



Executive Summary

Staffing Challenges within the Northern Ireland Homelessness Sector

Dr Karen Orr and Dr Leeanne O'Hara

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Executive Summary

Aims and Objectives

Homeless Connect commissioned this independent research project to explore staffing issues in the homelessness sector in Northern Ireland. The overarching research aims were to inform understanding of the current staffing situation and identify key recommendations moving forward to support staffing in the sector.

Methodology

The research took a four-stage mixed methods approach. This included a desk-based review; stakeholder engagement; analysis and interpretation; and reporting of recommendations. All stages were supported and guided by the research advisory group.

The desk-based review began with a review of all relevant documentation held by Homeless Connect. This was used to map the current structure of homelessness provision in Northern Ireland, staff roles and organisations. In addition, a

literature review on staffing in the homelessness sector (internationally) and a brief (local) policy review was undertaken.

Stakeholder engagement was conducted via qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Firstly, a frontline staff survey was distributed via the Homeless Connect network. This survey explored: background information on staff employed in front line positions; their job role and perceptions of that role; job satisfaction; the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and recommendations for staffing in the sector. In addition, an organisational survey was distributed to management and human resources (HR) across the sector to explore: an overview of service size; staff demographics; employment characteristics; the Coronavirus pandemic; and reflections and recommendations for staffing in the sector. Survey data was complimented with qualitative focus group data collected online with both frontline staff and organisational managers. The fieldwork

for the research was conducted between April and June 2022.

Literature Review

A total of 28 papers were deemed suitable for inclusion in the literature review, based on defined criteria. A broad spectrum of information was gleaned on staffing in the homelessness sector on a local, national and international level. Evidence indicated that the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased considerably over the years in almost all countries in Europe (FEANTSA, 2018). Despite this, the literature suggests that the resources available to manage the services working in this sector have not increased accordingly. The impact of this has had inevitable and negative consequences on the experiences of those frontline staff working in the homelessness sector. Staffing challenges were highlighted and discussed under the remit of staff's (poor) wellbeing, resulting in staff stress and burnout (in part due to the challenging working environment); limited resources and comparably low salaries; the need for improved training and professional development; and the exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Further, the evidence shed some light on why people choose to work in the homelessness sector, motivations and rewards.

Policy Review

The context of homelessness in Northern Ireland was reviewed and indicated 15,758 homelessness presentations in Northern Ireland for 2021/2022 and 10,135 homelessness acceptances.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) are responsible for responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland and they are also charged with administering the Supporting People Programme on behalf of the Department for Communities. The Supporting People annual budget of £72.8m (2021/2022) funds approximately 85 delivery partners that provide more than 850 housing support services for approximately 19,000 service users in Northern Ireland (NIHE, 2022).

NIHE are also obligated to publish a new homelessness strategy every five years, with the most recent released to cover the period from 2022-2027 (NIHE, 2022-2027). The main aim of this strategy is: 'Wherever possible homelessness should be prevented, if homelessness cannot be prevented it should be rare, brief and nonrecurring.' The three main strategic objectives are: (1) prioritise homelessness prevention; (2) address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support; and (3) support customers to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation.

Findings: Surveys

In total, 205 people responded to the frontline staff survey from 27 organisations across Northern Ireland. The majority of the sample (68%) were female, white (98%) and aged between 26-55 years (72%).

Just over half the sample reported that they come from a Catholic background (57%), whilst a quarter (25%) were from a Protestant background. The majority of the respondents were somewhat experienced in terms of their tenure at their current organisation. Most of the workforce sampled hold some level of formal qualification, most commonly cited was a degree (35%), followed by Level 5 qualifications (20%).

When asked why participants want to work in this sector, the most commonly cited response was that they wanted to make a difference in people's lives (84%). Indeed, for many, it is the nature of the work that they value about working in this sector. With regards to what they don't like about working in the sector, pay was the most cited factor (78%), followed next by stress (52%). The majority of respondents (75%) reported that the Coronavirus pandemic has made their work more challenging. Sources of job dissatisfaction include pay (73%) and promotion opportunities (52%). However, the majority of staff (91%) reported being satisfied with supervision, co-workers (87%), the nature of the work (85%), and communication (71%). The majority of staff also reported that they intended to continue to work in the sector (72%).

Fourteen organisations completed the organisational survey. These organisations varied in size. For example, three organisations were small with 0-10 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services while four organisations employed more than 90 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services. Half of the organisations stated their service had between 20-40% male staff and 60-80% female staff. There were lower percentages of under 18 year olds and the 18-30 year olds across the board compared to those in the older age categories.

Two organisations stated that 80-100% of their staff were aged 31-50 years old. The majority of organisations (71%) reported that their organisation was facing challenges due to staff sickness. When asked about remuneration packages, 43% of organisations felt they were average. All organisations felt the nature of the work was a challenge to staff. In addition, twelve organisations felt competitive pay and funding uncertainties were also a challenge. Shift work and limited progression to promotion were also deemed challenging by eleven of the organisations while eight organisations also felt competitive terms and conditions were a challenge to staff. The majority (71%) of organisations felt the Coronavirus pandemic enhanced staff challenges 'a lot'.

Findings: Focus Groups

Six frontline staff focus groups were conducted and one for senior management. A total of twenty eight staff took part in the staff focus groups, twelve were male and sixteen were female. All had worked in the sector for varying lengths of time ranging from 5-25 years. The senior management group was comprised of five females representing five organisations across Northern Ireland.

The focus groups provided rich insights into a range of factors related to working in the homelessness sector. Factors that encouraged people to work in the sector revolved around: a sense of vocation; intrinsic rewards; variation in the role; loyalty and camaraderie; and feeling valued. A plethora of issues and challenges of working in the sector were presented to include: issues with pay and funding; terms and conditions; recruitment challenges and staff retention; training development and career progression; the challenging, complex and volatile nature of the work and clientele; the impact of burnout on staff; formal and informal support;

relationships with statutory agencies; and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Nonetheless, ‘willingness,’ staff passion and commitment were strongly evident and so too was the potential to harness this commitment for the benefit of those working in the sector and those availing of the services delivered.

Conclusions

The findings from this research resonate strongly with the global evidence base (e.g., Olivet, McGraw, Grandin, Bassuk, 2010; Osborn, Every, & Richardson, 2018; FEANTSA, 2020), and highlight several core staffing challenges experienced by those working in the homelessness sector. These challenges can be categorised across four core areas, each of which poses considerable threat to the sustainability of the service delivery currently offered by the homelessness sector in NI: (1) Policy - the lack of funding and investment in the sector and the need for improved support infrastructures; (2) Practice - particularly staffing levels, recruitment, and terms and conditions of employment; (3) Societal issues - external factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the work; (4) Psychological issues- staff satisfaction and wellbeing. Discussed also is the effect of a ‘buffer’ to these challenges, that is a sense of vocation and the commitment and dedication of staff who work in the sector.

Recommendations

Recommendations for action have been identified across all four core areas, as presented below.

Policy Recommendations

- Improved communication networks (or more responsive systems) between the sector and policy makers to facilitate greater recognition of the vital work undertaken under extremely tight resources and challenging circumstances.

- The provision of enhanced support afforded to the homelessness sector, in terms of financial support as well as interdepartmental policy-level support frameworks and legislative infrastructure.
- Further research is also recommended in order to explore the perspectives of commissioners and policy makers in response to this report.

Practice Recommendations

- Terms and Conditions (Ts & Cs) and remuneration packages of staff employed in the homelessness sector should be reviewed. Research should be undertaken to benchmark against other skilled services, as well as to statutory services.
- Whilst some variability in Ts & Cs across the sector and between different organisations should be expected, the implementation of a standardised baseline remuneration package is recommended, which organisations can further supplement or enhance.
- The current financial and operating model should be revised with investment focussed on current staff and the reliance on agency staff reduced.
- Professionalise the sector, and consider the training pathways and professional development of staff employed.
- Dedicate activity to enhance staffing levels across the sector, with targeted recruitment activity (facilitated with improved Ts & Cs).
- Improve public relations and communication to better explain to future employees (and to broader society more generally) what a role in the homeless sector actually entails.

Social Recommendations

- Additional research aimed at exploring service users' responses to the staffing challenges within the sector. Their voice (whilst not the remit of this research) is notably absent from this report. The authors suggest that it is imperative that further research is conducted to explore their perspectives and experiences of availing of homelessness services in light of all the challenges highlighted in this report.
- Greater investment, enhanced funding, subsequent improved staffing levels, and further professionalisation and enhanced bespoke training of sector staff would better equip the sector to adequately support the service users presenting with these ever increasing complex and challenging needs.

Staff Wellbeing Recommendations

Whilst further research into support packages afforded to staff in other sectors would be beneficial, in the immediate term, staff wellbeing could be improved with additional funding and investment, e.g., by providing:

- Adequate sick leave so that staff can properly recuperate from any illness encountered whilst working in the sector.
- Enhanced holiday entitlement to allow staff to better look after their own mental health and wellbeing with much needed downtime and rest.
- Freely available and professional mental health support for all staff who require such services.
- Opportunities to further strengthen the existing strong staff relationships and support networks, e.g., via funded staff away days and wellbeing events.

2.0 Introduction

This research was commissioned by Homeless Connect and funded by the NIHE to explore staffing issues in the homelessness sector in Northern Ireland. The rationale for undertaking this research is the recognised staffing challenges that exist within the sector. For example, the Homelessness Sector Operational Group (HSOG) have identified challenges around staff recruitment and retention and the potential negative impact on service provision and on outcomes for service users. Anecdotal evidence has highlighted several potential interrelated factors, which are contributing to these challenges, for example: staff pay; increasing complexity and nature of the work; attractiveness of other roles or sectors; and the on-going challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic

2.1 Study Aims and Objectives

The overarching research aims are to inform understanding of the staffing situation in the homelessness sector and to identify key recommendations for supporting staffing in the sector. More specifically the key objectives of this project were:

1. To gather information on staffing within the sector including, for example, information on the number of staff employed; demographics of staff employed; job roles; pay grades; qualification and skill levels of staff employed; supervision and support for staff employed; and training and development for staff employed.
2. To gather information and opinion from staff employed in the sector including, for example, information on job satisfaction; reasons for working in the sector; pros and cons of working in the sector; issues relating to skill sets and qualifications; career prospects and future intent for employment in the sector; and suggestions for change and improvement..
3. To gather information and opinion from sector employers including, for example, information on staff vacancies; employer perspectives on training and support needs versus what is available; staff pay and conditions including factors relating to benchmarking and use of salary scales; changes in the nature of the work and how that relates to current and future staffing requirements; and consideration of the impact of the pandemic on staffing issues.
4. To co-develop, through a participative process, a series of recommendations for positive change and improvement.

3.0 Methodology

The research team implemented a four-stage, mixed methods approach to address the research questions, all of which was scaffolded by the input of the research advisory group (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Methodological overview

3.1 Co-production: Research advisory group

As a first step, the research team worked with Homeless Connect to establish a research advisory group made up of representatives the Homelessness Sector Operational Group, NIHE and others. The team engaged with the advisory group at key junctions throughout the research process including:

- Finalising the methodology;
- Development of the research instruments, e.g., advising on survey design and interview schedules;

- Participant identification and recruitment;
- Analysis and interpretation of findings;
- Reporting and recommendations development

3.2 Desk-based review

Next, the research team collated and systematically reviewed all relevant documentation and literature held by Homeless Connect. The team used this information to map the current structure of homelessness provision in Northern Ireland and staff roles within the sector. Further, this exercise was used (in tandem with consultation with the advisory group) to identify key members working in the sector to take part in the research and act as gatekeepers to other potential participants.

In addition, the team undertook a scope of the published literature on staffing in the homelessness sector identifying and gleaning information from work that is available at the local, national and international level. Searches were conducted using the OVID platform (Psychinfo) and Google Scholar. For OVID the search strategy was designed for a title search to include terms relating to homelessness and staff (OVID search strategy: (((homeless or homelessness) and staff) or staffing).ti.). A total of 686 results were sifted with 21 deemed suitable for inclusion in the review and directly related to staffing in the homelessness sector. All other results were related to staffing in health care (care homes and hospital settings) or educational settings (teachers in school settings or further education). Google Scholar gleaned a further 7 relevant results for inclusion (searching ‘staffing’ and ‘homelessness’). To accompany the literature scoping review, the team identified relevant policy to homelessness in Northern Ireland, which is presented in a brief review.

3.3 Stakeholder engagement

A range of stakeholders were consulted during this research. This included:

- Staff employed in the sector;
- Sector employers;

A mixed methods approach to stakeholder engagement was adopted, availing of both quantitative survey techniques and in-depth qualitative focus groups. A range of organisations took part in this research. It is noted that due to the staffing challenges evident in this report that there are organisations that were unable to afford their staff the time to take part in this research.

3.3.1 Surveys

Bespoke survey tools were designed for both frontline staff and managers/HR working in the homelessness sector. These surveys were administered online and distributed by email via organisations to staff members.

Organisational survey: A bespoke survey tool for staff in management/HR positions in the sector was developed in partnership with the advisory group. A tailored suite of questions was developed to address the precise needs of the research objectives presented. Main sections of the survey included: overview of service size; staff demographics; employment characteristics; the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic; and reflections and recommendations.

Frontline staff survey: A bespoke survey tool for frontline staff was developed in partnership with the advisory group. As per the organisational survey, a tailored suite of questions was developed to address the precise needs of the research objectives. These included: background information; job role and perceptions; job satisfaction; the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and recommendations. To complement these sections, a 36 item standardised measure of job satisfaction (Spector, 1994) was included in the staff survey.

3.3.2 Focus groups

Online focus groups with frontline staff and senior managers were conducted. All groups were facilitated using Zoom. Homeless Connect worked as gatekeepers to recruitment for all groups and assisted in scheduling group dates and times. Group composition included frontline staff and senior managers from across Northern Ireland.

Group sessions lasted between 45 and 70 minutes in length. A total of six staff focus groups and one senior management focus group were conducted. A total of twenty eight staff took part in the staff focus groups, twelve were male and sixteen were female. All had worked in the sector for varying lengths of time ranging from 5-25 years. Whilst some service managers took part in frontline staff groups, all were still performing some level of frontline work. Other staff roles included deputy managers, floating support workers (outreach, hostels), senior practitioners, project managers, accommodation officers, and resettlement workers. The client base was from across the spectrum and included those working with youth (16-24 year olds), family support, adults and adults 50 plus in age. The senior management group was comprised of five females representing five organisations across Northern Ireland.

3.4 Analysis and interpretation

An analysis plan was developed for both the qualitative and quantitative data collected.

Quantitative data analysis: A comprehensive descriptive analysis was conducted with data presented in tabular and graphical formats. For the 'Job Satisfaction Survey' (Spector, 1994) administered to frontline staff, items were scored on each of the nine facet subscales (positive and negative scoring). The sum of the four items for each facet score was calculated to give a total score for each subscale and a total satisfaction score (see Spector, 1994). For the four item subscales, scores range from 4-24. Scores ranging from 4-12 were categorised as dissatisfied, between 12-16 were categorised as ambivalent, and those ranging from 16-24 were categorised as satisfied. Total satisfaction scores ranged from 36-216, where 36-108 were categorised as dissatisfied, between

108-144 were categorised as ambivalent, and 144-216 were categorised as satisfied.

Qualitative data analysis: A grounded approach, involving thematic analysis and guided by the rigorous and evidence-based practices as reported by Braun & Clarke (2008) was employed. Key themes were complemented with anonymised quotes from focus groups to give depth to the findings. Recurrent themes were emerging by focus group number four with data saturation reached by group six. Senior management group themes, on the most part, concurred with frontline staff.

Comparative analysis: Working back through the scoping review of relevant literature, the team compared themes and findings that emerged from other studies with this current work and formulated a section of the report on recommendations for positive change and improvement.

Note that the research adhered to strict ethical protocols (for example, those set out by the British Educational Research Association and the British Psychological Society).

4.0 Literature Review

The number of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased considerably over the years in almost all countries in Europe (FEANTSA, 2018). Despite this, the literature would suggest that the resources available to manage the services working in this sector have not increased accordingly. The impact of this has had inevitable and negative consequences on the experiences of those frontline staff working in the homelessness sector.

As an on-going and pervasive challenge facing much of Western society, UK government policy (Department of Communities & Local Government, CLG, 2008) has recognised the importance of understanding and addressing the experiences of frontline staff working in the homelessness sector (Peters, Hobson & Samuel, 2021). Peters et al., (2021) recognise the need to understand the challenges faced by the staff working in this sector, not only for their own wellbeing, but for that of service users, whose own distress and challenging behaviour could potentially be exacerbated by the stressful conditions staff experience in the workplace.

4.1 Staffing challenges

Staffing issues in the homelessness sector (such as, low pay, high burnout, high stress, high turnover, challenging work situations, temporary contracts, and low levels of staff training and development) have been reported in a range of countries around the world, including the USA (Olivet, McGraw, Grandin, Bassuk, 2010), Australia (Osborn, Every, & Richardson, 2018) and Europe (FEANTSA, 2020). A recent study published by the European Observatory on Homelessness (FEANTSA, 2020) reported on a range of staffing practices and challenges in services for people experiencing homelessness across 15 European Countries.

The report acknowledged the variability of working experiences in the homelessness sector. Nonetheless, several core issues were highlighted, namely:

1. Staff's (poor) wellbeing, resulting in staff stress and burnout (in part due to the challenging working environment);
2. Limited resources and comparably low salaries;
3. Need for improved training and professional development;
4. The exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

4.1.1 Staff wellbeing

The mental health challenges faced by frontline staff working in the homelessness sector are well reported (see, for example, Wirth et al., 2019). Staff working with people experiencing homelessness can often carry an emotional burden, weighed down by compassion fatigue (Peters et al., 2021). The mental health challenges experienced by staff are further problematised due to the complex psychological needs and challenges of those service users within their care. Peters et al., (2021) argue that frontline staff are likely to be exposed to individuals' experience of trauma which can potentially lead to their own secondary traumatic stress. A point supported by Schiff and Lane (2019) who found high rates of PTSD symptoms amongst frontline workers in the homelessness sector in Canada.

Furthermore, Wirth, Mett, Prill, Harth, Nienhaus (2019) highlighted that due to the emotional involvement with their clients, staff working in this sector are at higher risk of burnout. As such the authors argue that more information and training regarding maintaining boundaries is necessary.

Due to these challenges, these same authors highlight the importance of providing staff with the opportunity to discuss, in a therapeutic setting, either with a suitably qualified supervisor or an external counsellor, the emotional impact of their work. Such therapeutic intervention would help frontline staff manage the ‘fragile balancing act’ (as reported by Peters et al 2021) of trying to provide invaluable support to service users, whilst also trying to protect their own wellbeing, despite working in traumatic situations and with insufficient resources.

In Northern Ireland specifically, Homeless Connect, in response to the Supporting People Strategy (2022-2025), reported that deteriorating mental health amongst staff was a significant issue (Homeless Connect, 2022). This was attributed to the growing pressure faced by staff in the sector, in part due to the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff (resulting in current staff having to work additional shifts) as well as the rising complexity of the needs presented by service users.

4.1.2 Limited resource

Poor resources and low salaries appear to be exacerbating the stress and burnout experienced by frontline workers. The FEANTSA (2020) report highlighted that in those countries where the national focus on homelessness was matched with ‘significant commitment to resources’ (e.g., in Denmark and Finland), staff stress related issues were reported less. Whereas in those countries where resource was low or funding unstable (including in the UK), issues around stress and burnout, resulting from low wages, stressful working environments and job insecurity were more widely reported.

Neale and Kennedy (2002) recognise the need for homelessness services to not only provide the basics of accommodation, but the importance of their role in providing stability, safety, and security for service users, as well as allowing for a place to socialise and the space to grow in confidence and self-respect. The importance of staff-service user relationships is also recognised in the evidence base. For example, Peters et al., (2021) recognised how staff members working in a hostel often function as a family member-type role for service users, where deep and genuine support is offered. Additionally, Heinze and Jozefowicz-Simbenib, (2009) highlighted the positive impact that strong relationships between staff and service users can have as they report how satisfaction amongst their youth service users was driven by their having supportive and caring relationships with staff.

However, with increasing societal need and limited resources, it is likely these services will face extreme pressure and challenges in providing even the most basic of service provision. As such, Wirth, Mett, Prill, Harth, Nienhaus (2019)’s review called for greater financial resources in this sector to increase the number of professionals working in this field and thus reducing the staff to service user ratio. Such further investment in the sector will provide for much needed resources to enable homelessness services to deliver not only accommodation but the additional social and emotional support that is often required within this service delivery.

With specific focus on NI, Homeless Connect (2022) highlighted that ‘the resources available to the sector are simply insufficient to meet the needs of those at risk of or experiencing homelessness’ (p.14).

The poor financial resourcing is reported to be exacerbating the issues with recruiting and retaining staff as the salaries are noted as being insufficient to attract suitable candidates. The knock-on effects on services are also highlighted, particularly with rising energy costs. The report recognises that 'the blunt reality is that valuable services are at risk of being scaled down or even closed because of difficulties around staffing and resources' (p.14).

4.1.3 Professionalisation, training and development

In the UK, it has been recognised that staff roles in the homelessness sector typically do not require any professional qualifications and furthermore, it is also highlighted that staff may (in some contexts) receive little training for their work (McGrath & Pistrang, 2007). Nonetheless, in the UK it has been reported that graduate level qualifications are 'not uncommon' and that there have been efforts to better professionalise the sector where emphasis has typically been placed more on experience rather than formal qualifications (FEANTSA, 2020). Further investment in frontline staff by way of training and development would likely enhance overall job satisfaction by better equipping staff to undertake their role (both in terms of the practicalities of their duties as well as managing the emotional burden), as well as offering recognition and appreciation for the dedication these staff commit to their role.

4.1.4 Coronavirus pandemic

The challenges experienced by the homelessness sector have been further exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic. A recent study conducted by the Frontline Network Wales explored the experiences of frontline workers working in homelessness during the Coronavirus pandemic.

This report explored the challenges experienced by frontline workers during this time as well as the support they have received (and that which was lacking) from their employers.

For example, support regarding mental health and wellbeing and the ability to maintain work-life balance. The exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is also recognised in the Northern Ireland homelessness sector specifically, where the pressures placed on staff as a result of the pandemic have been extremely high. This exacerbated existing challenges around stress, low job satisfaction and poor mental health (Homeless Connect, 2022).

4.2 Motivations and rewards

Despite the numerous challenges noted above, the literature also provides insight into the reasons why people choose to work in the homelessness sector. For example, Peters, Samuel and Hobson (2021) explored the experiences of support worker staff who work with young people experiencing homelessness. In doing so, they revealed several core concepts that explain some motivations (as well as challenges) for working in this sector. For example, it was noted that to work in the homelessness sector you need to be "a certain kind of person," someone who values people experiencing homelessness, with a sense of vocation and a desire to help/unify their community. For others, they found rewards in a range of factors, including: the flexibility; working hours/shift patterns; the autonomy afforded to them; the opportunity to work outside of an office environment; and the opportunity for personal growth, whereby some staff felt their role had changed them and helped them to become more reflective, more patient and to view their own life more positively.

5.0 Policy Review and Context

5.1 Homelessness in Northern Ireland

Statistics collated from the Department of Communities Housing and Homelessness Bulletins by Homeless Connect (March 2022) indicated 15,758 homelessness presentations in Northern Ireland for 2021/2022 and 10,135 homelessness acceptances. Further, statistics gleaned from these bulletins indicated increases in numbers from 2021-2022 for households in temporary accommodation; children accepted as homeless (aged 0-17 years old); children in temporary accommodation; placements in non-standard (B&B); households in housing stress; and households on the social housing waiting list. More specifically, from January 2019 to February 2022, there was a 74 per cent increase of households in temporary accommodation (from 2065 households to 3596 households); and an increase of 55 per cent of children living in temporary accommodation (from 2433 children to 3763 children). From March 2019 to March 2022, there was also a 69 per cent rise in the number of households on the waiting list for social housing (from 26,248 households to 44,426 households). In terms of placements in 'non-standard' (B&B) accommodation, a significant increase of 172 per cent was recorded in cases from 2019 to 2022 (from 737 placements to 2010 placements). In addition, an increase of 140 per cent was recorded for numbers in housing stress from 2003 to 2022 (from 13,042 households to 31,407 households (Homeless Connect, 2022)).

5.2 Northern Ireland Policy Context

The NIHE is the body responsible for responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland (NI). They are also charged with administering the Supporting People Programme on behalf of the Department of Communities NI.

5.2.1 NIHE Homelessness Strategy 2022-2027: Ending Homelessness Together

The NIHE has a statutory obligation to publish a new homelessness strategy at least every five years (NIHE, 2022-2027). NIHE recently launched their new homelessness strategy to cover the period from 2022 to 2027 that documents how NIHE and its partners will respond to homelessness during this time. The aim of the strategy is:

'Wherever possible homelessness should be prevented, if homelessness cannot be prevented it should be rare, brief and nonrecurring.'

The three main strategic objectives are: (1) prioritise homelessness prevention; (2) address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support; and (3) support customers to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation.

Further, a year one action plan was published that denoted actions required, timescales, by whom, the role of the NIHE, resources, risks to delivery and risk scores (NIHE 2022-2027b). A total of 44 action points were developed across the themes covering experiential evidence; collaboration; legislation; interdepartmental approach; funding; staff; process; primary, secondary and tertiary prevention; understanding customer’s needs; improving access and inclusion; implementing the strategic action plan for temporary accommodation; housing supply and support; community integration; and publishing an annual report (NIHE 2022-2027b). With direct reference to staff, the year one action plan states:

‘We will consider opportunities for staff to input to homelessness research’; ‘we will seek to commence a rolling training programme for staff across the sector to equip staff to deliver psychologically informed responses (based on training needs assessment conducted 2021/22)’ (NIHE 2022-2027b).

5.2.2 Funding and the Department for Communities

There are two main funding sources for homelessness services in Northern Ireland, the ‘Supporting People Programme’ and the homelessness services budget held by the Department for Communities. The ‘Supporting People Programme’ budget is used to fund floating support, voluntary hostels and some other services while homelessness services fund the use of ‘non-standard’ accommodation, the use of single lets and outreach services. The NIHE administers the ‘Supporting People Programme.’

The annual budget of £72.8m (2021/2022) funds approximately 85 delivery partners that provide more than 850 housing support services for approximately 19,000 service users in Northern Ireland (NIHE, 2022). The NIHE is currently developing a Supporting People Strategic Plan and Covid Recovery Plan (2022-2025). Homeless Connect made a submission in April 2022 to the consultation raising a number of key points for consideration. In addition, a number of additional comments were made on the overall strategy document. With relevance to this work, some additional comments included:

(a) Agreement with the CEO of the NIHE, Ms Grainia Long, in her assessment that funding levels for Supporting People were ‘inadequate.’ Homeless Connect state they join with the NIHE in support of additional funding for Supporting People to enable providers to provide effective services for those they serve;

(b) Service providers in the homelessness sector are under a great deal of pressure and the resources available to providers are ‘insufficient’ to meet the needs of those at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Service providers are experiencing issues with recruiting and retaining staff and the salaries offered are ‘insufficient’ to draw the most suitable candidates for the posts; floating support have large waiting lists and there have been significant increases in rates and energy costs. All of which place ‘valuable’ services at risk of closure;

(c) A question as to whether Supporting People will provide the full cost recovery for services.

6.0 Findings: Surveys

6.1 Staff Survey

In total, 205 people responded to the staff survey from 27 organisations across Northern Ireland.

6.1.1 Demographics

The majority of the sample (68%) was female, white (98%) and aged between 26-55 years (72%). Just over half the sample reported that they come from a Catholic background (57%), whilst just a quarter (25%) was from a Protestant background (see Table 1).

Demographics	Staff (n=205)
GENDER	
Male (n, %)	62 (30.2)
Female (n, %)	140 (68.3)
Other (n, %)	1 (0.5)
*Refused	2 (1.0)
AGE	
18-25 (n, %)	10 (4.9)
26-55 (n, %)	148 (72.2)
56 and over (n, %)	20.5 (21.0)
*Refused	5 (2.4)
BACKGROUND	
Protestant (n, %)	51 (24.9)
Catholic (n, %)	116 (56.6)
Other (n, %)	17 (8.3)
*Refused	21 (10.2)
ETHNICITY	
White (n, %)	202 (98.5)
*Refused (n, %)	3 (1.5)

Table 1: Demographics

6.1.2 Employment information

The majority of the respondents were somewhat experienced in terms of their tenure at their current organisation. Less than a quarter (22%) had been employed in their current organisation for less than a year (see Figure 1). Furthermore, one third of respondents (33%) have been employed by their current organisation for more than 10 years (see Figure 1).

More than half (62%) of respondents were employed in a support worker role (see Table 2), the majority of whom (72%) have been in their role for one year or more (see Figure 2). The majority of respondents (85%) are on a permanent contract (see Table 3).

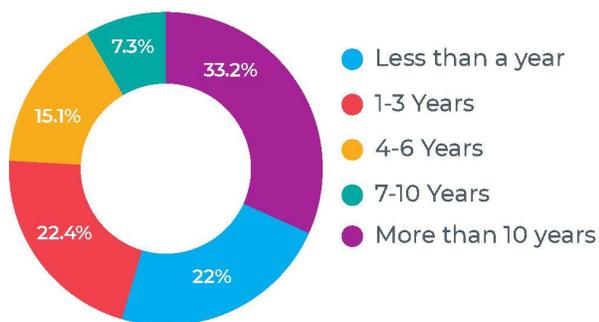


Figure 1: Tenure of employment

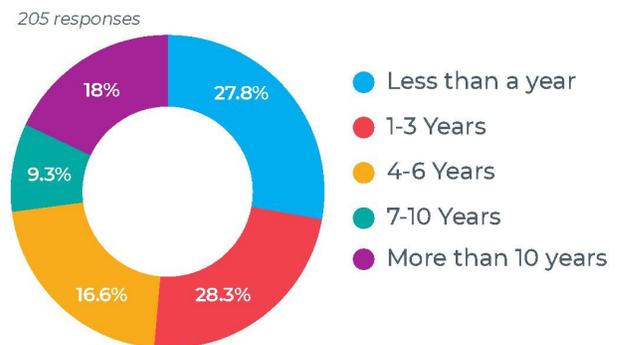


Figure 2: Tenure in current role

Job Role	Staff (n=205)
Administration Role (n, %)	3 (1.5)
Support Worker (n, %)	128 (62.4)
Concierge/Maintenance (n, %)	3 (1.5)
Deputy Management (n, %)	18 (8.8)
HR (n, %)	1 (0.5)
Night Worker (n, %)	3 (1.5)
Project Manager/Worker (n, %)	30 (14.6)
Social Worker/Senior Practitioner (n, %)	6 (2.9)
Mental Health Specialist/Worker (n, %)	2 (1.0)
Harm Reduction/Drug/Alcohol Worker (n, %)	11 (5.4)

Table 2: Job Role

Additionally, the majority of the workforce sampled holds some level of formal qualification, most commonly cited was a degree (35%), followed by Level 5 qualifications (20%, see Figure 3).

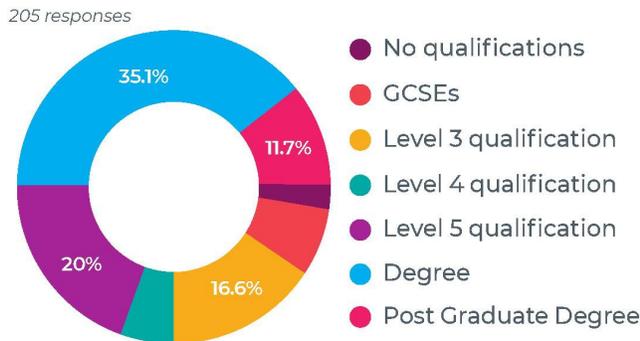


Figure 3: Qualification held

Contract Type	Staff (n=205)
Permanent (n, %)	175 (85.4)
Temporary (n, %)	29 (14.1)
*Volunteer (n, %)	1 (0.5)

Table 3: Contract Type

6.1.3 Perceptions of job

When asked why participants want to work in this sector, the most commonly cited response (84%) was that they wanted to make a difference in people’s lives (see Table 4). Indeed, for many (89%), it is the nature of the work that they valued about working in the sector (see Table 5).

With regards to what they don’t like about working in the sector, pay was the most cited factor (78%), followed next by stress (52%, see Table 6).

Why work in this sector?	Staff (n=205)
Want to make a difference (n, %)	173 (84.4)
Rewarding (n, %)	144 (70.2)
Prefer to work in voluntary sector (n, %)	60 (29.3)
Charitable (n, %)	52 (25.4)
Have lived experience of the issues (n, %)	48 (23.4)
Just fell into it (n, %)	22 (10.7)
Nothing else (n, %)	2 (1.0)

Table 4: Why work in this sector?

What do you like about working in this sector?	Staff (n=205)
Nature of the job (n, %)	182 (88.8)
Colleagues (n, %)	136 (66.3)
Training and development (n, %)	86 (42.0)
Work hours (n, %)	69 (33.7)
The support I receive (n, %)	68 (33.2)
Opportunities (n, %)	41 (20.0)
The autonomy (n, %)	37 (18.0)
Shift work (n, %)	24 (11.7)
Pay (n, %)	9 (4.4)

Table 5: What do you like about working in this sector?

What do you NOT like about working in this sector?	Staff (n=205)
Pay (n, %)	158 (78.2)
Stress (n, %)	106 (51.7)
Shift patterns (n, %)	43 (21.0)
Opportunities (n, %)	42 (20.5)
Lack of support (n, %)	35 (17.1)
Lack of job security (n, %)	30 (14.6)
Training and development (n, %)	18 (8.8)
Nature of the job (n, %)	7 (3.4)
Lack of autonomy (n, %)	3 (1.5)

Table 6: What do you NOT like about working in this sector?

6.1.4 Skills

The majority of respondents felt that they did have the appropriate skills (94%) and qualifications (93%) to undertake their work (see Figures 4 and 5)

205 responses

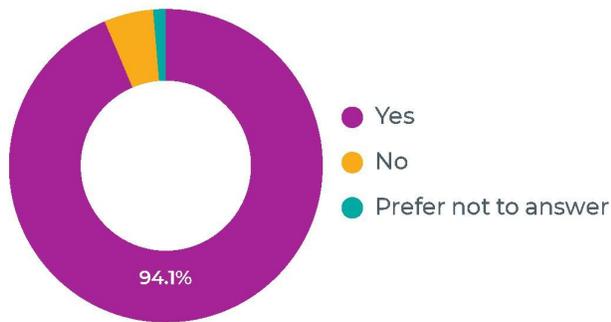


Figure 4: Hold appropriate skills

205 responses

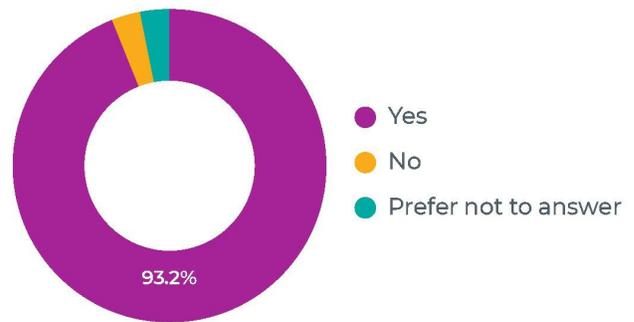


Figure 5: Hold appropriate qualifications

6.1.5 Impact of the Coronavirus pandemic

The majority of respondents (75%) reported that the Coronavirus pandemic has made their work more challenging (see Figure 6).

205 responses

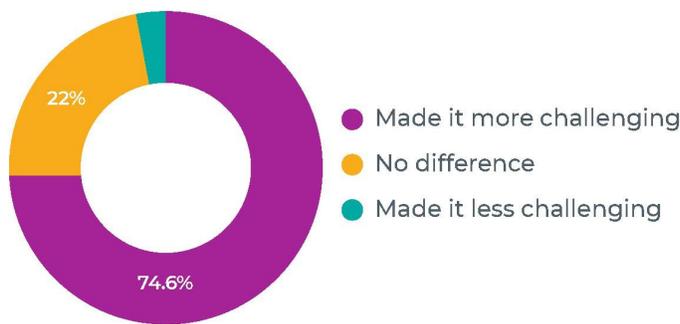


Figure 6: Coronavirus impact on work

The nature of the Coronavirus disruption was explored in more detail via the open-ended staff comments. For example, and as might be expected, keeping everyone safe during the pandemic proved challenging:

'Because of the clients we deal with, keeping them and myself and staff safe has been extremely difficult'

'Keeping staff and residents safe - ensuring they are adhering to COVID risk assessment & policy. Shift cover due to increased levels of sickness, along with the periods of isolation. Staff recruitment & retention is at an all-time low putting pressure on the whole team.'

Staffing more generally and shift cover was another key challenge, with the self-isolation requirements adding additional pressures to the staffing level challenges. Staff reflected on how these challenges impacted on service delivery and their capacity to fully support client's needs:

'Hard dealing with individuals and being distant from them. It has made certain individual's anxiety levels escalate making it difficult to support them appropriately.'

'I think that staff have been unable to fully support clients with appointments, referrals and their general needs. Since there is a back log for these it is frustrating for clients and therefore the stress is piled on to staff. Social Distancing and a reduction in the face-to-face interactions has been detrimental for some of the clients and made it difficult for staff to complete their duties. I think that since there has been a pause on services that this has increased the needs that our clients have and their reliance as such on support will only become more of a necessity for some.'

Staff commented on the impact of less face-to-face interaction with clients and how this has had an impact specifically on recovery and client's mental health:

'Reduced face-to-face contact with service users for a period resulted in deterioration in service users mental health meant staff were under extreme stress and pressure to find new ways of working throughout the pandemic and their workload increased. Working from home was hard at the beginning with learning new skills and ways of working.'

In the absence of face-to-face interaction, some further challenges were attributed to the implementation of technology during lockdowns:

'Lockdowns made it more difficult in seeing clients and offering support using technologies was not always appropriate or readily up taken. Financial and mental health issues were often exacerbated. Mental health and finances continue to be at the forefront even after the lockdowns ceased.'

For those in residential settings, staff reflected on the difficulties associated with enforcing restrictions:

'Working with challenging individuals who has alcohol/ drug issues was extremely stressful as they did not understand the regulations/ effects of Coronavirus. Working daily in this environment meant I had to live on my own as a single person.'

In addition, there was a 'shift' noted in terms of how the staff delivered their services. Whilst some appreciated the work life balance afforded to them due to working from home, others suggested that the remoteness imposed by Covid had a detrimental impact on a service provision that relies strongly on 'connectedness' and 'interaction':

'I now permanently work from home and I love it, no commuting, not trying to find a parking space, better work life balance'

"I am able to work from home which has improved my family life as I don't have to travel to and from work, meaning I spend more time with my children in the evenings.'

'Covid forced a fundamental shift in the way in which we can deliver our service and support each other as a team. I believe we are only now returning to the connectedness and interactions needed for the type of work we do.'

Finally, one individual gave a detailed account of the reality of working within the role during the pandemic. This excerpt demonstrates both frustration and commitment from this individual (as well as acknowledgement of all their colleagues also) during one of the most unforeseen challenging time frames the sector has likely ever encountered:

'I will start on a positive note... the community and voluntary sector were fabulous through the pandemic. Supporting people, service users, each other and the community as a whole. Everyone in this sector worked over and above our call of duty and provided the best support we could under extreme unforeseen circumstances. We all worked over our hours for no additional pay, in order to meet the needs of our service users. Before the pandemic hit us, our sector was in dire straits.'

We have always been viewed as the poor cousin to the Statutory Agencies and the place that they appear to dump on with the most vulnerable people in our society. The impact of COVID 19 has increased the mental ill health and wellbeing of many people and families. As a floating support worker on the front-line it was difficult to support people via the phone and email. This resulted in hours upon hours of phone support and basically “counselling” folk on the phone... trying to keep them safe from themselves and their intrusive thoughts and feelings. This also impacted my own mental health as usually we would have been able to off load to our colleagues with a chat and cup of tea, but this couldn't happen as we were all going through the same things and in isolation ourselves. We did support each other via social media platforms and team meetings but it wasn't the same as meeting physically. For the vulnerable folk with substance dependency, the pandemic caused most to use more of their normal substance and to start using other forms of harmful substances, just to get through their days. The pandemic has left a very vulnerable broken society in its wake and as usual the Community and Voluntary Sector will pick up the pieces. You see when the vulnerable folk are seen by Statutory Agencies they are

moved on very quickly to all of our services, where we do our best to provide support, advice, guidance, advocacy. We see the real deal with vulnerable people as we are linked in for longer periods of time. The one thing the pandemic has shown, is that, if we in the community and voluntary sector were to pull our services for a 24-hour period the whole system would collapse as there would be no one to pick up the pieces for vulnerable folk and families in the communities. We work with the most marginalised people in our communities and we will continue to do this regardless. And yet, we are the least recognised or remunerated for our work.'

6.1.6 Job Satisfaction

Survey respondents were asked to rate their job satisfaction, across a range of domains. The majority of staff reported dissatisfaction in terms of pay (73%). Approximately half (52%) also reported dissatisfaction with promotion and almost half were dissatisfied with fringe benefits (48%). The majority of staff (91%) reported being satisfied with supervision, co-workers (87%), the nature of the work (86%), and communication (72%).

Approximately half were satisfied with contingent rewards (51%). There were varying levels of satisfaction in relation to operational conditions (see Table 7). Despite dissatisfactions, the majority of staff also reported that they intended to continue to work in the sector (72%, see Figure 7).

Job Satisfaction (n=205)	Dissatisfied	Ambivalent	Satisfied
Pay satisfaction (n, %)	150 (73.2)	29 (14.1)	26 (12.7)
Promotion satisfaction (n, %)	107 (52.2)	48 (23.4)	50 (24.4)
Supervision satisfaction (n, %)	5 (2.4)	13 (6.3)	187 (91.2)
Fringe benefits satisfaction (n, %)	98 (47.8)	56 (27.3)	51 (24.9)
Contingent rewards satisfaction (n, %)	54 (26.3)	46 (22.4)	105 (51.2)
Operating conditions satisfaction (n, %)	57 (27.8)	72 (35.1)	76 (37.2)
Co-workers satisfaction (n, %)	6 (2.9)	20 (9.8)	179 (87.3)
Nature of work satisfaction (n, %)	7 (3.4)	22 (10.7)	176 (85.9)
Communication satisfaction (n, %)	18 (8.8)	40 (19.5)	147 (71.7)
Total satisfaction (n, %)	13 (6.3)	83 (40.5)	109 (53.2)

Figure 7: Job satisfaction

*'Fringe' benefits: an extra benefit supplementing an employee's money wage or salary.

**'Contingent' rewards: a motivation-based system that is used to reward those that meet their identified goals by providing positive reinforcement for a job well done

205 responses

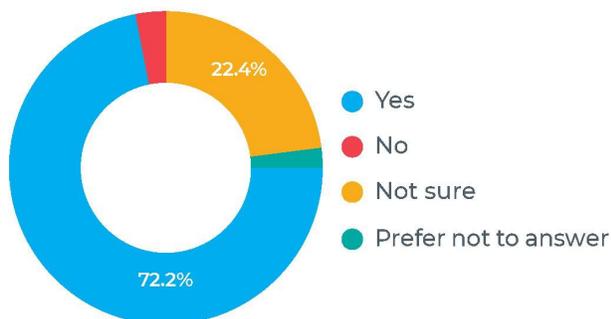


Figure 7: Intention of continued work in the sector

The survey respondents were given the opportunity to offer further information regarding their job dis/satisfaction. A range of different issues emerged, specifically regarding pay (and other terms of their employment); staff retention; training and development; shift work and staff shortages; and recognition.

It must be noted, however, that the vast majority of open-ended comments from staff on job satisfaction focused on pay issues. One participant stated:

‘There are no issues with staff satisfaction apart from the pay which could be better.’

The perceived poor pay afforded to staff in the sector was associated with other challenges, such as, staff retention and lower levels of job satisfaction:

‘Better pay grades would result in better job retention and feelings of worth, Charitable organisations are severely under funded by Supporting People and cannot afford to pay a decent wage, resulting in lack of applicants and staff

moving to better paid jobs in other sectors including retail.’

‘I think that decent pay especially with current rising prices would increase job satisfaction. We have had recent pay increases but we are still on the back foot due to years of low wages. An annual incremental wage increase is needed and this would incentivise people to stay in the job.’

In addition, dissatisfaction related to pay (and additional terms and conditions, specifically, sick leave) was also attributed to the high responsibilities that came with the job and staff burnout. Rates of pay were compared to those working in other community jobs without the level of responsibility associated with working with clients of complex need. The below excerpts also point to the ‘buffer’ type effect of staff camaraderie, support and hope:

'I would like to see more pay for the responsibility we have. The job is taking on a different role as we have to deal with mental health issues. We need more training in this area. Outside agencies are putting more pressure on staff by not dealing with our client's mental health issues. There seems to be no professional supervision regarding staff mental health. Staff are becoming burnt out which leads to sickness. Which then takes its toll on the rest of the team, having to meet the shortfall of cover. If it wasn't for my manager, I don't think I would still be in the job. She is very supportive.'

'Salary is the main area of improvement. We are asking people to work with some of the highest risk, traumatised women, children and young people in our society and those people can often earn more money working for Lidl or Tesco. When our staff are worried about how they feed their own children or heat their own homes how can we expect them to feel valued in their work. While other elements of benefits are also below a reasonable standard if we first do not rectify this issue, we will have no staff to worry about improving benefits for. Should this piece of work yield positive results for the homeless sector on this occasion it will be imperative that budgets are planned and set to ensure

the sector can continue to grow and remain competitive otherwise in 5 years time we will be back in the same situation having learned nothing. Yet I remain hopeful.'

'Better benefits, pay increases and more staff. Often staff are burnt out covering shifts due to low staffing levels. Schemes should not be running with one staff member on shift, this practice is dangerous but due to low staffing levels is often carried out. Staff are getting too much pressure put on them and service users are not receiving the best support. People do not want to apply for this sector as the pay is too low and stress levels are very high. Sick pay allowance needs to be increased, due to the nature of the job staff stress and anxiety levels are very high, it is unfair that staff are asked to cover shifts, burn themselves out and then don't get paid when they are sick.'

Furthermore, shift work including the need to cover shifts for others (due to staff shortages) and the need for improved rota planning were also seen to impact on job satisfaction:

'Having time to complete the main tasks of my role. Currently a lot of time is spent trying to cover shifts or doing 2 or 3 roles due to us being short staffed and having to provide cover.'

'Better rota planning to create a rolling rota so that I plan my family life better. Improved benefit rewards system. More team building opportunities. Increased pay to compensate for the difficult work we undertake.'

Training and development were mentioned by a few in terms of promotion and career development. However, for most it was in the context again of financial rewards and the loss of 'trained' staff to other posts due to better salaries elsewhere:

'There needs to be opportunities for promotion within the sector. This role requires a vast amount of knowledge and connections to other services, which I feel sometimes is underestimated and not many opportunities for promotion above current grade.'

'Experience, loyalty, training, qualifications are not financially rewarded, we train staff for them to leave for better pay. We are constantly investing money, time and supporting new staff development, it adds additional work pressure training new staff over and over again.'

Finally, the lack of appreciation, recognition and reward for the complex job roles performed by front line staff were also attributed to lower levels of satisfaction:

'I feel like the efforts of staff are not appreciated by those who are not working in the hostels. Staff are required to be support workers, social workers, addictions workers, mental health professionals, counsellors, provide financial support, housing officers and I do not think that this is recognised by those who are not in the sites.'

6.2 Organisational Survey

6.2.1 Organisational Overview

Fourteen organisations completed the organisational survey. Despite the relatively small number of organisations involved, due to the large size of several of those surveyed, a large number of employees working in the sector are represented in the organisational survey. Out of these fourteen organisations, three had 0-10 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services, four had 11-30 staff working in any capacity, three had 31-50 staff working in any capacity, two with 91-120 staff working in any capacity and two with over 120 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services.

In terms of staff working directly with service users, three organisations had 0-10 staff working directly with service users in homelessness services, five had 11-30 staff working directly with service users, two had 31-50 staff working directly with service users, one organisation reported 51-70 staff, one reported 71-90 staff and two organisations reported having over 120 staff that work directly with service users in homelessness services (see Table 8).

Organisations (n=14)							
	0-10 staff	11-30 staff	31-50 staff	51-70 staff	71-90 staff	91-120 staff	> 120 staff
Total number working in any capacity (n, %)	3 (21.4)	4 (28.6)	3 (21.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (14.2)	2 (14.3)
Total number working directly with service users (n, %)	3 (21.4)	5 (35.7)	2 (14.2)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	2 (14.3)

Table 8: Total staff working in any capacity/working directly with service users in homelessness services

In addition, thirteen organisations (93%) reported having between 0-10 back-office staff and one (7%) organisation reporting between 31 and 40 back-office staff. Similarly, thirteen organisations (93%) reported having between 0-10 staff working in an auxiliary capacity (chef, cleaner, concierge, receptionist) and one (7%) organisation reporting between 21-30 working in an auxiliary capacity.

Over half (57%) of the organisations reported having 0-20% frontline positions filled with bank staff and the majority of organisations (93%) reported having between 0-20% agency staff in frontline positions. One organisation reported having between 40-60% agency staff in frontline positions (see Table 9).

In terms of frontline staff positions, half of the organisations reported 80-100% of their frontline staff were in permanent positions.

Organisations (n=14)					
Frontline Positions	0-20%	20-40%	40-60%	60-80%	80-100%
Permanent Staff (n, %)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	6 (42.9)	7 (50)
Bank Staff (n, %)	8 (57.1)	6 (42.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Agency Staff (n, %)	13 (92.9)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 9: Staff job status

With regard to bank staff, the majority of organisations (64%) employed between 0-5 bank staff on a weekly basis. Over half of the organisations (57%) reported between 0-5 shifts covered per week by bank staff (see Figures 8 and 9).

14 responses

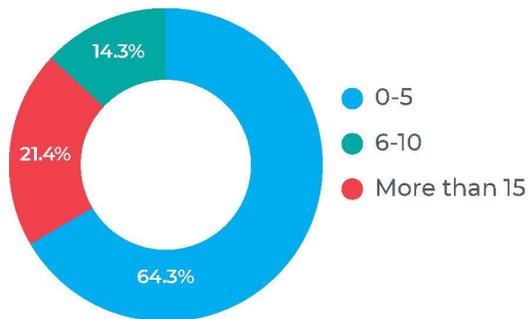


Figure 8: Bank staff employed on a weekly basis

14 responses

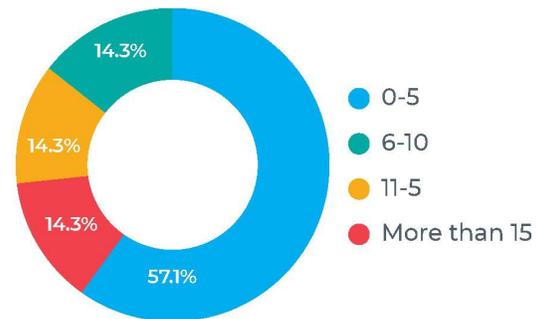


Figure 9: Shifts covered by bank staff on a weekly basis

In terms of agency staff, the majority of organisations (79%) reported that agency staff work with them on a weekly basis. Over half (57%) reported 0-5 shifts per week covered by agency staff, with one organisation reporting that more than 15 shifts per week were covered by agency staff (see figures 10 and 11).

14 responses

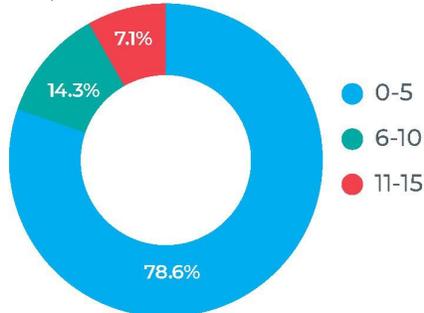


Figure 10: Agency staff employed on a weekly basis

14 responses

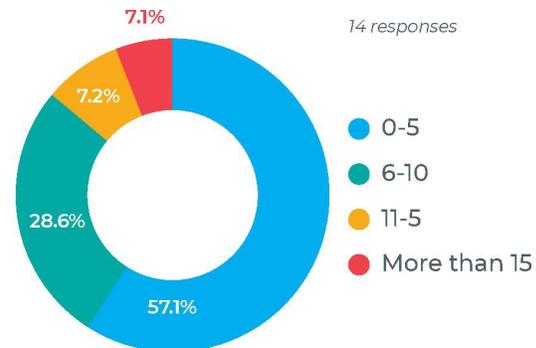


Figure 11: Shifts covered by agency staff on a weekly basis

In additional comments, two organisations reported difficulties with using bank and agency staff to cover posts:

'Due to staff recruitment and retentions (resulting from salary levels) the use of agency workers to fill vacant posts is causing considerable issues. The drain on already strained resources as agency staff need to be inducted, they may have little or no experience in the particular sector so unable to lone work, Sus [service users] have not yet established a trusting relationship with them which has a knock on effect on quality of support.'

'Bank and agency staff will only work when it suits them or they are available, therefore it can be difficult to get cover for particular shifts/days. Bank staff do not receive a double payment for working a bank holiday as they get a holiday payment added onto every shift they work, so there is no incentive for them to work on bank holidays, this means we need to reach out to agency that does pay double time and the agency staff are not able to fully complete the duties of the role as they do not/may not have access to IT systems etc.'

Regarding hostels, floating support services and 'other' services, the majority of organisations operated between 0-5 hostels (86%), one (7%) operated between 6-10 hostels and one (7%) between 16-20 hostels. The majority also operated between 0-5 floating support services (93%) and one operated between 6-10 floating support services (7%). All operated between 0-5 'other services' (see Table 10). These were categorised as day centres, community support, young person's services, aftercare services, dual diagnosis support, family support, mental health men's services, parenting assessment programmes and minority ethnic support services.

Organisations (n=14)				
	0-5 services	6-10 services	11-15 services	16-20 services
Hostels (n, %)	12 (85.7)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Floating Support (n, %)	13 (92.9)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other (n, %)	14 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 10: Hostels, floating support and other services

All fourteen organisations received funding from the NIHE Supporting People Programme. All but one organisation were funded through multiple sources that included: seven organisations additionally funded through charity grants; seven organisations additionally funded through the Health and Social Care Trust; six through public fund raising; four through non-statutory grant aid; four through the Public Health Agency; three through the NIHE homelessness grant; one through Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs); one through a Foundation; two through statutory grant aid; and one through their own additionally generated income.

There were lower percentages of under 18 year olds and 18-30 years olds across the board compared to those in the older age categories. Two organisations stated that 80-100% of their staff were aged 31-50 years old. All organisations reported to have 0-20% of staff in the over 65 year old category. In terms of ethnicity, the majority (86%) of organisations had between 80-100% staff who identify as white. Half (50%) of the organisations stated 40-60% of their staff were from a Catholic background while 7% of organisations reported between 60-80% of their staff from a Protestant background (see Table 11).

6.2.2 Staff Demographics, Education and Training

In terms of gender, more organisations reported a higher proportion of female employees, e.g., 50% of organisations stated their service had between 60-80% female staff and three organisations had between 80-100% female staff.

Organisations (n=14)					
	0-20%	20-40%	40-60%	60-80%	80-100%
Gender					
Male (n, %)	4 (28.6)	7 (50)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)
Female (n, %)	0 (0)	2 (14.3)	2 (14.3)	7 (50)	3 (21.4)
Other (n, %)	14 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Age					
< 18 (n, %)	14 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
18-30 (n, %)	9 (64.3)	4 (28.6)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)
31-50 (n, %)	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	6 (42.9)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)
51-65 (n, %)	5 (37.5)	5 (37.5)	3 (21.4)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)
> 65 (n, %)	14 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Ethnicity					
White (n, %)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	12 (85.7)
Black/Asian/Mixed (n, %)	13 (92.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Irish Travellers (n, %)	14 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other (n, %)	12 (85.7)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Background					
Protestant (n, %)	2 (14.3)	4 (28.6)	6 (42.9)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)
Catholic (n, %)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	7 (50)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)
Other (n, %)	10 (71.4)	4 (28.6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 11: Demographics – Gender, Age, Ethnicity and Background - for Organisational Staff

With regard to employees' education background and qualifications, the majority of staff from the organisations sampled held at least GCSE-level qualifications, with large proportions also holding higher-level qualifications. For example, half of the organisations reported that at least 40% held degree level qualifications (see Table 12).

Organisations (n=14)					
Qualifications	0-20%	20-40%	40-60%	60-80%	80-100%
None (n, %)	12 (85.7)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
GCSEs (n, %)	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)	6 (42.9)
Level 3/4/5 (n, %)	2 (14.3)	5 (37.5)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	5 (37.5)
Degree Level (n, %)	5 (37.5)	2 (14.3)	4 (28.6)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)
Postgrad Level (n, %)	12 (85.7)	2 (14.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 12: Educational Qualifications

Nb Level 3/4/5 might include OCN, HND, NVQ.

One organisation commented that they do not hold information on staff qualifications. A variety of comments were provided by other organisations. Some do not request formal qualifications, placing emphasis on experience, whereas others require qualifications with experience. One other stated qualifications were 'post dependent.' Example comments include:

'We do not require Support Workers to hold formal qualifications. For managerial positions we typically ask for a relevant third level qualification.'

'Specialised on the job training is as vital as any formal qualification for our work.'

'With recruitment so difficult at this time, we are recruiting staff that do not have qualifications but have a willingness to work towards them. The applicant needs to demonstrate a desire and passion to support those faced with homeless and other associated issues.'

'Usually require a level of experience along with the level of qualification. If no degree then lower qualification but longer experience requested.'

When asked about any further comments relating to staff training three organisations commented:

'All staff undergo various essential/priority training upon starting the role.'

'The level of internal support for staff goes way beyond formal qualifications and requires extensive experience, knowledge and skills gained working in the field.'

'We have invested in the development of a substantial in-house learning and development programme to ensure that all staff have the appropriate level of training required to do their job safely. We take a blended approach to staffs learning and development in order to facilitate their learning style, deliver training in line with organisational capacity and meet both or legal obligations and organisational requirements.'

There is significant amount of financial investment and time invested in bring staff up to a standard of competency, knowledge and skills required to work with this complex group of people. Due to the turnover of staff the investment is lost to us and the sector as staff are moving outside the sector.'

6.2.3 Staff Roles, Pay and Vacancies

Firstly, with regard to roles, there was great variation in terms of the types of roles employed within the sector. The most commonly used roles were support workers. Just under half of the organisations (43%) had more than eight support workers. ‘Service manager’ roles were also commonly reported. Over half of the organisations (57%) had between 1-2 service managers (see Table 13).

Organisations (n=14)						
Number of Staff Roles	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	> 8
Support Worker (n, %)	2 (14.3)	0 (0)	3 (21.4)	3 (21.4)	0 (0)	6 (42.9)
Senior Practitioner (n, %)	10 (71.4)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Project Manager (n, %)	6 (42.9)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)
Service Manager (n, %)	2 (14.3)	8 (57.1)	3 (21.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Night Worker (n, %)	5 (35.7)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	3 (21.4)
Team Leader (n, %)	10 (71.4)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Coordinator (n, %)	9 (64.3)	2 (28.6)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Street Outreach Worker (n, %)	13 (92.9)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Mental Health Resettlement Specialist (n, %)	12 (85.7)	2 (14.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Drug and Alcohol Worker (n, %)	12 (85.7)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Floating Support Worker (n, %)	6 (42.9)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)
Diagnosis Practitioner (n, %)	13 (92.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)
Harm Reduction Worker (n, %)	11 (78.6)	2 (14.3)	0 (0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Other (n, %)	9 (64.3)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (14.3)	2 (14.3)

Table 13: Staff roles

Secondly, with regard to filling these roles and staff vacancies, the data highlights that whilst five organisations had no vacant posts, four organisations had eight or more posts vacant. Three of these organisations reported that these vacancies and the subsequent staff shortages would impact on service operation. Two others stated six vacant posts would impact on the service operating optimally (see Table 14).

Organisations (n=14)						
	0 posts	1-2 posts	3-4 posts	5-6 posts	7-8 posts	> 8 posts
Vacancies (n, %)	5 (37.5)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	0 (0)	2 (14.3)	4 (28.6)
Optimal Operation (n, %)	5 (37.5)	2 (14.3)	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)

Table 14: Vacancies and Impact on Optimal Operation

Further exacerbating staffing challenges is the issue of staff sickness. The majority of organisations (71%) reported that their organisation was facing challenges due to staff sickness (see Figure 11). Further, 43% of organisations reported that long-term sickness was more challenging than short term (see Figure 12).

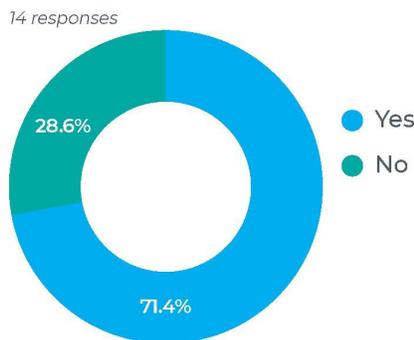


Figure 11: Challenges due to sickness of frontline staff

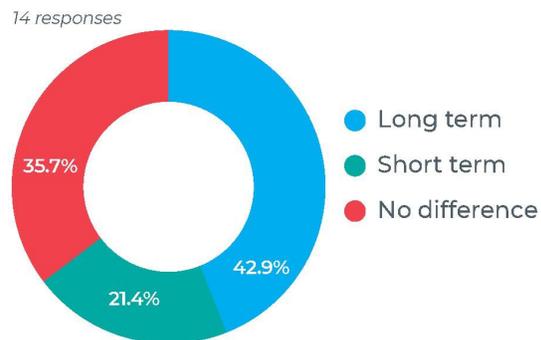


Figure 12: Challenges – Short and Long term

With regards to remuneration and pay, firstly, the results highlight that a higher proportion of organisations (67%) do not use an externally validated pay grade. Organisations commented that pay grades were internally established, measured against the sector, government/band scales/Health and Social Care, or linked to National Joint Scales (NJC). Salary scales were variable. One organisation gave £9.60 to £10.00 per hour while others stated entry salaries that started with support workers from approximately £17,000 to £22,000. Others reported that fixed salaries were assigned to each post.

A higher proportion of organisations (67%) have provided their staff with an annual cost of living raise in the last 3 years.

14 responses

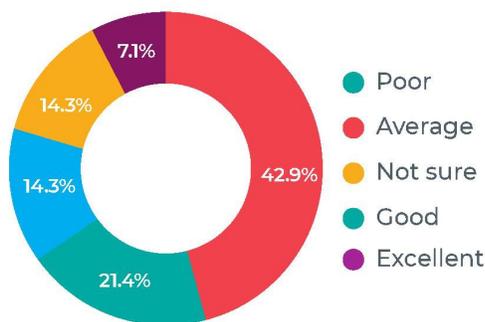


Figure 13: Remuneration Packages

Staff were provided with free space to express their thoughts and concerns. As such, a number of issues emerged, particularly in relation to staff pay, the challenging nature of the role, vacancies, staff retention and the resulting impact on service delivery:

‘Staff are able to move into less skilled jobs for considerably more money. Due to the client groups homeless services

This raise was paid from a variety of sources including other funding streams and unrestricted reserves. In addition, 73% of organisations gave their staff a pay rise in the last three years which again was variable across the board.

When asked about remuneration packages, 43% of organisations felt they were average, 21% felt they were good and 14% poor (see Figure 13). When asked how this package compared to other possible jobs staff could move into, 29% felt it was a bit less attractive, 21% felt it was much less attractive and 36% were not sure (see Figure 14).

14 responses

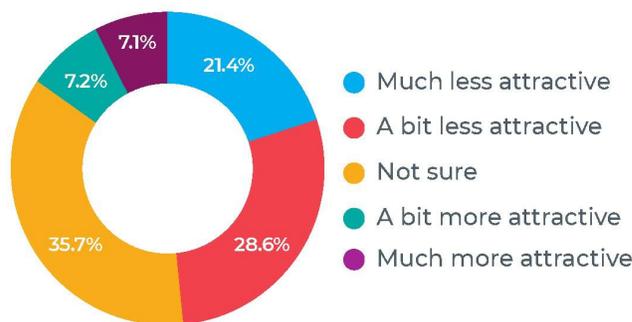


Figure 14: Remuneration Packages Compared with other Jobs

generally work with it can be a very stressful environment, they deal with crises almost on a daily basis; aggression, challenging behaviours, complex issues relating to poor mental health, criminality, addiction, child protection issues, domestic violence, verbal and physical aggression, impacts of poverty and distress.’

'We have been experiencing a real loss of experienced and skilled staff and have had to spend a huge time recruiting to replace and even when we successfully recruit these staff these staff come with a very low skill and knowledge basis requiring significant support from peers and senior staff to ensure safety in their working practice and reduce level of risk for service users and themselves. Typically, these staff move on to better paid posts after receiving our specialised training having accumulated a short number of months experience. The number and quality of applicants applying for post is far below our previous standard 5 years ago. Despite improving our methods of recruiting and advertising we are continually struggling to attract a reasonable level of acceptable candidates. This impacts negatively on our experienced staff due to the low level of remuneration. This is against a backdrop of significantly high level of service demand and a significant level of increasing referrals from statutory and community referrals creating a very concerning waiting list of high risk individuals.'

'We are very concerned that without an SP increase we will be unable to recruit and keep a staff team over the next 2-5 years. To the extent that we won't be able to run our services. We are already struggling to recruit relief and have seen a huge drop in applications especially from those under 30 in the last 5 years.'

6.2.4 Staff Experience and Job Satisfaction

With regard to perceived satisfaction levels, whilst formal line management and personal/ wellbeing support were rated quite highly (57% rated both as excellent), there was less positivity expressed in terms of training and development opportunities and overall staff satisfaction (see Table 15).

How would you rate the following:	Organisations (n=14)			
	Average	Excellent	Good	Not sure
The formal line management provided to your frontline staff (n, %)	1 (7.1)	8 (57.1)	5 (35.7)	0 (0)
The level of personal/wellbeing support provided to your frontline staff (n, %)	1 (7.1)	8 (57.1)	5 (35.7)	0 (0)
The training and development opportunities to your frontline staff (n, %)	2 (14.3)	5 (35.7)	6 (42.9)	1 (7.1)
The overall satisfaction of your employees (n, %)	4 (28.6)	1 (7.1)	8 (57.1)	1 (7.1)

Table 15: Thinking of the organisation rate management, support, development and satisfaction

All fourteen organisations stated that staff could avail of training opportunities. A detailed list of what was on offer to staff included: first aid, fire safety, various online training courses, naloxone training, Assist, sexual health training, GDPR training, professional development, resilience training, training in harm reduction, challenging behaviours, risk assessment, outcome star, support plan and management essential training.

It was unclear if all organisations were offering the same courses to all staff. Some mentioned there was a comprehensive mandatory training programme within the organisation whilst others mentioned that external training could be requested to fulfil the role. It was mentioned that new training opportunities were limited.

The main training and qualification needs were highlighted as access to Housing Rights training; remaining updated on policy and practice; suicide, self-harm, overdose and trauma-aware practice; motivational interviewing; basic maths and English; child protection; safeguarding adults; first aid; dealing with challenging behaviour; professional boundaries; mental health; and lone working.

All organisations felt the nature of the work was a challenge to staff. In addition, twelve organisations felt competitive pay and funding uncertainties were also a challenge. Shift work and limited progression to promotion were also deemed challenging by eleven of the organisations while eight organisations also felt competitive terms and conditions were a challenge to staff (see Figure 14).

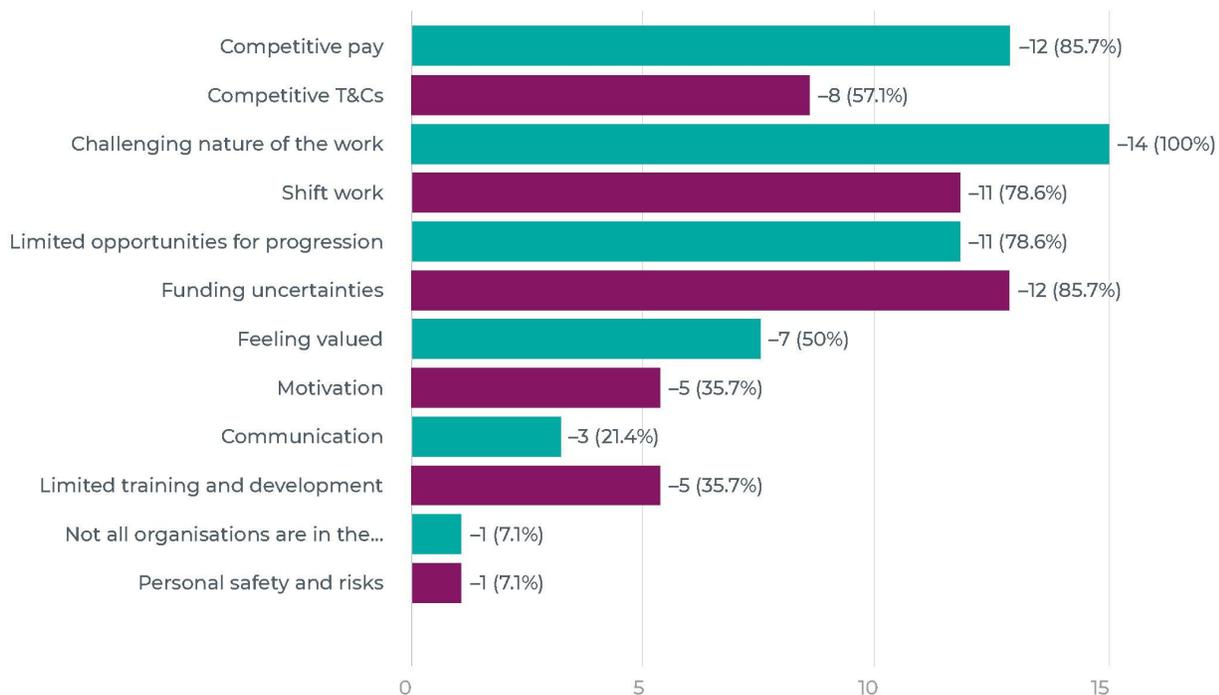


Figure 14: Main Challenges to Staff

6.2.5 Coronavirus Pandemic

The majority (71%) of organisations felt the Coronavirus pandemic enhanced staff challenges 'a lot' (see Figure 15).

14 responses

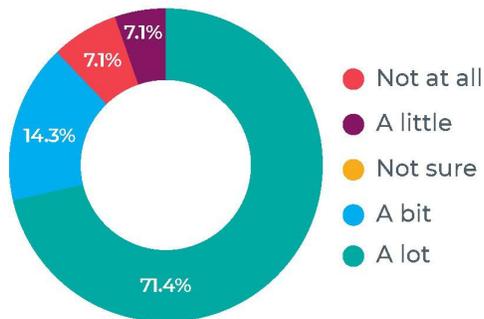


Figure 15: Extent Coronavirus Enhanced Staff Challenges

One organisation stated:

'The level of direct face-to-face support was reduced and staff felt that they were not able to fully meet the needs of the clients. At the start of the pandemic there was also a worry about the close proximity of their work with clients for example supporting those that are under the influence of substances and them not adhering to guidelines.'

Relating to the delivery of homelessness services in the organisations, almost all (93%) organisations felt the pandemic exacerbated challenging work conditions and most felt it reduced staff morale (86%). Nine of the organisations felt it led to staff shortages and short staffing added pressure on others (see Figure 16).

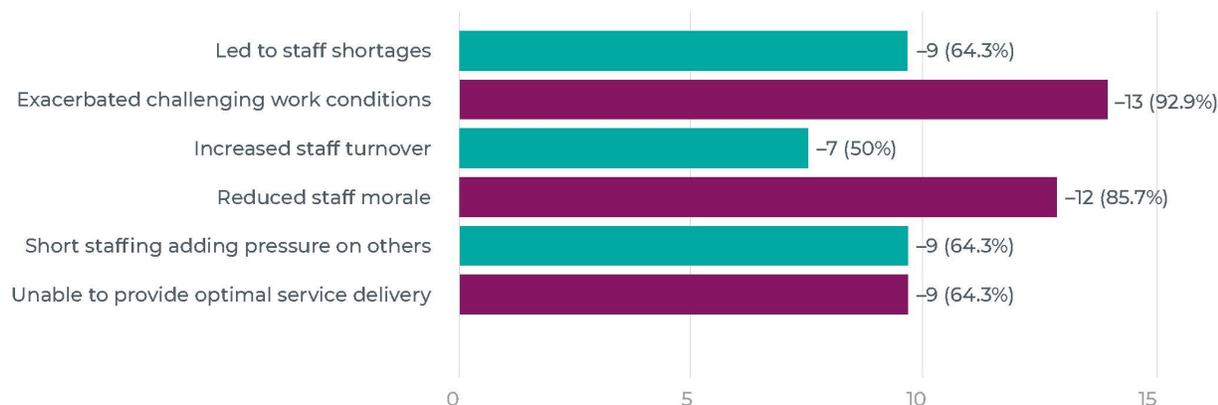


Figure 16: Coronavirus Pandemic Impact on Delivery of Homelessness Service

Despite this, 47% of respondents also felt that the Coronavirus pandemic had impacted on the homelessness service in some positive ways. Some examples are provided below:

'In some ways there were positive changes; learning and utilising new ways of communicating both internally and externally i.e. use of online platforms. New ways of communicating/connecting with services users i.e. online platforms. Expanded our reach due to the use of online platforms. Enabled a rethink of how training could be developed and delivered. Improved partnership working – all in it together.'

'Residents felt safe here'

'Homeworking for some staff has been a very positive change, and given management some time to develop new projects, access more funding, etc.'

'Staff have risen to the challenge of new protocols and procedures to reduce the risk of infection in projects without an impact on the services provided.'

6.2.6 Summary of Issues

Managers were asked to respond to the main challenges and provide any final comments relating to staffing in the sector. The most commonly cited challenge (n=8) related to lack of funding, static budgets and lack of financial stability in the sector. Following this, the next most referenced challenge was staff shortages and recruitment (n=5). Management also cited the complex needs of clients and responding to demand (n=3); staff terms and conditions (n=2); and staff morale and safety (n=2) as prominent challenges in the sector. One final comment that was demonstrative of recurrent themes across the surveys stated:

'Easier livings can be earned in other sectors. Cannot be seen as minimum wage job.'

Underpaid, overworked staff leading to burn out. In the voluntary sector there is an over reliance on staff's good nature to the extent that staff commitment to the job can be unintentionally taken advantage off to keep services going, many staff in the sector go above and beyond in order to get the job done, keep the service going and support the service users.'

As a result of this services have not been realistically costed. Staff stress levels increasing, increased levels of short and long term sickness, risk of staff making a mistake due to taking on too much as a result of staff shortages; mistakes that could affect others and impact on the future of their careers. Closures of services due to inefficient funding, insufficient staffing levels; loss of skilled workers to less skilled jobs. Ultimately the collapse of homeless services as we know them. The loss of vital services and providers from this sector will impact greatly on front line statutory services who will have to fill the gaps. The financial pressure this will put on government departments to find the resources and budgets to put into more expensive frontline services to fill the gaps that the voluntary sector now fills with their vital services will be immense.'

7.0 Findings: Focus Groups

The focus groups conducted with the frontline staff, their line managers, and the senior leaders of the homelessness organisations revealed detailed and rich insights. The overarching themes emerging revealed key factors, which encourage people to work in the sector, such as intrinsic rewards and fulfilling a vocational purpose. Additionally, a number of themes emerged around the challenges facing the homelessness sector, for example, issues around staffing, funding, and the exacerbating negative impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. This section will shed light on how these challenges impact both the staff and service users, as well as highlighting some issues emerging regarding the relationship and disconnects between the homelessness sector and the statutory sector. Finally, this section concludes with some key recommendations provided by the focus group participants.

7.1 Factors encouraging people to work in the homelessness sector

‘We stay in the role for some reason... it’s not for the money!’ (FG staff, 6)

There were several reported key factors that influence people’s decisions to work in the homelessness sector. These included a sense of vocation, intrinsic reward and a sense of loyalty and camaraderie amongst staff in the sector.

7.1.1 Vocation

One of the main reasons offered was an altruistic motivation to help or to make a difference in other people’s lives, whereby work in this sector was often considered vocational. This view was shared by staff and management alike:

‘It’s a sense of vocation. Maybe people have had experiences with friends or families in their life and in some small ways feel like they are making a difference. Making a contribution. A lot of people see this as a vocation and that’s what keeps them there.’ (FG staff, 4)

‘It’s a vocation for some people...it’s a certain type of person who wants to work in this environment...out of caring... making a difference in people’s lives... having a sense of social responsibility’ to support people who are less fortunate than themselves.’ (Management FG).

In particular, staff discussed a passion for working with clientele in this sector and the desire to help others and give back to the community:

‘I think people join the sector because they have a heart to help people. That’s primarily what it is. It’s not necessarily for the money but unfortunately it gets to the point where it becomes more relevant. Recently people have moved on because they have to pay bills. And it is just where it is at unfortunately. But the initial reason that people come in is because they have a heart to help people.’ (FG staff, 1)

'I think a lot of people that are in support roles are happy with the job. They love dealing with the people. It becomes a passion and they absolutely love it.' (FG staff, 1)

Indeed, one participant reflected on their own opportunities to earn a higher salary in a different organisation. However, they chose not to take on this role in favour of working in the homelessness sector, which offered less money but more of the values and vocation valued by this employee:

'I came back (from a career break) because I still have the passion and it is a vocation. Values-based work is extremely important. I tried briefly to work in an organisation that wasn't really values driven and just couldn't do it and it was a lot better paid than the one we have at the moment.' (FG staff, 2)

As such, the participants agreed that it was a certain type of person who chooses to work in this sector. That is someone with empathy, sympathy, and a supportive demeanour. Or indeed, someone who has been through homelessness or challenging life circumstances themselves:

'[We] choose this because of the type of people we are. Not everyone can work in this sector. You have to have some empathy, sympathy and at the end of the day no one knows what tomorrow brings. You get an insight into what people are going through and help them and support them in any way you can.' (FG staff, 5)

'Some of the staff have experienced homelessness themselves.' (FG staff, 5)

7.1.2 Intrinsic rewards

The data suggests that for that type of caring, empathetic and values-driven individual, working in this sector can provide great intrinsic reward, whereby the feeling of making a difference in someone's life is 'second to none' and enough motivation to continue working in this sector:

'The rewards, certainly not financially. The rewards of doing something good in the community and getting people back on their feet is second to none. It is extremely challenging on a daily basis and we work with the very vulnerable people. It is helping them through their journey. We are certainly not in it for the pay, we are in it for the sense of helping other people and service users. Getting them back into society.' (FG staff, 5)

'Although there are a lot of frustrating cases and you feel like you are banging your head off a brick wall, there are also good outcomes for some people and people are changing their lives. When you feel as if you are making a difference to somebody well then that's what keeps you there.' (FG staff, 3)

Additionally, the sense of intrinsic reward and the relationships with the service users themselves was highlighted:

Overall I like my work....and I like the people I work with and the clients I work with regardless of how challenging they might be.’ (FG staff, 6)

‘Seeing the outcomes for the job we do. When you see someone coming in with absolutely nothing and then a while later moving out to somewhere they want to live and they have the skills to live on their own independently.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘I really do love my job... I look forward to coming to work. At the end of the day you feel like you have really achieved something. If someone has asked me something and I have given them the right advice I think they have come to me and I have guided them to something. I really do love my job and the people.’ (FG staff, 5)

7.1.3 Variation in the role

The variation afforded by working in the homelessness sector was well recognised, whereby participants appreciated the excitement in the unpredictability and varied nature of their work:

‘Every day is different. You are not going into a job and doing the same repetitive thing every night. You start your day and you don’t know how it will end. There is always challenges and things to challenge you.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘It is unusual work as every day is different. I’m in street outreach and no two days are the same. That’s what attracts us to it.’ (FG staff, 4)

‘It could be crisis intervention one day, coffee the next. You have no idea what is coming next.’ (FG staff, 2)

7.1.4 Loyalty and camaraderie

For many of the participants, their sense of loyalty to the organisation for which they work, their line manager, their colleagues and their clients was a key factor influencing their commitment to working in the homelessness sector:

‘Loyalty keeps me here.’ (FG staff, 2)

‘[Name of organisation] is a very good organisation to work for as well. That goes to show the longevity of the staff in the organisation.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘I love the people that I work with and the team that I work with.’ (FG staff, 2)

‘No matter what you go through there is always someone there to help you.’ (FG staff, 5)

Staff discussed the ‘strong team’ they were part of and that they are ‘lucky that there is mutual respect between staff members.’ One of the groups also mentioned that the staff teams would work together ‘to see how new staff members fit in the team and how we can support them emotionally.’

7.1.5 Feeling valued

Additionally, it appears that relationships and communication between staff and the organisation's senior leaders was highly regarded, providing a sense of feeling 'valued' and 'looked after':

'I mean they will give you a phone call, senior management, the Director. Just to see how you are doing. It's all on a personal level. The CEO knows us on first name terms, and it is really appreciated.' (FG staff, 5)

'I certainly feel good and very positive, and I think that is a large part to do with when you are working in a team when you work well together and you are working for an organisation that by in large looks after you.' (FG staff, 2)

This sense of feeling valued and well treated on an organisational level appeared to act as a buffer, facilitating job satisfaction despite some key challenges:

'Never worked for an organisation like this before. Wouldn't be the same in other jobs I've been in. Probably why I'm still here. No monetary benefits although we aren't the lowest paid in the sector. How we are treated helps with the low pay.' (FG staff, 5)

'I am very happy where I am at the moment....it is not just about pay it is about people feeling valued and their worth in the organisation and support.' (FG staff, 2)

'The first ten years were very frustrating as we were on a pay freeze...it was very disheartening.... But we were wearing so many hats. We were social workers, we were nurses, we were first aiders. We had to do everything on crap pay. Plus the lone working, plus everything else. It was very frustrating at the time. I only stayed because of the great team, the great support, the constant linking in. Management were constantly fighting our corner and it didn't fall on deaf ears.' (FG staff, 5)

7.2 Challenges facing the sector

'In these current times with the cost of living and the nature of the clientele we are working with you need to be paid a lot more than someone stacking shelves in supermarkets.' (FG staff, 5)

7.2.1 Funding

Firstly, and most importantly, the lack of funding received by the homelessness sector is a common theme underpinning many of the other challenges experienced. The poor levels of funding, its stagnant nature, or indeed the reduction in funding was often cited:

'We lost 5% funding 5 years back...we've gone backwards...' (Management FG)

The socio-political and economic context in which these services are operating was often cited as an additional burden on their financial circumstances. For example, the cost of living crisis was highlighted as adding additional pressures to an already (beyond) stretched budget, as was the political context, which impedes the progress in funding, and budgetary sign off:

'I have some dual funded services and normally you get a couple of per cent from the trust but there's nothing coming this year because there's no budget signed off anywhere.' (Management FG)

'The cost of living has gone through the roof; utilities are sky high and you're trying to manage a service on less money than what you were managing it on 10 years ago.' (Management FG)

The frustration experienced by the staff and management was evident, as was their genuine concern both for their staff that have not received a pay rise in 10 years, as well as the services and the clients served. With regards to better funding for staff, the burden of securing such funding was recognised by the managers, who expressed a sense of personal responsibility to secure the finances to support the staff within their organisation:

'My work is so hard trying to find funding. For pay rises, wages.... It's just like a rotation ... who is up next...what contract do I have to secure...' (FG staff, 2)

Additionally, there was great frustration expressed around not being able to suitably resource the services required to meet the needs of those in society who are experiencing homelessness:

'So it is all about 'we don't have the budget for this... we don't have the budget for that' but you know if people need care, they need care. It shouldn't be about a budget.' (FG staff, 4)

'Everything seems to come down to funding, but it shouldn't be about that it should be about care.' (FG staff, 4)

7.2.2 Terms and conditions of employment

Pay

Related to the above issues regarding funding, is the perceived unfair and completely inadequate salaries afforded to staff working in the homelessness sector. Many of the interview participants referred to the stagnant nature of their salaries, which have not increased in the past 10 years, despite the on-going rise in the cost of living:

'We have been on a pay freeze. We were on the same pay last year as we were in 2005. And now we did get a 10% pay rise there in December but ... we are 40% under where we should be with a 2.5% pay rise over all those years, we should

we should have received a 40.48% pay rise with inflation in December to bring us up.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘I’ve had one pay increase in 14 years.’ (FG staff, 2)

The participants recognised that they were not being afforded a fair living salary (it was recognised in some cases that support workers were earning only 4 pence over the minimum wage). As such, knock-on effects on staff’s lives also need to be recognised, whereby staff are struggling to manage their own finances to make ends meet, let alone afford any ‘treats’:

‘For what the support workers do they don’t get paid enough.’ (FG staff, 6)

‘I haven’t managed to pay any of my student loan and I’m in 40s.’ (FG staff, 2)

‘I know money doesn’t buy happiness, but it does help along the way even if it is people being rewarded and being able to afford a holiday or a treat.’ (FG staff, 2)

‘The number of people who have to have a second job is unacceptable given the type of work they are doing in sector just to make ends meet.’ (FG staff, 3)

There was a sense of staff feeling completely disheartened and disrespected by the level of pay they receive for the work they undertake:

‘Disheartens me completely when I see shop assistants, with no disrespect to anyone out earning their living, but my support staff are not getting paid that level when they are dealing with vulnerable clients with complex cases putting their heart and soul into supporting other people.’ (FG staff, 2)

In several circumstances, it was highlighted that staff simply could not afford to work in the homelessness sector. Staff highlighted that even on their modest salaries they were at times ‘out of pocket’ performing their roles and couldn’t afford to work in this sector, without a supplementary income:

‘Be able to work in the sector and not have to take on overtime or another job. To be able to afford to work in the sector.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘Costs us money to go out and visit our service users. It should not be a situation that we are out of pocket.’ (FG staff, 3)

Not only are other jobs offering more money, but staff were finding that they could earn more money if in receipt of benefits:

‘More recently I have had resignations because people can’t afford to get to work. I had another one that resigned recently because she was earning more money on benefits’

She had gone part time and then full time and she didn't have childcare and then had to go back to bank work again and it wasn't paying her.' (FG staff, 1)

'But in my experience of being in this sector, there are people who just could not afford to work in the homelessness sector. The salaries that were being offered for a full-time job in and around 16 thousand pounds is just offensive.' (FG staff, 2)

Many of the participants drew comparisons with other employers, recognising the comparably lower levels of pay homelessness sector staff are receiving, and the impact this has on motivation and job satisfaction:

'Our staffing is bleak at best. It is not good; it is not positive and a lot of that is to do with finances. Obviously, money is not the answer to every problem but unfortunately it is. We are in too much competition with not only outside bodies who can offer more for less specialised work but ... everyone else in the sector who all have multiple different pay scales for the same positions.' (FG staff, 1)

Negative comparisons were drawn between the salaries afforded in the homelessness sector and those available in the statutory sector. Additionally, others compared their salaries to those available in (what was described as) less skilled work with less stress incurred and less challenging working environments, e.g., retail and in fast food restaurants:

'We need equality with the terms and conditions too that the health service are providing because we can't compete even with those never mind the salaries. We're still used as the cheap option... if we all turned around in the morning and say we can no longer afford to run these services and handed them all back, the Housing Executive would collapse ... they can't do without us and they know that but yet we are sitting in the position where we are seen as the cheaper option from statutory services.' (Management FG)

'Our staff come in, they do a 12-hour shift, two days and two nights, getting paid barely above minimum wage, don't know when they walk into a room has someone hung themselves? Have they overdosed? Are they slicing themselves? Do they have to give CPR? Do they have to deal with those issues? And then you get residents who walk across the street to work in [fast food chain restaurant] and getting paid a pound an hour more than they are.' (FG staff, 1)

Additionally, comparisons were drawn between staff employed by the organisations directly in the sector and those employed by recruitment agencies, whereby those agency staff were being paid substantially more, despite not holding the same level of responsibility of those employed directly:

'Agency workers are telling you they are on £2-£2.50 more an hour and they are walking away with no worry. We walk away and there is not one of us who don't worry about what happens when we leave...they get more for their night shift, and I think it is very disheartening for staff when agency workers can just walk away and staff have to sit and write incident reports and everything is on their shoulders.' (FG staff, 6)

'I've had agency staff say they would like a job in the [name of organisation mentioned] only that they are getting more money working as agency staff than coming here.' (FG staff, 6)

'An agency worker comes in. There is the continuity of not knowing the residents, not knowing how things will work so a staff member is taking the lead and the pressure and that person regardless of how good they are they are not doing the same work, but they are getting paid more per hour. Sometimes £3, £5, £6 more.' (FG staff, 1)

One manager highlighted the vicious cyclical nature of the problem, whereby due to poor pay, staffing levels were low, as such, organisations rely more on agencies, who charge more than the cost of in-house staff:

'We're in a bit of a vicious circle in terms of funding and money, because the funding hasn't increased, we can't increase salaries...and so we can't recruit and so we use agencies but the cost of agency is in excess of the cost of our support workersit really all does all come back to the funding, if we had that increase in our funding that we could pay our staff the correct amount that they duly deserve for the work that they do within the challenging environment, we wouldn't have the issues...that's the key piece, people need to be rewarded for the work they are doing.' (Management FG)

There was a perception that the sector was continuing to operate due to the vocational sense and commitment of the staff in post, who ultimately can afford to 'sacrifice' certain things, such as fair pay and competitive terms and conditions:

You get the argument that if it is a vocation, if you are doing it because of the values then you maybe are prepared to sacrifice in terms of the terms and conditions.' (FG staff, 2)

'I'm in this sector because I can afford to be, my mortgage is nearly paid off and I can afford to work at this level and my partner is working so a proper salary between us.'

But if you are young and on your own you don't have a mission of surviving and particularly with the way things are going with the price of things now.' (FG staff, 2)

'Consequence of that the ones in their early 20's, highly driven and highly motivated were coming in to do the work and they were really good at it and showed huge potential but then left because they were getting jobs that were maybe 3 or 3 thousand pounds a year more. And for them that is a huge amount.' (FG staff, 2)

Other Terms and Conditions

The participants also highlighted some other terms and conditions of their employment that they felt could be enhanced, for example, the limited sick pay was highlighted:

'We have 3 weeks sick and have had people with serious illnesses, mental health and physical health within our organisation who are freaked out then because when they are off sick, and your three weeks is up that is you on to stat pay.... it's ridiculous. If you go to the Trust, you get 6 months full pay and 6 months half pay. That in itself is way more attractive.' (FG staff, 3)

Additionally, the shift patterns and anti-social hours worked were also addressed:

'This is because the pay is crap. There is no other way to put it. The conditions aren't great either. We work nightshifts, we work weekends. There is no shift allowance, no weekend allowance, there is no anti-social hour's payment. And I am involved 24/7, 7 days a week for £70. I can't take a drink; I can't leave the town for £70. The wages are scandalous.' (FG staff, 3)

The nature of the shift work and the lone working environment was also highlighted as a particular challenge:

'We don't have dedicated day workers and night workers so our staff do day and nights and be exhausted from it. No matter whether they are 21 or 61. It affects everybody the same. And they say they are exhausted from one week of days and one week of nights. And that has a huge impact on our staff.' (FG staff, 6)

'I think it is the lone working because people who are applying for the job, they see lone working and get quite frightened because of the nature of the people we work with.' (FG staff, 5)

Finally, the pension contributions were also mentioned, whereby staff with over 30 years of service mentioned not receiving a pension on their retirement:

‘When I leave after 32 years, I won’t have a pension...there’s no investment in people within our sector, the sector has been baselined away back 13 years ago. We’re sitting in the 90s with costs raising ...our terms and conditions, our pay scales, our salaries, our benefits all need to be looked at if we’re to attract people into the sector.’ (Management FG)

7.2.3 Attraction and recruitment challenges

Attracting and recruiting the right (or indeed, any) staff was a common challenge cited by the management and staff. Participants expressed concern and frustration regarding the lack of interest in the roles advertised and subsequently the extended duration of vacant posts:

We feel like we are constantly interviewing.’ (FG staff, 2)

‘I’ve had two vacancies in (service mentioned), we’re now going into the 4th year where those two vacancies have been there. People apply for jobs... you get the interview panel together... lucky enough we’re doing it on Zoom... gone are the days people were polite and said, ‘apologies I can’t attend’...

you sit now with staff and managers waiting on people coming on to a meeting and they just don’t show.’ (Management FG)

‘We had 13 applications and not one of them turned up.... for a support workers job...’

‘People before that you wouldn’t really have accepted you would accept now... (name of colleague), she says that somebody has a pulse you’d nearly take them now...it’s getting that bad with staffing.’ (Staff FG, 2)

One of the core issues attributed to the issue of recruitment was the need to secure additional funding. This is in order to successfully attract staff with competitive terms and conditions, and specifically, competitive salaries aligned with the challenging nature of the roles advertised:

‘Recruitment has been really hard ... There again it comes down to the lack of money, lack of pay rises. The money is basically crap. It is terrible for what we do.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘It has been an on-going problem and until the funding is sorted out we’ll not attract people into this sector because nobody is going to work with the stress and the strain that comes with the job for the money that’s paid when you could go and stack your baked beans

tins in any supermarket in the country for more money...you go home and you forget about it...this job you go home and that stays with you until the next time you're on shift, is that person ok, will they be safe until I come back...that doesn't leave you....until the funding actually catches up with the rest of the country.' (Management FG)

'Lots of jobs in the sector but all low paid. In these current times with the cost of living and the nature of the clientele we are working with you need to be paid a lot more than someone stacking shelves in supermarkets or giving out hot food. But our wages aren't much more and we are helping people with lots of problems and issues.' (FG staff, 3)

7.2.4 Retention

Additionally, retaining those staff that are recruited was also a key challenge. For some participants, they recognised the challenge of retaining young staff, due to the nature of the work involved, less sociable hours, and salaries offered:

'I occasionally get somebody for a few weeks, and they're gone. Young people do not want to work evenings, they don't want to work weekends and when you mentioned nights, they go 'not a hope'. (Management FG)

'I've seen about 10 staff come in over 2 years and all the young staff say that I am off my head working in this. They only stayed a maximum 6 months as there were cleaners getting £2 extra than we were getting. We are basically doing a social workers job. The young ones were leaving.... getting the experience or training and moving on to something else.' (FG staff, 4)

'We had a lot of new recruits there in the summer and they're going 'I didn't know this was going to be as intense as it is' and you know in your heart of hearts that they're not going to stay.' (Management FG)

These issues are ultimately exacerbating the short staffing challenges and resulting in a high turnover of staff within the sector. Both of which add additional pressures and demands to an already stretched work force:

'Turnover of staff, not being able to retain staff, not having staff with the skill set, maybe at a level we would hope for has been a challenge. It just feels like it is constantly training and re-training. COVID hasn't helped either with that, not being in the sector and working from home.' (FG staff, 2)

'... there is a transient movement of staff among hostels and it seems to be the same staff coming and going throughout different hostels...Like a community of hostel workers that move throughout the sector.' (FG staff, 1)

It should be noted, however, that these issues were not universal, with one exception of an organisation experiencing low staff turnover:

'I think we have a pretty low staff turnover. We have had a few support workers come and go but I have been here 13 years.' (FG staff, 5)

Some staff shed light on some issues they felt were contributing to the high turnover of staff. One of which was a perceived misconception amongst people regarding what a role in the homelessness sector might entail. It was suggested that perhaps the expectations of new starts were not meeting the realities of the role:

'Bringing staff in, starting them in contract and very quickly new staff realise this is not what I signed up for. This isn't what you described. And they are leaving again.' (FG staff, 1)

One participant highlighted that, when recruiting for new staff, the job description needs to better reflect the wide array of complex issues that employees deal with regularly, in order to attract the right type of 'resilience'. Additionally, it was suggested that, as part of the recruitment, applicants should have some hands-on experience of the role to which they are applying:

'Staff, new staff and agency staff, are coming into this post that just aren't cut out for this line of work ... for people looking from the outside in they think it is just to do with homelessness when really, it's a complete array of issues. I personally don't think that you can teach resilience. Someone who is not confident and dealing with people with needles hanging out of their groin, multiple overdoses, poly drug users, alcoholics, needles lying around rooms. It's not for everyone. Adverts are going out to work with the homeless and not saying what they are actually going to be doing hence the reason you can't keep staff... a wider picture needs to be shown of what this job actually involves.' (FG staff, 6)

'Part of our recruitment now is that we have an 'on the job' day so if they pass an interview, we ask them to come in for a day and they are given a mentor for a day and whatever that staff member does they do it. So, if they are cleaning up sick or dealing with someone that's abusive or they are taking them to a doctor or they are having a cup of coffee at [coffee shop chain] with them they follow and do so that they have an understanding of ok this is an idea of what I will be doing in the course of the day.'

If we offer the job they have a basic understanding of the environment and the staff you are working with.’ (FG staff, 1)

And finally, as one manager highlighted, the sector is facing extreme vulnerability in the coming months when services begin to open up again, as the current staffing levels will not be able to deliver pre-pandemic service delivery levels:

...this is making me exceptionally nervous, personallyWhen services start to open up again, we don’t have the staff numbers or the staff with the experience to manage and run those services in the way they were done before the pandemic and that’s going to be a real issue....our way of working changed and to revert back to the levels that we would have been doing before to what services were commissioned to do, we don’t have the manpower to do it and we don’t have the skilled staff either.’ (Management FG)

7.2.5 Training, development and career progression

The training opportunities available to staff in the sector appeared to be highly dependent upon the employer, where some organisations appear to place more focus on training, development and progression, compared to others.

Qualifications

With regard to the training and qualifications required to enter the homelessness sector workforce, there was a sense that no specific training or qualifications were available. Often training is aligned with health and social care training. However, it was recognised that this particular training programme does not necessarily prepare people for this sector, rather it is more tailored towards nursing home and care work roles, than homelessness sector support work:

‘There’s nothing specific, people can do social care training which is transferable into this sector.... homelessness is not mentioned in that training...there isn’t ... any specific training...to prepare people for the homeless sector.’ (Management FG)

Additionally, due to the recruitment and retention challenges discussed above, participants highlighted that often the level of qualifications required are reduced:

‘You are having to recruit people with less and less skills because you just can’t get the staff so we would have been looking at level 3 now its level 2 and we are meeting next week to consider dropping that completely and saying we will train you when you are in. But we are going to face problems if we do that.’ (FG staff, 1)

Others highlighted that life experience is often a better predictor of performance, rather than a formal qualification:

‘Some of the best staff I have brought in do not have a qualification as much as they have had a year two years dealing with a family member that is either in palliative care, dealing with an addiction or has mental health problems because they have lived through the process. They have an understanding of some of the mood swings and behavioural issues and they are more tolerant.’ (FG staff, 1)

Different opportunities across different organisations

With regard to training afforded by employers in the sector, there were varied responses. Some recognised a reduction in training opportunities, despite increased need for training and development:

‘There is no investment in staff training... organisations have to find that money themselves....’ (Management FG)

‘In the last few years, the complex needs have got worse. Alongside that the training has been less.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘Training and education took a real hit a few years ago. It’s a key thing that we have missed out on. All we really have is an interactive programme. 13/14 modules that you renew after a few years. Go away an hour later and you would have forgotten what it was about.’ (FG staff, 4)

Whilst participants from another organisation referred to a strong organisational commitment to training and development:

‘One thing about [name of organisation], they are very zealous about training... We have a training hub and a training co-ordinator who will email about core training that must be completed by a deadline. Then you have lots of other training that is offered on the hub as well - eat well, mental health training, physical health training, cooking on a budget.’ (FG staff, 5)

‘Online training is updated, and you are always learning. Encouraged by management to take part in training.’ (FG staff, 5)

Whilst some staff in this organisation referred to a wide variety of training (and travel opportunities available), others felt the training was limited to the compulsory ‘tick box’ type health and safety training:

‘[Name of organisation] are very good on their training but I get the feeling it is more to their benefit than ours. It is to tick their boxes that we are trained. If it was training that we could go and progress, whether it was a qualification for management - that is not what they are offering, they are offering training to make sure we know how to pick up a box.’

We may be doing the jobs and carrying the load, but we don't have the qualification or certification to pay you for what we are already doing.' (FG staff, 4)

Training to meet the complex demands of the role

The need for varied training and development opportunities was recognised in order to meet the numerous challenging and complex demands of the role:

'The staff are not trained to deal with the complexities of an individual because you have personalities mixed in with these complex mental health issues.' (FG staff, 1)

'Your personal skill bank is constantly widening because you have got to be aware of new trends in drugs, you have got to be aware of new trends in maybe data protection, human rights, legality and stuff. The job is undervalued because you are juggling maybe 20 balls.' (FG staff, 4)

Additionally, the need for organisation's training offering to evolve and remain current was recognised also, due to the ever-changing demands of the job role, as per the ever-evolving shifts in service user needs:

'We have a well-established team and none really there less than 10 years and training refreshers need to be done but

the content of it never changed so you are teaching the same thing over and over again.' (FG staff, 6)

'The referrals as I say are more full on. We haven't had adequate training since COVID and we are expected to deal with these young people.' (FG staff, 4)

Barriers to adequate training

However, despite the recognised complexities of the role and the vast array of issues staff face, there was a recognised lack of training opportunities in some organisations, due to a range of perceived barriers. For example, the lack of funding and budget available resulted in some organisations relying on freely available training resources:

'We rely on the free training. If it wasn't for services offering free training, we wouldn't have anything. Its only information giving too and although some are good, they don't offer qualifications or accreditation.' (Management FG)

Others recognised that despite the availability of training, there was little time for staff to avail of such opportunities, due to the aforementioned staff shortages:

'There is plenty of training and training that people want to go on but unfortunately again because of the effects of COVID and the hostels having less than half staff the majority of the time people can't attend the training

unless they attend on their days off but they need their days off because they are tired. It has been difficult where the training has been concerned for people.' (FG staff, 6)

'I think the difficulty too is if you are wanting professional development, unless the staff really want it with key courses our staff work shifts and their time off is precious to them. And then you are asking them to go on their time off on courses and they may get time in lieu, and you may not. They aren't getting paid on their time off and going on their time off.' (FG staff, 4)

Additionally, some staff commented on their attempts to avail of professional opportunities that were declined by their employer:

'Not good...I know particularly for myself and my own organisation I had asked quite a few times to do the [level 5 management] and I was refused, and I had to pay for it myself and do it myself. I was actually doing roles within that [management] and I wasn't recognised.' (FG staff, 4)

Career progression

The participants discussed the limited career progression pathways available to them in the sector. Additionally, several participants acknowledged that for many, work in this sector was a stepping stone onto other careers, rather than a chosen career:

'Career progression is difficult in the sector.... opportunity to seek career progression is limited.' (FG staff, 4)

'They're going for better options, some of them use our sector as a stepping stone...they move onto social work or further education.' (FG staff, 2)

As such, there was a sense of a lack of career progression for those who chose to work in this sector and who do want progression:

'There are very little careers in our organisation so there isn't really a career path for careers.' (FG staff, 1)

'It is only a small number of staff that actually want progression.' (FG staff, 1)

'For support workers there doesn't seem to be a lot of career progression. Some have senior practitioners and then senior management would have to die or leave. No work for staff to go to so they move on to somewhere else.' (FG staff, 6)

7.2.6 Challenging nature of the work

Staff and management working in this sector acknowledge the extremely challenging roles they perform. This appears to be as a result of the ever changing and complex needs of the service users they encounter, as well as the volatile working environment in which the staff are working within.

Clientele

The complex needs with which many of the service users are presenting was a common theme emerging from the data, as was the consequent stress experienced by the staff:

'I think generally from my own perspective I find that a lot of the hostels are quite unsettled, the nature of the clientele has become a lot more complex and the strain and the stress on the staff is palpable.' (FG staff, 1)

There was a recognition that the needs of service users have evolved over the years, whereby nowadays, people are presenting with more complex issues and less respect for the staff in the sector:

'Homeless population has become more complex. It is not just about being homeless. It is about everything else that comes with it...there is also a certain level of disrespect towards staff where some think they can treat you whatever way they want.' (FG staff, 1)

Additionally, one participant commented on the change in age profile, whereby more and more younger people are presenting as homeless:

'Years ago, we would have been dealing with street drinkers, the majority aged 40 plus. Maybe 20 per cent female to 80 per cent male. That has completely somersaulted now. The young people, all under 30, now are the biggest percentage and alcohol is lower on the scale and now it is drugs. We encounter situations every month that are brand new to us.' (FG staff, 4)

Furthermore, adding to the complex needs of the service users was the rise in mental health challenges. For example, staff are dealing with trauma experienced clients, those with differing levels of psychosis, as well as related self-harm and suicide attempts:

'Dealing with people's traumas is one of our biggest issues. We work with people with different issues. Just because you are homeless doesn't mean you slot into certain criteria.' (FG staff, 5)

'It is not unusual to have self-harm, suicide attempts. It is not unusual to have rash physical and verbal behaviour and those are the main issues we have with our client base.' (FG staff, 1)

'It has got worse. When I first started this job, we were dealing with people who were coming out of care and needed a bit of support. Now we are dealing with people who have schizophrenia, who have serious addictions, multi addictions and mental health issues. We are dealing with people that the agency won't even let in their door! They are referring them to us!' (FG staff, 3)

As highlighted in the above quote, addiction is also a major concern and challenge (sometimes, undoubtedly, exacerbated by the mental health challenges experienced by the service users):

'...years ago, a lot of the young people coming in just didn't have a roof over their head. A lot of relationship breakdowns and maybe it was just as acute then and I didn't notice it as much but the amount of people coming into the hostels these days have severe mental health issues, addiction issues, relationship issues, they have come into contact with the criminal justice system, criminal cases against them. They are a lot more complex.' (FG staff, 1).

Volatile and 'abusive' nature of the work

Several staff commented on the volatile and stressful environment they face in their workplace, because of the additional needs and challenges experienced by the service user community:

'You walk into a doctor surgery, and they have a note up saying abuse to our staff won't be tolerated. Our staff know on a day-to-day basis they are coming in to be abused. Verbally. All day everyday usually.' (FG staff, 6)

Staff gave examples of the abuse and aggression they face in their day-to-day dealings with service users. This has a subsequent impact on staff's own mental health and wellbeing:

'...even from my own experience working in the hostel that I worked in, I mean you are a victim of verbal aggression, you are a victim of threats, you are a victim of physical attack. I was attacked on two occasions. I mean one I was physically attacked and another I was threatened. It has become quite volatile, quite stressful. And you wonder why stick at it for 5 years if this is the case.' (FG staff, 1)

'No one wants to come into work where they are being assaulted. So hence the reason sick leave might be on the up or even leaving.' (FG staff, 6)

In some instances, examples of the abuse experienced by employees was extreme. It must also be noted that service users, at times, refuse to follow guidelines and 'house rules':

‘Some people even without complex issues don’t like to follow rules, they don’t like to follow licence, they don’t like to follow anything in house, and we aren’t running a community prison but we are running facilities that have to facilitate other people that we have a duty of care to as well.’ (FG staff, 6)

Additionally, it is also important to highlight that, despite such challenging circumstances, some staff (perhaps working in less extreme circumstances) also acknowledged that the clients were not the issue, rather the lack of adequate staffing levels to manage the services effectively:

‘We are experienced enough with our client base to know and be able to deal with most things. The problem with us is not the clients. It is getting staff and retaining staff.’ (FG staff, 1)

7.3 The impact on staff

‘In these current times with the cost of living and the nature of the clientele we are working with you need to be paid a lot more than someone stacking shelves in supermarkets’ (FG staff, 5)

7.3.1 Burnout

The resulting impact that these challenges (facing the staff and staffing in the homelessness sector) are having on the staff working in the sector was a key concern for staff and management alike. Issues of burnout, stress and exhaustion were recognised:

‘In my heart of hearts, I wanted to be there but they [service users] exhausted me...when you work with a locum [agency worker] you might as well be there on your own. So, when you are working with 19 very complex people with chronic addiction, severe mental health issues, you may as well be there on your own and it is very hard to take that burden on your shoulders doing maybe an 8-hour shift and not having the backing of the person you are working with because they haven’t a clue.’ (FG staff, 1)

‘Learning how to switch off. It is virtually impossible. You are going home with a lot of stuff and a lot of baggage, and it can have an effect on your personal life and you can get burnt out very easily.’ (FG staff, 5)

‘I’ve seen staff have breakdowns. You take stuff away with you - some aren’t as mentally strong that suffer.’ (FG staff, 4)

There was a sense of staff not having the time to properly take care of themselves, in part due to the overwhelming and constant nature of the work. For example, some staff (line managers) commented that they are always on call, others highlighted how they often work extra shifts (to cover staff absence), and the struggle to balance a challenging workplace and a ‘chaotic’ home life underlined a lack of balance in staff member’s lives:

“Burnout often implies that it is the worker that hasn’t taken the time out to take care of themselves enough, but you are only human.” (FG staff, 2)

‘There are times when we have chaotic lives at home so it is trying to get an even balance between our work life and home life can be very stressful.’ (FG staff, 5)

‘Sometimes it is hard to say no in this work.’ (FG staff, 5)

Staff recognised the need for both more generous holidays and more appropriate sick leave to better equip staff to take care of themselves, both reactively when sickness occurs and proactively to avoid burnout and mental ill health occurring:

‘To prevent burnout, you need 4-5 weeks holidays.’ (FG staff, 3)

‘You need sick leave, longer sick leave.’ (FG staff, 1)

‘Don’t think annual leave should have to be used if you are feeling worn out or stressed from the job.’ (FG staff, 5)

7.3.2 Informal and formal support

Across the board, there was a strong sense of staff supporting each other. Tight-knit teams, strong relationships and informal support structures were often evident:

‘If we see a staff member struggling, we are on the ball helping people out. We know how everyone works and things people can and can’t cope with.’ (FG staff, 5)

‘All managers offer an open-door policy – we advocate to our staff that door is always open to chat in an internal manner.’ (FG staff, 6)

However, structured and freely available professional mental health support was less common. It appears that some organisations are better equipped to manage the mental health challenges of their staff than others. Some appear to offer a range of therapeutic services, such as counselling, reflexology etc. (where part of the cost is covered by the organisations). But in other settings, staff felt there was a lack of such support provision (or at least there was a lack of awareness of such support):

‘We can get 6 free counselling sessions at any one time.’ (FG staff, 6)

‘You have to source your own support.’ (relating to therapeutic support/ counselling) (FG staff, 5)

7.3.3 Covid-19 and burnout

The impact of the pandemic was recognised as having further exacerbated the feeling of burnout and mental health challenges amongst staff. The delayed nature of the full impact of this most challenging time is felt to not have fully presented itself as yet, with more issues likely to emerge down the line:

No matter how resilient someone is there is an impact on everyone's mental health. There is exhaustion. Our staff have worked nearly two years, nearly coming up to three, through COVID and they will come in day in and day out. They have had no breaks and the impact of that hasn't really been seen yet and how exhausted staff are having to deal with that. The fear of not knowing if they are going to catch it or take it home to their families.' (FG staff, 6)

7.4 The impact on service users

'...the people that we're working with, there hasn't been much consistency in their life, and they don't need another lack of consistency when we're trying to help them.' (Management FG)

As well as having a negative impact on staff, the subsequent negative impact of the staffing challenges faced in the sector on the service users was also flagged. For example, the stretched workload and limited resource and time afforded to support worker- service user interactions were highlighted:

'Also, staff don't have the same amount of time with clients now that they had before because you don't have the same levels of staffing...managers used to have time to actually talk to clients as well, now they're lucky if they get the chance, other than when they're covering front line services, which means the management side has to sit and wait.' (Management FG)

Additionally, the poor staffing levels and heightened turnaround of staff was flagged as a real concern, due to a lack of continuity and poor relationship building between the support workers and the service users:

'If you have a transient staff group, agency staff and relief staff, those residents coming in do not have continuity. They don't know who is coming in from one shift to another. They can't feel comfortable in that environment. They feel more at risk in that environment.... if they don't know the people coming on to a shift, they don't know who to trust. They can't feel secure. They don't build up a rapport with members of staff. If they are agency members who don't have experience in that field for instance, people who don't understand the complexities of someone and that then reflects on how they deal with someone and how they manage incidents for instance.' (FG staff, 1)

'The relationship is the most important thing...to gain their trust and if there's no consistency in staffing then you're flogging a dead horse...the people that we're working with, there hasn't been much consistency in their life and they don't need another lack of consistency when we're trying to help them.'
(Management FG).

Some managers commented on the impact that such a lack of consistency can have in terms of the service user's own health and wellbeing:

'When you work in services you pick up things that if you come in for odd shifts you wouldn't pick up on.... there was a client.... he was leaving the service and he felt suicidal ...at the time but the support worker ran after him because she noticed his demeanour had changed. So, the difficulty that we have when we have staff who are not constant...they won't know that...these things are fundamental to the delivery of services, if we have agency staff they are not regular and there all the time, that's massive for our service users, because people aren't noticing things.'
(Management FG)

'When you don't have that consistency of staff and you've got agency or relief, or whatever, coming in and service users are having to retell their story over and

over again so that staff members understand their situation they're reliving that trauma, which sets off more triggers which then exacerbates their need for support but we don't have the support to give them and you can see people almost going down in a downward spiral instead of us being able to give them that ...one-to-one support with their key worker that knows them that knows their triggers, their situation and their risks...so it's having a real negative impact on the service users.' (Management FG)

7.5 Relationship with statutory agencies

There was a strong sense that the organisations involved in this research (and those working in the homelessness sector more broadly) were not valued as highly as statutory agencies and as such were not afforded the same opportunities or resources:

'They think because we are not statutory, we are not valued as much.... by the government and by the 'big boys.' Because they are statutory, they are automatically given it whereas we are not. We are very undervalued a lot of the time. Anything we want we have to keep fighting for it. Statutory services automatically get it. They seem to come top of the ladder before we do.' (FG staff, 4)

The participants felt that they were performing the roles of the statutory sector, but at a cheaper price point.

'So, it was always inevitable you could see it happening when there was an amalgamation of small and small to medium sized voluntary groups and also the housing associations as well. They came together to form what I refer to as pseudo-statutory organisations that are there to perform the function of statutory organisations but do it more cheaply. And that to me ... has been a big factor in government in driving the voluntary sector over the last number of years is in what way can it get the voluntary sector to pick up and do the work that they don't want to do and also do it cheaply.' (FG staff, 2)

As highlighted in the quote above, those in the homelessness sector feel like they are required to 'pick up' the work of the statutory sector. They described a system whereby the statutory sector, due to their requirement to work within more stringent timeframes, discharge complex cases back into the community to those working in the homelessness sector:

'We are the poor relation to the statutory agencies so to speak. Where we pick up all of their cases. They work in a limited way with the people they refer to us. They usually have timescales on it. Once they discharge them from their service, they are referred through to us.'

We pick up all of statutory agency cases in the community whether that be from homeless to domestic abuse, child protection, severe mental health to mild mental health, paedophilia. We are generic. We deal with everybody, and people know the work that we do and they also know the wages are shit.' (FG staff, 3).

'...there's a lot of absences in social work so we're picking up the backlog of that as well because we're on the ground working with the people with the problems. So we're dealing with it on a 24/7 basis but we're dealing with it very much alone.' (Management FG)

One organisation noted that, nowadays, their main referral is from social services for young people with more challenging needs, who are placed in the homelessness sector as a last resort. This new trend has further stretched the remit of the homelessness sector; to the point staff are uncertain of their role:

'Our main referral is from social services for our 16-17 year olds...We are getting extremely high needs. We are getting people from the care sector with very challenging childhoods. We sometimes don't know what our goal is any more. Are we housing? Housing support? There are a lot of issues with drugs. What is our goal? Because sometimes it is conflicting with social workers.'

They place them with us because they have nowhere else to put them and it is challenging.’ (FG staff, 4)

Another issue highlighted was the issue regarding dual diagnosis (the term used to describe people who concurrently have severe mental health problems and drug or alcohol problems). Staff highlighted that NICE guidelines state that for dual diagnosis, parallel services (whereby receiving one service at the same time as receiving another) must operate. However, in practice, this is not the case:

‘We do not have parallel services.... We do not have the agencies running parallel where we have addiction and severe mental health issues. It’s like the chicken and the egg... what came first the mental health problems or the addiction? What we need is the services running parallel because you need to be getting support for your mental health as well as dealing with your addiction. It needs to be a joint service. And that is not happening. So, the statutory agencies say ‘sorry we can’t deal with you’ they are referred again to floating support. We need parallel services to help us to help the statutory agencies not the other way about. We need the help. We are holding them up! There is so much lacking here.’ (FG staff, 3)

And finally, the lack of appropriate formal pathways between the homelessness and statutory services was also recognised.

It was acknowledged that relationships have been built over time between those in the sector and those in the statutory services. However, these exist as informal mechanisms rather than formalised pathways, thus leaving the sector open to more vulnerability with agency/new/temporary staff moving into the sector without this experience and without those relationships established:

‘There’s no formal pathways between the statutory agencies and the voluntary sector, while pathways exist they’re not suitable or appropriate for the client group most of us work with....because those are not formalised, it requires a huge amount of effort from the key workers and the staff that know the service users really well to advocate on their behalf to get them access to statutory servicestransfer that over to the current circumstance agency staff who don’t have those relationships, that are informal and developed over time that they can lift the phone....an agency worker isn’t going to be able to do that.’ (Management FG)

As such, this participant recognised the need for better infrastructure supporting this sector, grounded in interdepartmental commitment and supported by appropriate legislation:

‘...interdepartmental responsibility and commitment and the legislation that dictates that there needs to be that formalised agreement between voluntary and statutory organisations for service users.

Because that doesn't exist it makes this situation even more volatile.'
(Management FG)

7.6 Coronavirus pandemic

'Covid has made things worse...there were problems with staffing before COVID ever happened.' (Management FG)

As highlighted throughout some of the preceding themes, the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on this sector was greatly felt by all involved. The pandemic appears to have exacerbated a range of existing challenges, particularly around staffing and resource. The participants highlighted that despite the restrictions and lock downs, their services continued to run in the most challenging of circumstances:

"We do have to...keep the services open... one of the things the sector is committed to doing and did do exceptionally well during the pandemic was keep the services open, they kept them operational and the number of COVID cases within them was negligible in comparison to society as a whole and that wasn't out of good luck, that was out of good planning and professionalism in how services were run and I think that needs to come out loud and strong.'
(Management FG).

7.6.1 Challenges adhering to safety guidelines

Many of the participants discussed the challenges they faced trying to adhere to the various safety parameters imposed. For example, some highlighted the challenges of keeping clients 'contained' and others discussed the abuse they received from those who did not 'believe in Covid':

'More stressful dealing with residents who just did not want to be contained.'
(FG staff, 1)

'Hostels are micro communities of the outside world. Outside some people didn't believe in Covid. Inside some didn't believe in Covid so our staff were getting abuse from those who didn't believe in Covid.' (FG staff, 6)

'Some of our clients wouldn't follow any guidelines and we had to throw people out for not following guidelines as we had to keep staff safe, cause if all the staff went off with Covid who was going to manage the service? Some of our clients were very flippant when it came to Covid and they wouldn't wear a mask and they coughed all round the place. That was very hard to manage.' (FG staff, 6)

Additionally, some of the staff highlighted how they also felt incapable of adhering to the safety guidelines, particularly at times when service users were at risk:

'Hostels had to keep running. There were still incidents and accidents. Everything still kept happening. Overdoses still had to be dealt with. CPR still had to be done. And when your adrenaline is kicking in the last thing you are thinking is 'hold on where is my mask?' (FG staff, 6)

The staff also recognised how their job role extended further in light of Covid, whereby additional pressures, such as preparing meals and cleaning became part of their job role:

'If someone was in a room isolating you had a lot of running about to do to make sure that people don't feel so isolated. Making meals for them, which is something we don't normally do, but with Covid and ensuring that they didn't come out of their room and start congregating with other people. Making sure all the procedures were being followed.' (FG staff, 6)

'Part of our support workers role became cleaners because they had to make sure touch points were cleaned down regularly throughout the day. They had to be in full PPE. They had to wear masks day and night in work.' (FG staff, 6)

Yet despite facing these challenges, the staff did not feel they received any recognition for their efforts or their own sacrifices:

'No one acknowledged what we were doing. We put ourselves at risk like the nurses, but no one acknowledged it/ recognised it.' (FG staff, 5)

'I had one shielding at home and no one acknowledged that. We had to get on with it.' (FG staff, 4)

7.6.2 Negative impact on staff

The negative impact of Covid was recognised as having taken its toll on staff across the homelessness sector. There was a recognised pressure to keep everyone safe and an inability to switch off from the pressure:

'There was a larger responsibility on staff and managers to keep not only themselves safe but every client in the building safe. And that had an impact.' (FG staff, 6)

'COVID was physically and mentally exhausting. You constantly felt like you weren't doing enough. Your hands were tied no matter what obstacle you tried to get over. You go home and try to switch off but think I could have done this, or I could have done that...' (FG staff, 5)

The staff recognised the exhaustion experienced across the homelessness sector and the longer-term impact this is having on people's health and wellbeing:

'Everyone is exhausted coming out the other end.' (FG staff, 6)

'Showing up in other sicknesses staff are getting now. You get into that world 'I can't be off there is no staff' and you keep going and then when things start to relax or someone's annual leave is coming up you aren't well.' (FG staff, 6)

Despite the many challenges attributed to Covid, it must be highlighted that the staff were clear that these challenges existed before Covid, which further stretched and already volatile and vulnerable sector:

'Covid has made things worse...there were problems with staffing before Covid ever happened...the danger we've got is that particularly our funders attribute it down to COVID and it wasn't and they need to remember that...there is no increase on funding, there hasn't been for 13 years, funding has remained static for 13 years...so all COVID has done is accentuated a problem that existed before. I'm really clear on that. Sometimes I'm not so sure our funders are clear on that.' (Management FG)

7.7 Staff suggestions for change

'...they need to start to think about the value that the voluntary sector brings.... I think the voluntary sector is exhausted...it is at the verge of collapse.' (Management FG)

Finally, the staff and managers involved in the focus groups had numerous suggested recommendations to improve the staffing situation in the homelessness sector.

7.7.1 More funding and better use of resource

One of the key recommendations was to improve resource and to use existing staff time more efficiently, with the funding described as the 'fundamental...heart of the issue':

'But fundamentally we need to get to the heart of the issue...funding.' (Management FG)

'It ultimately comes down to funding and money because with that we can do so much more for our service users and invest in our staff so that we can retain them and enable them to train and develop and move up through the positions.' (Management FG)

Additionally, some staff reflected on the frustration they experienced, having to conduct administrative work too often, rather than engaging directly with clients. As such, an administrative function was recommended, to complement the work of the support worker.

'We complete processes that are repetitive at times. I would like to see less on computer and having time with clients.' (FG staff, 6)

'An administration worker to do the office work to free up support workers to do more actual support hands on.' (FG staff, 6)

7.7.2 Greater awareness and recognition

It was felt that greater awareness, recognition and respect for the roles that the staff in the homelessness sector actually perform is needed. It was felt this recognition and respect was needed from their own employers, from the broader statutory sector, and from policy makers and government officials:

'Respect and honesty from the statutory services when making referrals.' (FG staff, 3)

'Genuine awareness from head office of what our staff deal with. Not just lip service.' (FG staff, 6)

'How we are represented by our management. We aren't just care workers. We are out there carrying the load of work. The way the job is represented by our management. We need to be trained, acknowledged and supported in what we are actually doing. What we are actually doing is so much more than what we are listed for doing.' (FG staff, 4)

'The work the homeless sector do is really not being recognised by government. We are mostly in this sector on minimum wage and the work we are doing is that of police, counselling, social workers and there is no recognition, financially, of all we do.' (FG staff, 5)

7.7.3 Improved Public Relations (PR)

Related to the above point, some improved PR was also recommended to demonstrate the valuable role employees in this sector play in society and to highlight the job satisfaction experienced with helping those most vulnerable:

'...a bit of publicity about the valuable work that is carried out within homeless services and the impact that that can have even on us as individuals as employees to see the change in people's lives, to be part of that transformation....I think it would be really good to get some positive media stories out there of a couple of service users who have been through services who could say without this service I wouldn't be where I am today, I could potentially have died 10 years but because I was in the service and through harm reduction and whatever else, I am now here, I've moved out and have my own tenancy in the community...just some positive media...that might help also the funding piece to see how valuable the work is.' (Management FG)

7.7.4 Improved Terms & Conditions

Improvements to the terms and conditions of employment were suggested. For example, for some, they recommended basic reimbursement for the costs they incurred themselves personally while performing their role. For example, references were made to not having to use personal phones, petrol, car insurance to transport service users etc. and that these should be provided.

Others argued for improved salaries and enhanced terms and conditions more broadly. It was recognised that enhancing employee's salaries and benefits would be a clear demonstration of the value placed on them and the important role they perform:

'Better wages. Increments for the time in service. And not just the monetary side but on the holiday side of it. Better terms and conditions. Definitely better sick pay, length of sickness allowance.' (FG staff, 3)

'Number one is about valuing the staff more. That comes in relation to salaries and other terms and conditions.' (FG staff, 2)

Additionally, recommendations involving enhancing and standardising the current pay scale structures were also made:

'These people need to be financially rewarded if not just to keep them and their experience in the sector but to bring new people into the sector.' (FG staff, 1)

'I think there needs to be a standardised pay scale for the support workers. We are competing against each other. The fact is we are here to help people. Yes, it is a business but we are here to do the same job in our different areas. Small enough pool of people coming into this industry without competing.' (FG staff, 1)

Work patterns and lone working were highlighted as areas which should be considered, in order to improve the staffing situation in this sector:

'Lone working is hard for new staff to get their head around. A lot of people have fear about lone working. To get staff in, the sector needs to take a look at this.' (Staff FG, 6)

'In an ideal world no lone working and time for day staff to complete managerial tasks.' (FG staff, 5)

Furthermore, there was a recognised need to value employment in this sector as a career. Consequently, there is a need for further support, training, development and career progression opportunities for staff:

'Recognise working in the sector is a career... there are career options and I think we need to find a way to promote that more.' (Management FG)

'We are doing jobs from all other services. But we aren't given the support and training we need. We have to source the information ourselves to help our service users.' (FG staff, 4)

'Also the other issue is opportunities for career promotion within organisations and also in the sector as a whole.' (FG staff, 2)

7.7.5 Improved political commitment and legislative infrastructure

And finally, there were several recommendations made on a policy and political level. For example, the need for inter-departmental and all-party investment, legislative infrastructure and a cost-benefit analysis:

'I think some sort of cost analysis of what it actually costs what the value of the voluntary sector is...what it actually costs to run the voluntary sector in the way that it should be run...it's not real what's being invested into it takes more than that...if that investment was pulled and the voluntary sector was not here, what cost it would be to our stat partners?' (Management FG).

'All party investment...it has to be written into legislation.' (Management FG)

'Without the investment...we do need that investment and it's not just the Department for Communities, it has to be across the board because no one department would be able to manage the funding that is actually required to run the services and to support the clients to be able to sustain a tenancy and stop that recycling seeing the same people time and time again... to get people out of the system and supported well and get them settled, they need to invest right across the board.' (Management FG)

'...the reality of it is there should be cross departmental investment into homeless services because homelessness is not just a housing issue, so you've got health, criminal justice, education ... and none of them put a penny into any of the core funding of services... any services that have dual funded services it's because the organisations have sought the additional funding to come in and deliver those particular types of services...it goes higher than the NIHE, it goes to that strategic levels of government, it has to be part of how services are commissioned in the first instance.' (Management FG)

The valuable role of Homeless Connect in raising awareness and advocating on behalf of the sector was acknowledged and praised:

'I think Homeless Connect has done a sterling job in raising awareness and having those conversations and representing the sector. Every organisation... chief executives and senior management have spoken directly to our MLAs, there has been letters written... the Department for Communities is very aware of this situation and has been aware for a significant length of time...it's not just from the pandemic... it's been going on for years and it's now at breaking point... and I don't think they realise that that is the situation...' (Management FG)

However, the current political landscape was a great cause of concern for the participants, due to the uncertainty of the future of the NI Executive. Also, considering the previously highlighted feelings of being under-resourced and undervalued, the participants also recognised that with the return of an operational government, the homelessness sector will likely not be a priority:

'There's nobody sitting on the hill... this critical stage for all of us, were in a political landscape which is not known, we don't know what an election is going to bring...an election will most certainly bring a lot of ... debate amongst themselves for a considerable amount of time....look at health... our assembly

wasn't able to follow through on a multi-year budget which is so fundamental, recovery from COVID, especially for the health service... I think that across NI, we are at such a critical stage because our politicians and the executive and the assembly, they're not functioning in a way that is helping society and whilst we work in homelessness and for us that's an absolute priority, but gosh there are so many...health, I mean that's just a disaster, even looking at waiting lists, so they've got some massive issues to address and they're ineffective at doing it...we're sat in limbo now for a period of time...' (Management FG)

'We're going to be very far down the list.' (Management FG)

The participants felt that it was crucial that government recognised the challenges this sector face and invest more in the homelessness services in Northern Ireland, otherwise the services will become overwhelmed and will no longer be able to meet demand:

'Ministers can shout but you know we've had ministers saying for a long time we need to support this sector...we need to put more money in but one of them ever actually seem to get the results that they talk about.' (Management FG)

'We're the Cinderella service at the bottom of the heap, they're never going to get around to looking at us, it just feels like it's always on the long finger, we're never right up there as an issue, the only time it'll become an issue is when people start rough sleeping on the streets and that's coming very soon. We're going to be the same as all the other big cities across the water because people just aren't managing.' (Management FG).

'We're not a statutory service, people work for us because they care...they are certainly not working for us because their pension is so good...so I think there is a lot that discretionary effort that the people within this sector offer due to the values that they have and the commitment that they have...if that was harnessed in a way...that would be incredible.' (Management FG)

7.7.6 Sector willingness and harnessing the commitment

Despite their frustration and exhaustion, the passion and willingness was clearly evident from the participants in this research. As one participant mentioned, the service would likely flourish if only policy makers would 'harness' staff commitment with adequate resource, rather than relying on 'discretionary effort' and goodwill:

'They're working with the sector who absolutely want to work with the departments...to improve what we offer and how we do it, it's a very receptive sector...so much will.' (Management FG)

'We go above and beyond now... if we could go above and beyond and feel like we were actually making significant inroads for generations to come, gosh we'd do it even more.' (Management FG)

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this research resonate strongly with the global evidence base, as reported in Section 3. As per previously published research (e.g., Olivet, McGraw, Grandin, Bassuk, 2010; Osborn, Every, & Richardson, 2018; FEANTSA, 2020), the findings of this present study highlight several core staffing challenges experienced by those working in the homelessness sector. These challenges can be categorised across four core areas (see below and Figure 17), each of which poses considerable threat to the sustainability of the service delivery currently offered by the homelessness sector in NI.

1. **Policy:** The lack of funding and investment in the sector and the need for improved support infrastructures;
2. **Practice:** Particularly staffing levels, recruitment and terms and conditions;
3. **Societal issues:** External factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the work;
4. **Psychological/wellbeing:** Staff satisfaction and wellbeing.

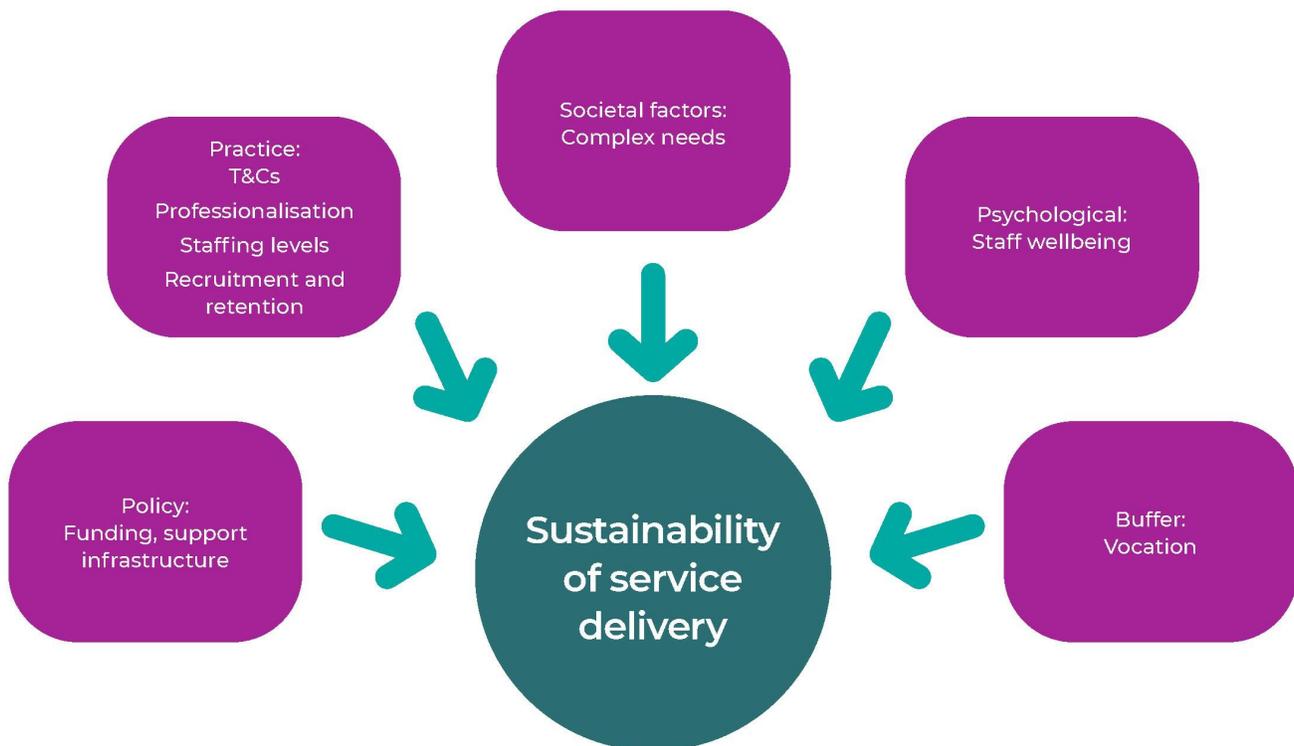


Figure 17: Sustainability of Service Delivery

8.1 Policy (funding and support of the sector)

This research points to the need for a number of policy-related shifts. In particular, the data calls for greater recognition from policy makers in terms of the valuable work undertaken in the homelessness sector and the limited budgets and resources available, improved policy and legal infrastructure and enhanced financial investment.

8.1.1 Improved funding

The data highlights that the lack of financial investment in the homelessness sector is a fundamental challenge. One of the key findings regarding the issue of funding was the widely held view that the current funding levels are completely inadequate.

Several participants discussed the static and diminishing budgets afforded to them, which were in contrast to the budgets afforded to the statutory sector. Further was the apparent flawed nature of current funding model. For example, one manager in the focus groups highlighted how the sector currently operates within a vicious cycle of not being able to afford to adequately pay staff, which results in poor staffing and an overreliance on agency staff, the cost of which exceeds the cost incurred of employing staff directly, thus further exacerbating both financial and staffing difficulties (see Figure 18).

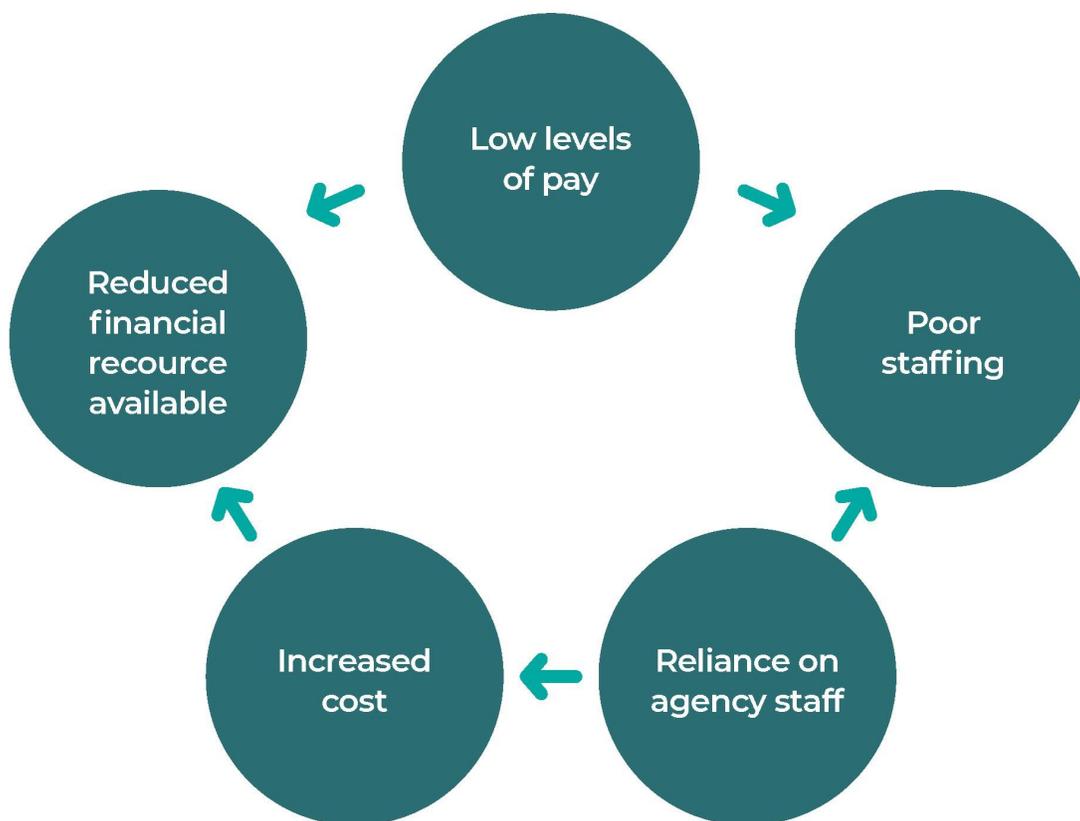


Figure 18: Resource Cycle

8.1.2 Improved commitment, policy and legal infrastructure

Whilst the valuable role of Homeless Connect in raising awareness and advocating on behalf of the sector was acknowledged and praised, there remains great need for policy level commitment and improved policy and legal supporting infrastructure. For example, whereby there is interdepartmental commitment, legislative underpinnings, and formal pathways connecting the homelessness and statutory sectors. These policy level commitments and supporting frameworks appear to be essential if the sector is to receive the recognition, investment and support it deserves.

8.1.3. Policy Recommendations

The data collected points to the following recommendations:

- Improved communication networks (or more responsive systems) between the sector and policy makers to facilitate greater recognition of the vital work undertaken under extremely tight resources and challenging circumstances;
- The provision of enhanced support afforded to the homelessness sector, in terms of financial support as well as interdepartmental policy-level support frameworks and legislative infrastructure.
- Further research is also recommended in order to explore the perspectives of commissioners and policy makers, in response to this report.

8.2 Practice (remuneration, professionalisation, recruitment and retention)

Practice across the sector is hindered greatly because of the inadequate funding and supporting structures in place.

Key areas of concern noted in this research include issues regarding the terms and conditions of employment (in particular, remuneration), the need for further professionalisation of the sector, and staffing level challenges, particularly regarding recruitment and retention of staff.

8.2.1 Remuneration and Terms and Conditions (Ts & Cs)

Poor levels of pay were recognised and recorded across the staff survey, organisational survey and the focus groups. The dissatisfaction with pay and the Ts & Cs afforded to staff more generally poses a very real threat to the sustainability of the sector. Staff expressed how they feel both disheartened and disrespected by the level of pay they receive for the work they undertake. Many made unfavourable comparisons to other jobs and industries. For example, participants highlighted that they could earn more if on benefits, if performing similar roles in the statutory sector (or indeed in an agency), or if working in retail or in a fast-food restaurant. In addition to pay, the focus group participants also highlighted some other terms and conditions of their employment that they felt could be enhanced, for example, sick pay, pension contributions, alternatives to lone working and improved shift patterns. All of which could be addressed and improved with increased investment in the sector.

8.2.2 Low staffing levels and improved use of resource

High levels of vacant posts, staff absences, and under resourcing were common challenges discussed by the research participants. Insufficient staffing levels will, undoubtedly, pose a serious threat to the sustainability of the sector.

Additionally, as the quantitative survey data highlighted, the sector has an aging profile. This poses additional risk in terms of skills and expertise aging out of the sector, without sufficient newcomer staff to fill these positions. Additionally, with regard to staffing practices, and again due to budgetary challenges, it was recognised that the roles to which staff are assigned are not often the best use of resource to meet the needs of service users. For example, there was concern that staff were afforded less client facing time in order to fulfil administrative duties.

8.2.3 Attracting and retaining employees

Both the quantitative and qualitative data point to the issues regarding recruiting and retaining staff in the sector. For example, the management survey highlighted the large number of vacant posts currently in the sector (four of the organisations sampled currently had eight or more posts vacant) and the subsequent reliance on bank and agency staff to fill vacant posts. Focus group participants recognised the need to secure additional funding in order to successfully attract staff to work in this challenging sector by offering fair pay and improved terms and conditions which adequately align to the challenging nature of the work involved. Some participants also felt that the true nature of the role needs to be better communicated, in order to better prepare new staff for the role they are undertaking.

8.2.4 Professionalisation

Related to the poor investment in the sector is the lack of professionalisation of the careers and staff working within this sector. Although (as the surveys indicate) many people come to this sector with previous qualifications, it is also recognised in the focus group data that the sector does not benefit from bespoke training or qualifications, which will adequately prepare staff for their work. Rather, staff members tend to enter the sector with more generic health and social care training and qualifications. It was also recognised that for some, working in this sector was a stepping-stone to other employment opportunities. Furthermore, training opportunities whilst in post and career progression opportunities were also recognised as a potential area for improvement.

8.2.5 Practice Recommendations

The results of this report point to the following recommendations:

- Ts & Cs and remuneration packages of staff employed in the homelessness sector should be reviewed. Research should be undertaken to benchmark against other skilled services, as well as to the statutory services;
- Whilst some variability in Ts & Cs across the sector and between different organisations should be expected, the implementation of a standardised baseline remuneration package is recommended, which organisations can further supplement or enhance.
- The current financial and operating model should be revised with investment focussed on current staff and the reliance on agency staff reduced;

- Professionalise the sector, and consider the training pathways and professional development of staff employed;
- Dedicate activity to enhance staffing levels across the sector, with targeted recruitment activity (facilitated with improved Ts & Cs);
- Improve PR and communication to better explain to future employees (and the broader society more generally) what a role in the homelessness sector actually entails.

8.3 Social: External factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the work

There were several external factors that were recognised in this research as further exacerbating the challenges experienced by the staff in the homelessness sector and which ultimately threaten the sustainability of the sector. That is, the ever-evolving complexity of the needs with which service users present and the exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

8.3.1 Complex needs of service users

The social, emotional, psychological, and medical needs of the service users was one of the most commonly cited challenges expressed by the research participants. The organisational survey highlights that the complex needs of the clients were amongst the top 3 commonly cited challenges experienced in the sector. This is explained further by the qualitative data, which highlights how the nature of the role has become more challenging over recent years.

For example, the complexity of issues experienced by service users was highlighted, in particular the rise in mental health challenges, the prevalence of psychosis, the trauma experienced, and related self-harm and suicide attempts were all recognised as being much more commonly presented in service users nowadays. Additionally, staff also discussed the abuse and aggression they face in their day-to-day dealings with service users. The result of which has a subsequent impact on staff's own mental health and sickness.

8.3.2 Covid

The exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic was clearly articulated throughout the research process. The pandemic further stretched an already stretched workforce, extended staff roles and responsibilities, and whilst services continued to operate in the most challenging of circumstances, the cost to staff wellbeing and health was strongly recognised.

8.3.3 Social Recommendations

Whilst these external factors are beyond the control of the sector or policy makers, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Additional research aimed at exploring service users' responses to the staffing challenges within the sector. Their voice (whilst not the remit of this research) is notably absent from this report. The authors suggest that it is imperative that further research is conducted to explore their perspectives and experiences of availing of homelessness services in light of all the challenges highlighted in this report.

- Greater investment, enhanced funding, subsequent improved staffing levels, and further professionalisation and enhanced bespoke training of sector staff would better equip the sector to adequately support the service users presenting with these ever increasing complex and challenging needs.

8.4 Psychological and Staff wellbeing

The psychological wellbeing of the staff employed in the sector is a crucial consideration. This research points to the severely detrimental impact working in this sector can have on its employees and, as such, points to necessary actions to protect wellbeing for the sake of the employees and that of the success and sustainability of the sector.

8.4.1 Burnout

The staff survey demonstrates that a large proportion (54%) of staff sampled cited stress amongst the top cited factors that employees do not like about their job. Additionally, throughout the focus groups, issues of burnout, stress and exhaustion were recognised. It appears that the poor wellbeing of staff is exacerbated by a number of factors:

- The ever-increasing challenge of the work environment (complex needs of service users, abuse etc.);
- The lack of time for staff to look after themselves;
- Poor formal mental health support - whilst informal care between staff members was highly regarded, the data suggests there is further scope for formal support structures to better care for the mental wellbeing of staff in the sector;
- Inadequate sick leave and holiday entitlement.

8.4.2 Staff Wellbeing Recommendations

This research points to the need to better support all staff working in the homelessness sector in NI. Whilst further research into support packages afforded to staff in other sectors would be beneficial, in the immediate term, staff wellbeing could be improved with additional funding and investment, e.g., by providing:

- Adequate sick leave so that staff can properly recuperate from any illness encountered whilst working in the sector;
- Enhanced holiday entitlement to allow staff to better look after their own mental health and wellbeing with much needed downtime and rest;
- Freely available and professional mental health support for all staff who require such services;
- Opportunities to further strengthen the existing strong staff relationships and support networks, e.g., via funded staff away days and wellbeing events.

8.5 Buffers: Intrinsic motivation and vocation

All of the above are issues that are reducing job satisfaction amongst staff working in the sector. However, the impact of these factors appears to be mitigated by several intrinsic rewards and motivations encouraging people to join or remain working in the sector. The apparent strongest of these intrinsic motivators is an individual's vocational drive and commitment to improve the lives of those less fortunate within their communities. The staff survey highlighted that 84% of respondents recognised that the ability to make a difference in people's lives as one of the top factors that they liked about their job. This was supported in the focus group data where one of the main reasons offered was an altruistic motivation to help or to make a difference in other people's lives, whereby work in this sector was often considered vocational.

Indeed, there was a perception that the sector was continuing to operate due to the vocational sense and commitment of the staff in post, who ultimately can afford to 'sacrifice' certain things, such as fair pay and competitive terms and conditions. Additional factors buffering against the challenges and promoting staff satisfaction were the relationships staff had cultivated with their colleagues and indeed the service users themselves. This points to the strength, commitment, passion and real value of the people involved in the homelessness sector. If harnessed and adequately resourced and remunerated, the staff in this sector could stabilise the sector and contribute greatly to its success.

8.6 Service delivery: Impact and sustainability

Each of the issues presented above represent a key challenge facing the homelessness sector today. Individually they each pose a real and valid threat, cumulatively, they have the potential to collapse the sector entirely. The research participants recognised the inevitable and detrimental impact on service delivery, service users, and the sustainability of the service provision currently offered. Numerous examples were provided of how each of these challenges poses real threats to day-to-day service delivery. For example, due to high staff turnover and reliance on agency staff, the detrimental impact on support worker- client relationships was strongly recognised, the result of which could have devastating impacts on the service users. Research participants recognised the detrimental impact on current services, as well as their concerns and frustrations regarding their capacity to address societal need with additional service provision or indeed the return to pre-Covid levels of service delivery.

Overall, the evidence presented paints the picture of an extremely vulnerable sector, requiring immediate recognition, investment and support if it is to continue to offer the much-needed services it delivers:

'The message is this, they need to evaluate and cost what it is going to cost the statutory sectors if the voluntary sector, the third sector ... if they are not going to be there to provide the services and take the pressure off the statutory services, what is the cost going to be? ... I think the voluntary sector is exhausted...it is at the verge of collapse.' (Management FG)

9.0 Advisory Group

The members of the Advisory Group for this research were as follows:

Name	Organisation
Deirdre Canavan	Depaul Ireland
Eileen Best	First Housing Aid and Support Services
Nigel McKinney	Homeless Connect
Nicola McCrudden	Homeless Connect
Colin McCloy	NIHE
Andrea McCooke	Simon Community NI
Karen McAllister	Simon Community NI

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Homeless Connect
Units 2-4 | Building 14 |
Central Park | Mallusk | BT36 4FS

homelessconnect.org

Housing
Executive

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