental health, leaving some feeling exhausted.

*"The on the ground staff have given their all to keep the service going, even though it has been a detriment to their health."*

*"Services are overstretched, and staff are exhausted."*

### **In what way(s) do you consider there are lessons that need to be learnt about how your Local Authority responded to COVID-19?**

The predominant theme to this question was staff felt overworked, and a lack of staff which negatively impacted on those working through the pandemic.

*"Need to consider the impact it's had on staff MH - a lot of staff have been greatly affected as demand increased but staffing levels didn't."*

*"Lack of staff, units of accommodation, staff skills etc."*

*"More staff for the future to protect the current staff from work overload."*

*"More staff needed to tackle loneliness, isolation and community spirit."*

Participants found that offering a person centered approach was a great flexible way of working and that this approach should continue to be used in supporting homeless people. They also highlighted that more and better accommodation is needed.

*"Flexible and person-centred ways of working should hopefully continue. Better and more comprehensive services for street homeless should also continue."*

*"Offered a person-centred approach - volunteering opportunities - community cohesion."*

*"More and better accommodation for homeless."*

Participants highlighted how barriers decreased as the government eased policies and provided financial support for those that needed it throughout COVID-19. This is something that participants feel should be replicated to help those affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

*"Financial packages of support provided by central government for those most in need during Covid 19 need to be replicated during the Cost-of-Living crisis."*

*"We cut red tape through with the help of Welsh government which freed us up from the shackles to get the job done. we worked as one voice."*

*"Things can be achieved virtually."*

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

In this final report in the series, we were interested to hear more from staff about how they felt their wellbeing had changed since our first survey.

Perhaps not surprisingly but very much of concern, over 75% of responses told us that they felt their mental wellbeing had decreased since January 2020.

When asked about contributing factors; people identified workload pressure, lockdown measures, poorer physical health, home schooling, worsening relationships with colleagues and working from home as having negatively impacted on their mental health.

For the smaller number, whose mental health has improved, they identified as key factors the move to working from home, improved personal circumstances and better relationships with colleagues.

### If your mental health has got worse, what are the key factors?

Impact of lockdown measures	10
Workload pressures	16
Physical health	9
Home-school	6
Workload	5
Relationships with colleagues	5
Corporate communications	1
Anxiety re Covid19	2
Relationships with tenants	4
Working from home	8
Personal reasons	4
Job security	3

### If you feel your mental health has improved, pick up to three of the categories as contributing factors:

Relationships with colleagues	6
Personal reasons	6
Hybrid working	1
Relationships with tenants	3
Working from home	9
Career outside housing	1
Smaller workload	2

Continuing our focus on wellbeing, over 50% of respondents told us that they felt supported by their employer, with some highlighting the extra support put on by their local authority including

- Wellbeing days
- Counselling services
- Social get-togethers
- Homeworking and managerial support.



# How do you see the future of housing in Wales?

## What do you see as the greatest threats to ensuring Wales has the right homes for the future?

By far the greatest concern is the **lack of temporary accommodation** and more permanent solutions for people seeking accommodation.

People also shared their dissatisfaction with **regulations, overly complex planning, the impact Local Housing Allowance is having on rents, lack of available land, and concerns re financing of housing into the future.**

Respondents also highlighted the cost of living crisis, and lack of land to provide more social housing

Interesting to note that only one person highlighted Covid 19 and the recovery as a factor that they saw as an issue

*"Rising house prices put properties out of the reach of many people which then results in them applying for social housing, which puts pressure in LAs"*

*"Lack of co-ordination in addressing the challenges facing affordable housing development."*

*"rent costs for private rentals too high and not enough, landlords not accepting council bond scheme to get people into properties."*

*"lack of LA properties"*

*"need to stop the influx of people buying up second homes. Making affordable homes for locals, young people cannot afford to stay in the communities. Give landlords back some incentive to rent properties out as so many landlords are selling up."*

*"Poverty. This impacts mental health and ability to live without anxiety, and risk of homelessness."*

## What do you see as the greatest opportunities for ensuring Wales has the right homes for the future?

The greatest opportunity was to **build more affordable homes**, which are seen as key to building Wales's future.

Welsh Government should take a national lead in building strong progressive, partnerships at national and local level and some relaxation of planning. Other ideas including more decarbonisation of new and existing homes, creating more jobs in rural areas, better mental health support for young people and more resources for LAs (both financial and staffing).

*"Partnership , shared vision and the will to make a difference."*

*"Simplified Planning and regulatory system and allocation of adequate viable land for development"*

*"More employment for younger people in deprived areas and help with buying affordable homes"*

*"Support needs must be addressed to ensure tenancies are sustainable. Continuation of the multi agency work achieved during the pandemic, especially around mental health support"*

*"Continue with increasing grant amounts to develop affordable housing."*

*"Continue building energy efficient and zero carbon and improve existing homes of all tenures."*

## 2020 - 2022: A reflection on two years of pressure on housing departments in local authorities.

When we first surveyed housing professionals in January 2020, we had no idea that so much was about to change in how we deliver services across housing and homelessness services.

Since that time, thanks to the commitment of housing staff in local authorities, Wales has seen large numbers of people able to access temporary accommodation, tenants able to stay safe in their homes and better working partnerships between housing and health colleagues.

This final survey tells us that many staff (42%) are working in a different role from the one they had in January 2020, and many have new or different responsibilities since the start of the pandemic.

A priority for respondents is to find more permanent housing solutions for people who are homeless and/or living in temporary accommodation. They also want more joined up services, with better understanding of the needs of homeless people by health and social care colleagues.

Staff are feeling the impact of the cost of living crisis on communities, and have concerns that current policies (such as the Local Housing Allowance) are no longer fit for purpose.

In our first survey, staff told us they were concerned about tight budgets for LAs to deliver on housing commitments. Since then, the worry has been linked to resources, staff burnout and lack of accommodation.

Some of the greatest impact of the pandemic has been on the mental wellbeing of staff who continue to be committed to working in this sector because they want to help people and are proud of the work done to support communities to stay safe. It is critical that lessons are taken on board about the pressures put on staff in housing departments in local government.



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