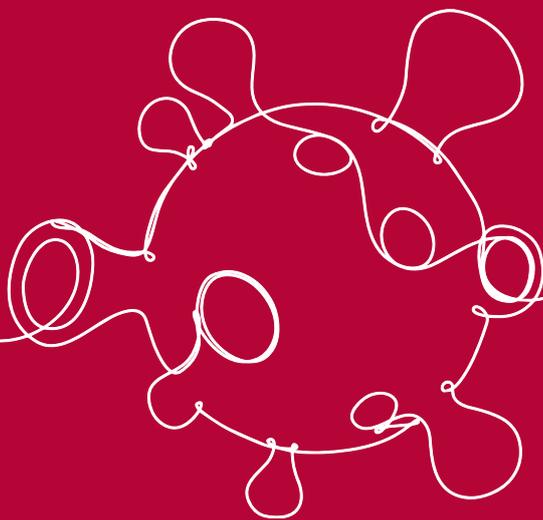


# Lessons from the Frontline #2

## Changes to the Work Environment Post-Lockdown

September 2021



# The Frontline Network Wales

The Frontline Network Wales is delivered by Cymorth Cymru in partnership with the St Martin's Frontline Network. It aims to give frontline staff working with people experiencing homelessness in the voluntary, statutory and public sectors and those in housing support roles in Wales, an opportunity to share their views and experiences, to make their voices heard and influence policy and practice.

Established in late 2020, in the middle of a global pandemic, the Frontline Network Wales has delivered an online launch event, which gave frontline workers the an opportunity to ask questions of the Minister for Housing and Local Government. Following this event, which was attended by nearly 200 people, we made plans were made to establish a series of regional online meetings.

Given the regional footprint for the Housing Support Grant, it was decided that Wales Frontline Network Wales meetings would also be held using these pre-existing regional divisions: Cwm Taf Morgannwg, Gwent, Mid and West Wales, North Wales, Vale and Cardiff, and West Glamorgan. This report has been written following the second round of these meetings.

## About Cymorth Cymru

**Cymorth Cymru** is the representative body for providers of homelessness, housing and support services in Wales.

Our members provide a wide range of services that support people to overcome tough times, rebuild their confidence and live independently in their own homes. This includes people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, young people and care leavers, older people, people fleeing violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence, people living with a learning disability, people experiencing mental health problems, people with substance misuse issues and many more.

We act as the voice of the sector, influencing the development and implementation of policy, legislation and practice that affects our members and the people they support. We are committed to working with people who use services, our members and partners to effect change. We believe that together, we can have a greater impact on people's lives.

We want to be part of a social movement that ends homelessness and creates a Wales where everyone can live safely and independently in their own homes and thrive in their communities.

## About the Frontline Network

The **Frontline Network** works at both a national and a local level across the UK to support and empower frontline staff working in the public, statutory and voluntary sectors with people experiencing homelessness.

At a local level; since 2017, we have been working with Partner organisations across the UK. Our Partners have helped us to build the Frontline Network's work at a local level, by facilitating their Local Network activities that regularly bring together frontline workers. Our Partners provide;

- Opportunities for frontline workers to regularly come together in their areas – to network, share experiences and expertise
- The potential to explore solutions to key issues affecting staff and people they are supporting
- Links between the frontline voice and decision-makers.

At a National level the Frontline Network aims to build relationships, share best practice, develop solutions, and communicate the experience and views of frontline workers across the UK. We offer **funding, community** and **resources** to provide opportunities for staff to come together and share their experiences and expertise and support work practice. We connect people through our **annual** and **regional** conferences and events and provide opportunities for staff to have their say through our **Annual Frontline Worker Survey**.

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# Introduction

**Following on from the success of the first round of regional meet-ups and the publication of the accompanying report looking at *Staff health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic*, this report considers changes to the work environment post-lockdown.**

For most frontline workers, the nature of the crisis meant that entering lockdown and changes to service delivery were abrupt and there was little time for consultation. However, we have an opportunity to ensure that the next transition is more planned and co-produced with both frontline staff and people using services.

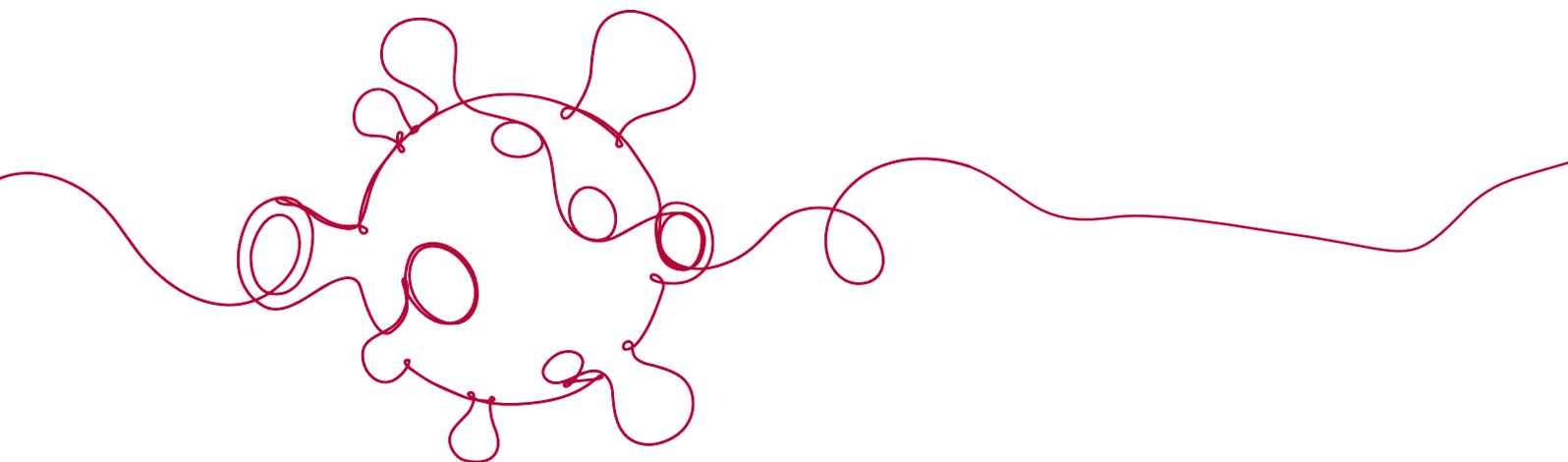
Whilst acknowledging that a return to pre-Covid 'normality' is highly unlikely, it is important to have conversations with staff about some of the challenges ahead. Likewise, over a year of working from home or partly at home means that new, positive ways of working have been developed and ought to continue in the future.

Frontline housing and homelessness workers continue to face significant challenges in their day-to-day work, whilst earning a relatively low wage. We know that the last year has been tough for many, and that the huge numbers of people in need of homes and support mean that the next year will be equally as challenging. Some of the risks of Covid have not fully disappeared, and housing and homelessness staff must be protected. They should also have a voice in deciding how to return to some sort of 'normality' with increased face-to-face support and work in an office environment.

This report sets out to capture the opinions of frontline workers across Wales regarding their views on changes to the work environment post-lockdown. It also puts forward a number of recommendations for the Welsh Government, commissioners, and service providers.



**Gareth Lynn Montes**  
**Research Officer, Cymorth Cymru**



# Methodology and Approach

A series of online regional 'meet-ups' were held between April 21st and May 6th. These were announced through Cymorth Cymru's mailing list, communications with Cymorth members and on the Frontline Network website.

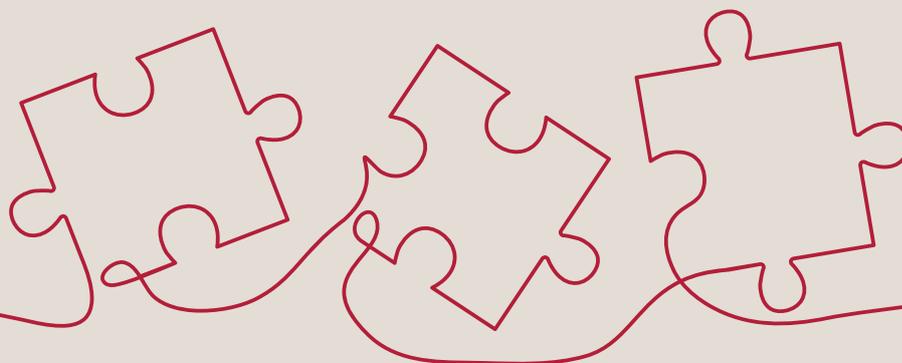
In total, just over 50 frontline workers from the six regions of Wales attended the meet-ups. These are: Cwm Taf Morgannwg, Gwent, Mid and West Wales, North Wales, Vale and Cardiff, and West Glamorgan. There was also a variety of organisations represented and different roles within very distinct types of services.

Whilst quite informal, there were a number of questions presented to the Network attendees:

- With the lifting of restrictions and the gradual reopening of shops and businesses, how do you feel personally and about your work?
- Have your organisations started talking about returning to work in an office environment?
- Have you been involved in decisions about returning to the office/working patterns? Have you been consulted or considered? If not, would you have liked to have been?
- What lessons from the last year of working online/part-online would you want to take on board once we return to normality?
- In terms of working arrangements, what would you prefer: working from home, working from an office, or a hybrid model?
- Would you prefer to have more flexible working hours moving forward?

This report is focused around the themes which emerged from the responses to the questions. Frequently, these were not just limited to one particular question. For instance, flexibility was something that was mentioned as a lesson from the previous year, but also as something that is being considered in the return to work in office environments.

All responses have been anonymised and those in attendance were assured that this would be the case. Similarly, the names of organisations and any mentions of places have been kept to a bare minimum.



# Return to the Office – A Mixed Story

It is worth establishing that while for the majority of the working population of Wales the norm has been working from home since March 2020, many frontline workers have not had that opportunity. Many frontline workers in accommodation-based schemes have had to remain on-site throughout, whilst others have continued to deliver face-to-face support in the community, even if at a reduced capacity, whilst still exposing themselves to considerable risks. For these frontline workers, conversations about returning to an office environment are alien. Likewise, so are some of the conversations about hybrid working models or flexible working hours.

Among workers who had previously been working from home, a rota system has been in place for those who have gone back to the office or were close to going back. Most offices do not have the capacity to accommodate all staff whilst still enforcing social distancing. Through a rota system, staff are allocated certain days to go in. These rotas are usually quite strict and create work bubbles to avoid the whole workforce needing to self-isolate if one worker contracts Covid. In the cases where this has been put into practice, frontline workers have found it reassuring, as it has enabled contact with colleagues but managed the risks. In addition, where it has been implemented there have been very strict cleaning guidance and procedures.

An aspect to consider when returning to work in the office are the anxieties or concerns of staff about doing so. As one frontline worker explained “this is my first week back in the office and it feels strange, I feel a bit penned in”. It’s clear that some frontline workers are anxious, which is understandable after working from home for so long.

A very good example of planning and communicating a gradual returning to work was in one organisation which developed and set out a plan that aligned with the Welsh Government’s Coronavirus Control Plan and timetable for vaccination. While the organisation could not predict timescales, it was able to align particular actions with the Welsh Government’s alert levels so that staff were able to understand what change would take effect when Ministers announced easing of restrictions. Nevertheless, a significant number of frontline workers still had no information regarding a return to the office. This left them feeling uncertain, anxious and frustrated.

## The benefits of returning to work in an office

Returning to work in the office has many advantages, some of which are highly valued by staff. In the words of one frontline worker “returning to the office is also important for staff for social interaction”. Using the knowledge gained in our previous report, we know that the lack of face-to-face social interaction with peers was something missed by frontline workers.

**“We’re a close knit team, we’ve been really excited to see each other again.”**

This is exemplified by another frontline worker reflecting “as a team we’ve been really disjointed, not having a manager around has been difficult, but we’re a close knit team, we’ve been really excited to see each other again”.

Some frontline workers have found it easier to engage face-to-face with service users since returning to the office.

## What has worked about the return to working in an office environment?

With the risks of Covid still a reality, anxieties about returning to work in an office environment remain. This is exemplified by one frontline worker who said “it is still a concern that people might be rushing to get back in the office”. To mitigate these anxieties, some approaches have been more successful than others. A frontline worker explained “initially I was concerned with how we were going to move forward, what would the company expect from us? But fortunately, our company have put a policy document together, it’s really positive, takes into account staff well-being and what they have been through”. This approach was also used elsewhere with risk plans in place.

# Consultation – Another Mixed Story

Frontline workers appreciated their employers taking them into consideration when planning a return to the office and would like to have a choice over their future work arrangements. In the words of one frontline worker “I would like to be asked and have views taken into account about the return to the office. We have regular team meetings where managers ask for feedback. They’ve set up a staff online forum which takes place every month where people can talk about various issues. That’s another way they’re gathering people’s views”.

**“I would like to be asked and have views taken into account about the return to the office.”**

From what has been learnt, in only about half the cases had some consultation taken place. In those where it had not, either because the decision had been taken unilaterally or no return had been planned yet, frontline workers had an overwhelming preference to being consulted.

Consultation has taken several forms. Some chose surveys or workshops. As explained by one frontline worker “[my] company put on workshops, to see how you are, touch base... don’t know if they’ve taken our comments, but assume so”.

For another frontline worker “we’ve had a comprehensive email to find out what staff are feeling about returning to work [in an office environment], like a risk assessment, but will be a blended approach, due to the dynamics of working from an office but with some elements of home working. I feel it is being done in a consultative way, having the connection back with the team will be really important”.

**“We’ve had a comprehensive email to find out what staff are feeling about returning to work.”**

In other cases, this process has gone through managers. A project manager at a static project, who carried a caseload, explained their consultation with staff “it’s important to make sure staff are involved and they know their opinions matter”. Reflecting on the role of managers, a frontline worker noted “[I would like my organisation to involve me in plans about returning to the office], and I don’t envy management because everyone has a different opinion, it’s important to feed in your views and for managers to consider them, but then what I want is for someone to make a decision”. Another view was “[I] don’t know if they are going to do it [changing the spacing in the office based on staff feedback], but managers do take things on board and our voices are heard, from grassroots up, it’s quite rewarding”.

**“It’s important to make sure staff are involved and they know their opinions matter.”**

As part of the consultation process, in some instances there was still plenty of flexibility offered. A frontline worker explained that “all of us were consulted, and some have chosen not to go back to the office. Ball has been in our court, which is really good. None of us are back full-time in the office, once a week and it’s up to us”.

Not all frontline workers have had such a positive experience though, as this testimony of a frontline worker is indicative of, “managers had a meeting and then staff were told [about returning to work in an office], so I emailed my manager and there was no checking if I was happy with it, just told I was going back to the office full time. We did have some consultation earlier, but not about being back in the office full-time”. The risk of no consultation is that staff do not feel valued or respected by their employer. Many frontline workers understood that managers need to make difficult decisions about the ‘new normal’, which may not please everyone, but they want to have the opportunity to contribute their views.

Consultation does not necessarily have to end at conversations about returning to work in an office environment or flexible working hours, but can extend to the planning of services. An example that emerged at the meet-ups was “we had an outreach service, but we’re now planning a new service and asking staff about how to plan new service delivery”.

# Flexibility – No Going Back

With the daunting challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of service delivery in a sector so reliant on face-to-face interaction and support, frontline workers have had to learn to adapt, with great success. With the slow return to work in office environments, there is no reason why some of these ways of working will change. This is best epitomised by one frontline worker's words "[there have been challenges], but I think we've all learned to work in a different way and I don't want to stop that".

## Hybrid working

A recurring theme for frontline workers at both our sets of meet-ups is that they want blended or hybrid working models to continue. Whilst so far in the gradual return to working in an office environment, these have been present to allow social distancing, using a rota system, this ought to go further into the future and not just for Covid reasons.

**"I've loved working from the house, I'm more efficient and get on with work and I have the freedom to go into the office when I have a case I need more support on."**

As one frontline worker put it "I've loved working from the house, I'm more efficient and get on with work and I have the freedom to go into the office when I have a case I need more support on". This was echoed by another "I'd like to do both [work from home and an office]. [It is] important for clients to see me face-to-face at times, but I like the freedom to choose when to do that".

The benefits of a hybrid working model are best put by this frontline worker "[flexibility] has been really refreshing. Working from home I found that I missed the little micro conversations with the instant answer that you get in an office, but I get more done at home and less travel, so the benefit of having a mixture of office and online would be good".

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In some of the instances when the idea of working from home every now and again came about it was to be more efficient, especially in tasks that did not directly involve support. An example from a frontline worker "[it is] good to have the peace to be able to write reports or do admin at home, rather than be in the office with others talking". This, as another frontline worker explained, extends to avoiding office distractions "[there are] lots of distractions in the office. [It is] hard to get paperwork done, so even if it's just a day at home to get paperwork done, it's really beneficial, it means [that] when I am in the office my service users get my full attention".

This also extends to well-being. Talking about their situation and reflecting on the last year, a frontline worker said "I like the idea of working from home and being able to have an admin day, get on with reports and things that need doing but also not to have to take a day off because I'm feeling flat and not able to give my best. The people I work with are in crisis [mode] all the time, so after this year I want to be able to choose to work from home some days".

A similar view was expressed by another frontline worker "[It can be draining to work with people who are in constant crisis, so it is] good for my well-being to be given the option to work from home on reports and admin". The experience of another frontline worker was "working from home has been so much better for my well-being. I can fit my life around work now, it's so much more rewarding. I've started a garden project, I'm growing things, which I've never done before. I'm going to get a rescue dog, I couldn't do that if I was in the office. I feel like I'm getting more out of life".

Unanimously, frontline workers also want a continued focus on staff health and well-being in the coming months and years.



In an era where the effects of changes to the environment have become more than apparent, this is something to consider for the future of flexible working, too. This was something that came up several times in the meet-ups, with frontline workers acknowledging their own environmental footprint and that with the flexibility of working from home, they would use their cars less. This extends to the price of fuel and commuting time, as one frontline worker put it “not having to commute to an office has saved people a fortune. I used to travel 40 minutes to get to an office before I even started work”.

Something to be considered is that when the pandemic started and staff had more time due to less face-to-face delivery and travelling, the amount of work increased. This was exemplified by a frontline worker who said “when working from home, caseloads went right up, couldn’t see how it would be possible to do that and travel when things open up again”. That same frontline worker explained that they were reassured by their organisation’s policy

**“When working from home, caseloads went right up, couldn’t see how it would be possible to do that and travel when things open up again.”**

offering flexibility allowing them to be able to complete all caseloads efficiently in a timely manner. However, caution should be exercised and both commissioners and service providers should ensure that frontline workers are not overloaded as they return to more face-to-face delivery.

## **Trust**

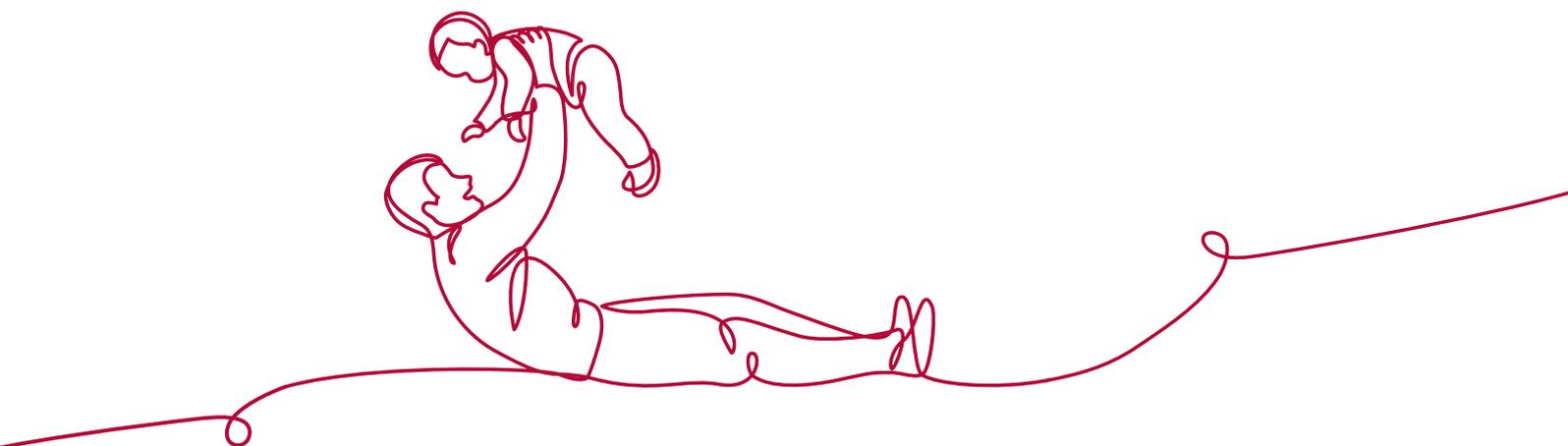
Prior to the pandemic, there was perhaps a cultural antagonism to the idea of working from home, a belief that staff would not be as productive, not do their work, or even take time off. Needless to say, this is certainly not exclusive to the sector. A frontline worker reflected, “I think what this whole pandemic has shown us is that we don’t need to be in an office all of the time. In the past there has been a lot of pressure to be in an office, but if you can have the space at home, you can work from home”.

On an individual level, some workers previously bought into these sentiments and never chose to work from home, even if they were offered the opportunity to do so. An example from a frontline worker talking about their experience of working from home for the first time was “we’ve always had the option to work from home but not all of us have tried it before, so it’s been interesting to see how much we can get done from home, and the biggest revelation is how much we can do with clients when we are not sat in their homes”.

**“I like to be trusted and use my own initiative and take responsibility for my own work.”**

In a year of working from home, some of these notions about lack of productivity have been challenged to their core. Some organisations have acknowledged it and changed, as one frontline worker put it “we’re allowed to manage our own time, because we’ve shown that we could still deliver services while at home”.

For another, “I’m fortunate, my organisation has always had a flexible approach to work hours, so we already had that freedom, and the organisation gets that back in loyalty, they have a good sickness policy and people are never sick. People don’t take advantage when you trust them”. This is echoed by another frontline worker “I don’t like being micromanaged. I like to be trusted and use my own initiative and take responsibility for my own work. I can ask for help if I need it”.



## Personal caring responsibilities

With schools closed on and off throughout the last year and a half, some frontline workers have been presented with the additional challenge of childcare and home-schooling.

This has been especially hard when both parents worked or for single parents. Whilst schools have reopened, childcare duties still persist. One frontline worker explained the situation over the last year and a half and reflected “I need to structure my working day around picking my child up. I start early and finish at 3pm. I would like to keep that as I don’t have anyone who can look after my child”.

**“I need to structure my working day around picking my child up. I start early and finish at 3pm. I would like to keep that.”**

It is important not to give preferential treatment to a specific group at the expense of others. A frontline worker explained “if there is any change and flexibility, it needs to be across the board, not just related to childcare, so that everyone is considered, not just parents”.

## Not the same for all

In spite of pleas from both the UK and the Welsh Governments for people to work from home, not everyone had that possibility. Some frontline workers within the sector were classed as key workers and had to remain in position throughout the period from March 2020. Most notably, this has affected care homes, supported accommodation or other types of static schemes. A frontline worker in the latter described having “had no time away from work. [We’ve] had to adapt to engage and support clients while being here 24 hours, while protecting us and them [the clients], so not seeing it as going back to work. We’ve just had to adapt all along and do constant risk assessments”.

There are perhaps some worries from some frontline workers moving forward. One frontline worker voiced concern that flexibility was “going to depend on the business needs, what you can do on one project you can’t do on another, so [it] might be different for an organisation to manage that for everyone, to make it fair, as some staff can be flexible but others might not be able to that because of their project”.

# Space and Connectivity

Whilst many easily adapted to working from home, it has not been so straightforward for some. On top of the aforementioned home-schooling and caring responsibilities, issues regarding physical space to do one's work from home, internet connection and technological literacy or confidence have made this change harder.

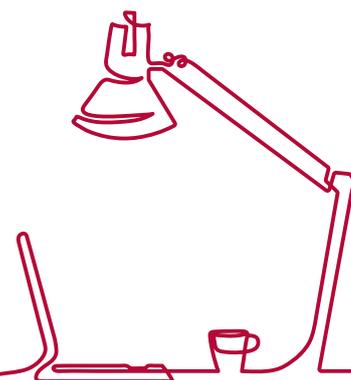
So, for some frontline workers, a return to the office is necessary, as this testimony demonstrates "I'm finding it a lot better, being able to go back to the office, because there's not much room at home". Another frontline worker spoke about cabin fever "the room starts to feel like your own private cell if you go from home life to work life at the same laptop". Speaking of those same home-work barriers, another frontline worker added "it can be challenging keeping your private space private. I've bought a screen to hide the bed when I'm on Teams".

In parts of Wales internet connectivity is not up to speed with the needs of working from home. Explaining their situation, a frontline worker said "I've been lone working since March last year. At first it was awful because I couldn't go anywhere and my signal was really bad. I actually moved house because my signal was so bad". Whilst this may be an extreme example, lack of access to a proper internet connection is detrimental for the effective delivery of services online. The same can be applied to phone signal for delivering phone support.

There is the worry that with the almost immediate shift to online working, many have not learned to use the skills but rather adapted. An example comes from one frontline worker "support workers need more training. Zoom and Teams. At the start it was difficult. If you weren't familiar with them it was very hard to get things done".

**"The room starts to feel like your own private cell if you go from home life to work life at the same laptop."**

**"Meetings like this, virtual is a lot easier than getting yourself somewhere and having to travel."**



## Online interactions and partnerships

One of the biggest successes of the pandemic has been the ability of different agencies to work together online in ways they had not done before. Referring to one of the Frontline Network Wales online meet-ups, a frontline worker said "things like this Zoom meeting, these meetings are very good. They don't take up too much of your day, you don't have to get in the car, ready to go, this is much better". Highlighting the benefits of meetings like the Frontline Network Wales meet-ups, another frontline worker expressed "meetings like this, virtual is a lot easier than getting yourself somewhere and having to travel. There are more bums on seats in meetings, more cross-sector working. I've been on training courses with people from other areas of Wales, which has been great".

Perhaps this ability to reach across agencies and localities has changed some prior perceptions. According to one frontline worker "partnership working pre-Covid was great, but [during the pandemic] everyone has really pulled out the stops to help who they can with whatever they have. [For] meetings [you] don't have to get in a car, no need to do that now, still get the same outcome by having meetings online. Different agencies have worked better together, [I] didn't realise how well we could do until Covid, so [I] want to carry that forward".

Whilst this is true, it also poses its own challenges, especially in the reduction of small office conversations. A frontline worker explained “sometimes in the office where there’s a few of us you’d be able to easily ask ‘what’s the phone number for so and so, or what do we do with this issue’. Or you’d be able to say to a colleague that you’ve just had a really difficult conversation and you’d be able to offload. But we’ve used MS Teams chat function to ask questions and people will answer when they have time. But you do miss the office banter and offloading. It’s also difficult to hear people on Teams when lots of people are talking [it is] not like having a group chat in person”.

**“But you do miss the office banter and offloading. It’s also difficult to hear people on Teams when lots of people are talking.”**

Throughout the sector there have been issues regarding the delivery of and participation in training. In the experience of one frontline worker “we’ve found training difficult online, [it is] not suitable for everyone. Sometimes you are expected to be online all day and it’s difficult to concentrate, so I would like to go back to in-person training”.

### **Online service delivery**

Similarly, the delivery of services online or via phone has had positives and negatives. For the former, one frontline worker reflected “[a] massive learning curve for me is that some young people actually like to do things like this [online]. They are more comfortable like this rather than face-to-face because they are used to it. It does work and it engages them and it has opened doors that haven’t been opened before”.

**“They are more comfortable like this rather than face-to-face because they are used to it. It does work and it engages them and it has opened doors that haven’t been opened before.”**

Another example from a different frontline worker was “we set up a WhatsApp group for members, and some people who had never engaged before are really engaged now. They are now running it themselves, so we need to reflect on the positive learning from the pandemic”. They then added “one person who had never engaged before has become the sort of mother of the WhatsApp group”. A frontline worker also explained that “support work is more focused via phone”.

**“We set up a WhatsApp group for members, and some people who had never engaged before are really engaged now.”**

Yet, barriers do exist. According to one frontline worker “a lot of our service users haven’t got any up-to-date phone, so they can’t get access to online meetings. They haven’t got access to smartphone, tablet or computer”. While some organisations were able to purchase smartphones for people using services and install wifi at projects, others continued to face barriers. Talking about their experience, according to one frontline worker “some parts of our services have struggled, in terms of engaging members with activities, and we tried to help by providing people with technology, but not everyone has the skills or confidence to use the technology. It’s been easier for staff more than members, but then staff become fatigued after providing all the online activities”.

Over the last year and a half, this has had an unprecedented impact for some service users who depended on their support workers or the place they received support for internet access. This was put forward by one frontline worker “[internet] is a massive barrier for some people. They can’t access their Universal Credit log in and that can have a big impact on their mental health”.



# Starting a Job During a Pandemic

Working in Covid conditions has been especially hard for people starting a new job, not just for those starting completely new in the sector, but even for those taking new roles in the same organisation.

Speaking of their situation, a frontline worker said “I found starting a new job during the pandemic was really hard. Had to make a real effort to contact people, [I] missed those coincidental conversations, so my progress has been slower. It’s been really frustrating not to be able to meet people. It’s made it difficult to build a relationship with the people we support”.

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Speaking about new staff and the value of working in an office, a frontline worker explained “I’d like to be able to do some time in the office. It is needed for peer support and for the training of new members of staff. We’ve made it work, but it’s been a struggle for new staff”. Another one also said “it’s been a disadvantage for new staff. It’s been difficult for them not to be able to shadow, and learning how to do the paperwork over the phone is not easy, and not being able to ask questions in person is difficult”.

It is possible that those who have started working at their specific roles throughout the pandemic are more reluctant to the idea of returning to the office. A frontline worker speculated “some of the team have joined in lockdown, so they have only known working from home for us [the organisation] and are reluctant to come into the office because they don’t know what it was like before, whereas others who used to be in the office want to get back to the office”. Another added “people who started in lockdown are really nervous, so we’re trying to ease people in”.



# Remaining Challenges

## Recommencing communal activities

A topic which kept coming up in the meet-ups was the lack of clarity around guidelines for reopening. Some activities which are key to engaging with service users have not been able to take place due to lack of clarity regarding guidance. At the meet-ups, several frontline workers complained about this. One said “[it is] hard to engage with young people in services that are remote, but in terms of guidance, we need to know what is acceptable? We used to have a choir, can we still do that? Clarity is very much needed”. Another frontline worker complained “we haven’t done any activities recently. We used to do coffee mornings and craft sessions. And there is no road map for that, but we have done some house activities, painting and cooking, so we do need further guidance”. A frontline worker concluded that “maybe people [in support] haven’t been learning the skills they need to have during lockdown”.

Some frontline workers feel the guidance makes no sense. In the case of a hostel with 25 residents, they are not allowed to open the communal areas but the residents are expected to use the same small kitchen and toilets. In the hostel, residents have to stay indoors in their rooms, leading to boredom and an increase in overdose risks according to one substance misuse frontline worker. The frontline worker then added “we feel in the dark on what can be done, we have to increase check-ins, which is time consuming. Clients miss workshops but we haven’t got any advice on what we can do. The good weather has meant we can do greenhouse work outside, but some schemes don’t have that. Poor mental health has escalated, I think we’re going to see a backlash soon”. There’s a frustration at how even within the same local authorities, some schemes can open communal areas and others cannot.

**“Clients miss workshops but we haven’t got any advice on what we can do.”**

## Working together

Additional problems arise when working with other agencies which are not allowing their staff to meet people using or delivering services in person. This can have a detrimental effect on people in support. One frontline worker explained “the new kind of normal is much better, we’re back in, but the difficulty is getting other organisations [e.g. those providing mental health support] to come to the centre”.

**“The new kind of normal is much better, we’re back in, but the difficulty is getting other organisations to come to the centre.”**

One barrier to returning to work in offices is where the projects are co-locating with other organisations or agents. For example, in cases where projects were based within local authority buildings, approval for a return to work in offices depended on the local authority and frontline workers did not seem to have much of a say. Another example is with organisations which work with the police and are based in police stations, where the conversation about returning to offices has not occurred and again there has been no consultation.

Talking about their engagement with schools, one frontline worker said “[I’ve] found it difficult working with schools. We’ve all had the two vaccines but most schools don’t want us back in due to the fears about the risk”.



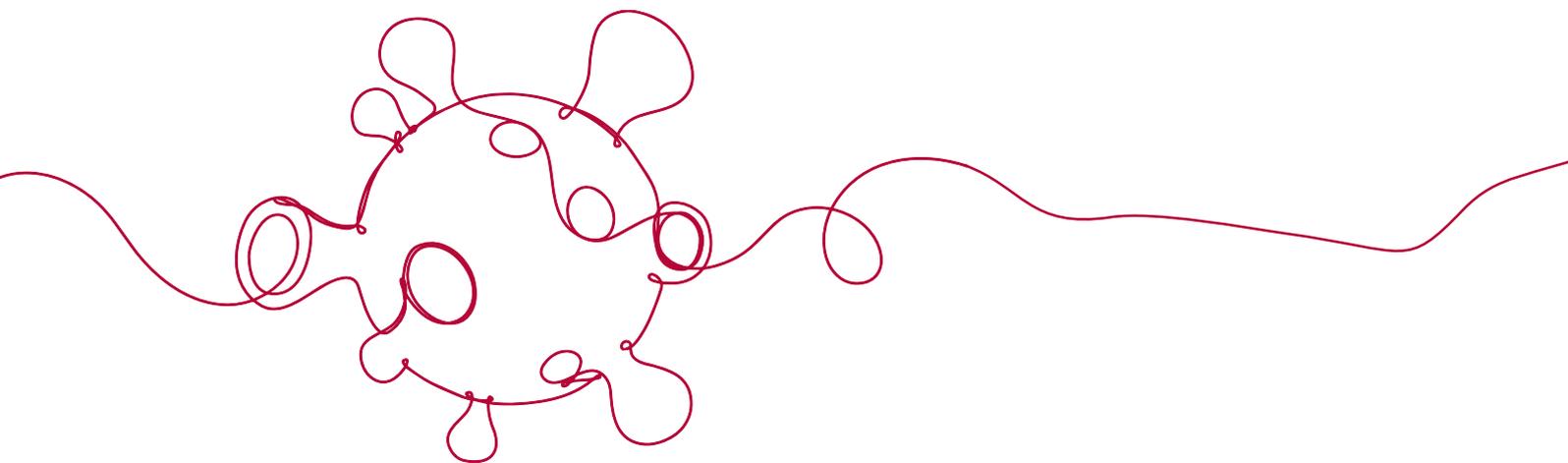
## Testing and vaccines

A potential problem to address is the number of unvaccinated frontline workers and service users. Considering some of the anxieties this entailed, a frontline worker explained “the majority of the team have had the vaccine, but some have chosen not to have it, and some of the [service] users are mixing and going into each other’s houses. So it’s nerve racking for the team, for the ones that have had the vaccine and the ones that haven’t, and for our families”. Speaking of their experience, another frontline worker said “when we go to temporary accommodation, a lot of people don’t follow the guidelines, they don’t social distance, it’s been a concern. I’ve only had one vaccine and I need to be careful with members of my family, so there are situations where we are putting ourselves out there and at risk”.

**“It’s nerve racking for the team, for the ones that have had the vaccine and the ones that haven’t, and for our families.”**

With vaccine rollout having been extended in Wales, by the time this report is published everyone over the age of 18 will have been offered the first dose of the vaccine and the number of frontline workers without the second vaccine will be very low. However, questions remain about how to manage situations where people delivering and using services have decided not to take up the vaccine. Frontline workers are keen to protect themselves and the people they support, and are unsure how the risks posed by unvaccinated people will be managed as restrictions ease.

There was some hesitance about continued testing and the sometimes mandatory nature of it, though for others it is only optional. A frontline worker said “I’ve just come from a staff meeting where staff have been told we need to take Lateral Flow tests twice a week, and I’m not keen on it, the tests are not nice to do. [I have] been told it is mandatory. If based at home, why do we need to do the tests? It seems pointless unless you are working in the community”. Weighing in on the discussion, another frontline worker added “at some point we are going to have to bring it [testing] to a close, this can’t go on indefinitely, we are going to have to get some sort of normality. I’m willing to have the tests, but don’t see how we can keep doing tests long term”. Seeing the positives of testing, one frontline worker commented “I’ve had both vaccines, but if we return to face-to-face support, I’m aware that I could still catch Covid and pass it on to someone vulnerable, and the Lateral Flow test can play a big part in dealing with that”.



# Recommendations

1. **Service providers** to pro-actively engage with frontline workers to understand their views about the post-lockdown work environment; publish and clearly communicate their plans; and ensure that managers and leaders are available to listen to concerns or answer questions.
2. **Service providers** to facilitate opportunities for face-to-face interaction between frontline workers, particularly for those who may have become isolated during the pandemic, while maintaining infection prevention protocols and provision of PPE.
3. **Service providers** to enable hybrid working where appropriate, enabling staff to work from home when engaged in activities such as administrative tasks and report writing.
4. **Service providers** to maintain the culture of trust developed during the pandemic and enable flexible working for staff wherever appropriate to support a positive work/life balance.
5. **Service providers** to enable staff who face barriers to working from home, such as lack of space, internet connectivity issues, to have access to a Covid-safe place to work
6. **Commissioners** and **service providers** to ensure that frontline workers' caseloads are not too high when they return to face-to-face support delivery.
7. **Service providers** to provide ongoing training to develop digital confidence and skills among staff, consider how maintaining an aspect of digital support delivery can benefit people using services, and consider the appropriate balance of digital and face-to-face meetings to maximise people's time but maintain in-person social contact.
8. **Service providers** to consider how induction of new staff can be delivered more effectively when people are working from home, and how to provide additional support to staff who started their roles during the pandemic and may feel disconnected from the organisation.
9. **Commissioners** and **public service partners** to work with service providers to provide clarity about post-lockdown working arrangements for frontline workers who are co-located with other public services.
10. **Welsh Government** and **Public Health Wales** to provide appropriate guidance to enable service providers to balance the need to manage risk and maintain client wellbeing as restrictions ease.
11. **Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, commissioners** and **service providers** to consider and provide guidance about how services should manage risk of unvaccinated staff and people using services.
12. **Welsh Government** and **Public Health Wales** to consider and provide guidance about utilising testing as restrictions ease and in circumstances where vaccination rates increase.

\* Service providers = local authority, housing association or third sector support provider which employs frontline homelessness and/or housing support workers