

Lessons from the Frontline #1

Staff health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

May 2021



The Frontline Network Wales

The Frontline Network Wales is delivered by Cymorth Cymru in partnership with the Frontline Network. It aims to give frontline homelessness and housing support workers in Wales the opportunity to share their views and experiences, make their voices heard and influence policy and practice.

Established in late 2020, in the middle of a global pandemic, the Network held an online launch event, which gave frontline workers the 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 to establish a series of regional online meetings.

Given the regional footprint for the Housing Support Grant, it was decided that Wales Frontline Network 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 first round of these meetings.

About Cymorth Cymru

www.cymorthcymru.org.uk

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.

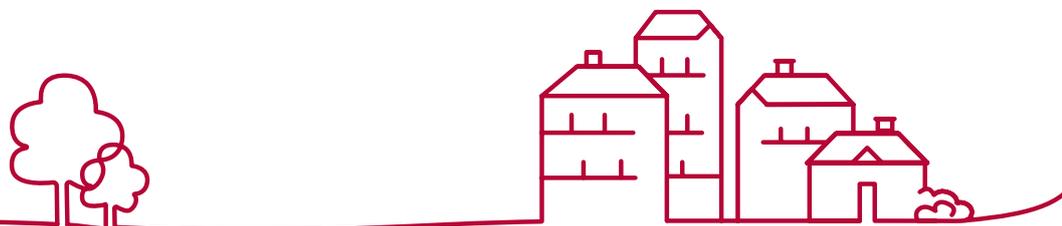
We want to be part of a social movement that ends homelessness and creates a Wales where everyone can live safely and independently in their own homes and thrive in their communities.

About the Frontline Network

frontlinenetwork.org.uk

The Frontline Network aims to build relationships, share best practice, develop solutions, and communicate the experience and views of frontline staff working with people experiencing homelessness.

Since 2016, the Frontline Network has been working with partner organisations across the UK to provide opportunities for frontline workers to regularly come together in their areas, to network, share experiences and expertise. These partnerships also explore solutions to key issues affecting staff and the people they support, and create important links between the frontline voice and decision-makers.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented stresses on society, including the delivery of homelessness and housing support services. In Wales, thousands of people were provided with emergency accommodation and support, with local authorities, housing associations and third sector support providers working together to utilise all available resources and staff capacity. Support workers also continued to support the thousands of people who were already in supported accommodation, keeping them safe and supporting their mental well-being.

Classed as essential workers, many frontline workers have been expected to continue delivering face-to-face support, putting themselves and their families at increased risk of catching COVID-19. Those who have been providing phone and online support have also been under huge stress, continuing to deal with trauma, while being isolated from their colleagues with fewer opportunities to mentally unload.

In light of these challenges, we believe it more important than ever to listen to frontline workers and ensure that their views are heard by decision makers.

This report is a study into the experiences of frontline workers working in homelessness and housing support services during the period March 2020 to March 2021, a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

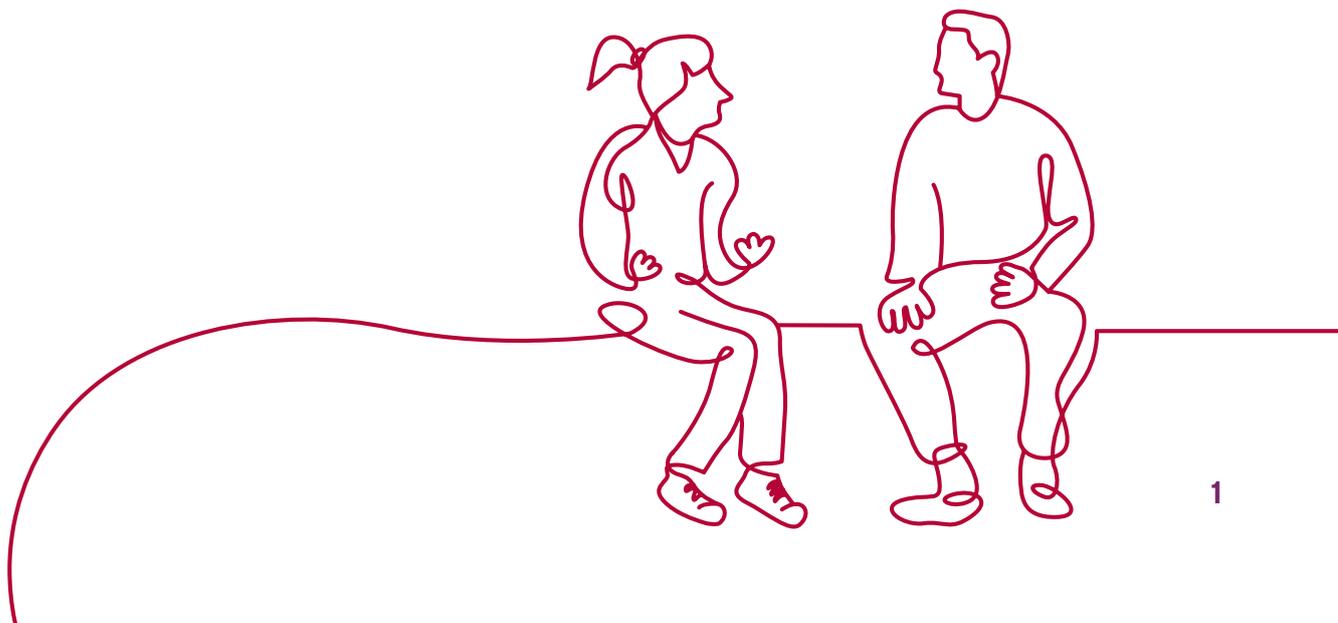
Using a mixed-methods approach, the report largely focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the way homelessness and housing support frontline workers have worked, the support they have received from the organisations they work for and what support they wish had been available to them. Whilst not a fully representative study, it does offer some insight into their experiences, and outlines what, in their view, have been the most successful measures in supporting them with their health and well-being during the most difficult of times.

Based on the feedback from frontline workers, we have made a series of recommendations for the Welsh Government, commissioners and employers.

We would like to thank all of the frontline workers who took part in the meetings, contributed their views and experiences, and helped to shape this report.



Gareth Lynn Montes
Research Officer, Cymorth Cymru



Methodology and approach

A series of online regional 'meet-ups' were held between March 15th and March 23rd 2021. These were advertised through Cymorth Cymru's mailing list, communications with Cymorth members and on the Frontline Network website.

In total, 50 frontline workers from the six regions of Wales attended the meet-ups.

The main topics of discussion were:

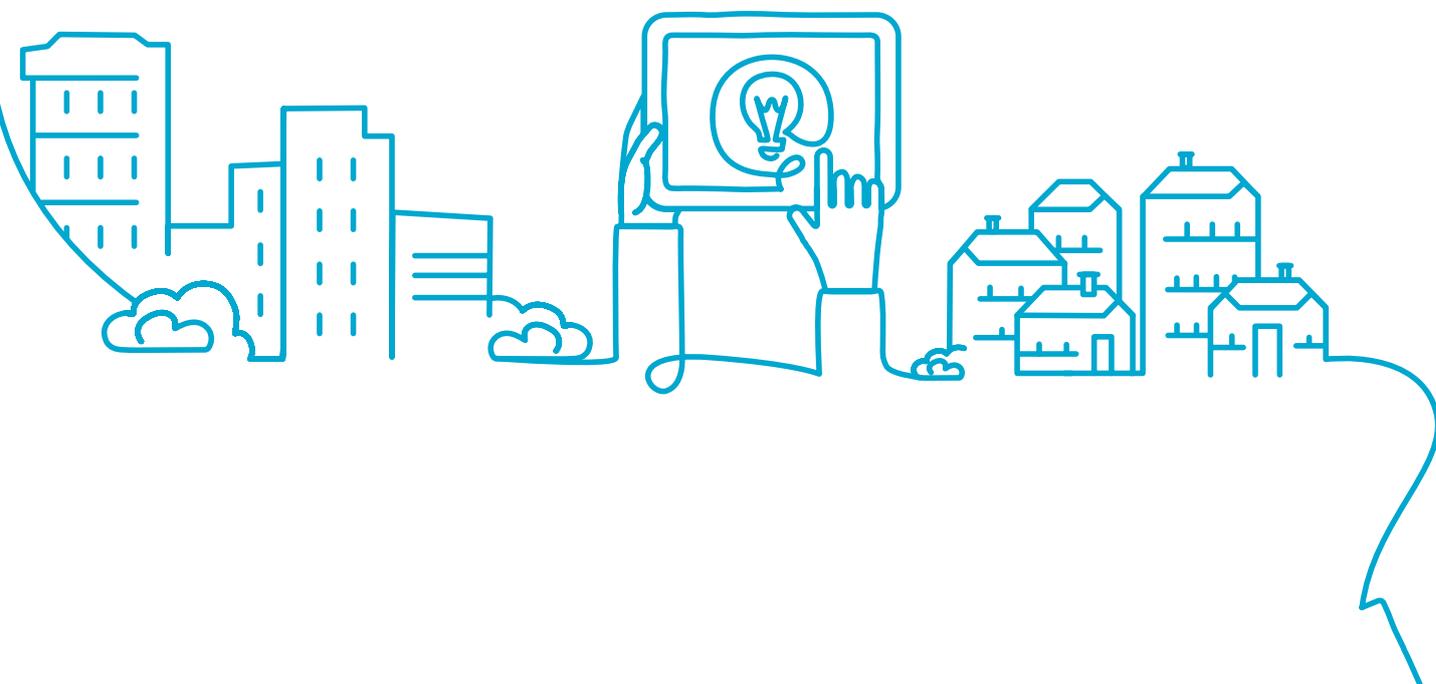
- How are you feeling? A year into the pandemic, does it feel any different?
- Were there any special measures put in place in the organization you work for to support and help with mental health and well-being at the beginning of the pandemic?
- Would you have wanted any additional support?
- Would you want this support to continue once the pandemic is over? How has Covid impacted the way you work directly?

Depending on the responses, several follow-up questions were asked. These included access to vaccines or whether the amount of support received from the organisations they work for has been continuous or fluctuated.

In addition, a series of free events for frontline workers were held during Cymorth's annual conference in March 2021. The second of these was used to present some of the emerging findings from the regional meet-ups. It was also a chance to gather more feedback, asking the attendees if the experiences presented reflected their own. Additionally, a series of polls asking similar questions were made available throughout the presentation for the frontline workers in attendance to respond to anonymously.

This report will take each of the five main areas discussed and dedicate a section to each, with some of the additional questions and polling results covered in the section which is the most similar. All responses have been anonymised and those in attendance were reassured that this would be the case.

This chosen mixed methods approach means that some of the limitations of the online meet-ups are lessened. Despite the assurances of anonymity, some of the frontline workers may have felt a little more hesitant in sharing their experiences with complete strangers. With the use of anonymous polls, these limitations are mitigated.



How are you feeling?

The first discussion focused on a broad question about how people were feeling at the time and whether this was any different compared to how they were feeling at the beginning of the pandemic.

A general feeling was that it felt like 'Groundhog Day', making reference to the 1993 film directed by Harold Ramis and starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. There were several instances of frontline workers expressing being "fed up to the back teeth" and highlighting how the pandemic "doesn't feel different anymore".

This extends to feelings of loneliness and isolation due to working from home and no longer benefiting from the social interaction with colleagues in an office. The pandemic has also seen fluctuating motivation. A response that encapsulates the general feeling of the workforce is "it's stressful, it does take its toll, even if we like to pretend otherwise".

"it's stressful, it does take its toll, even if we like to pretend otherwise"

Frontline workers highlighted a difference in their initial reaction to the pandemic compared to the feeling as the months progressed. Initially, a large part of the staff were panicked, scared and stressed due to the unknowns of the virus. However, there was also a 'can-do' attitude expressed by many. One frontline worker responded "when it started, it all felt very new, we didn't know what to do, but we've got into the swing [of it]". Similarly, another frontline worker explained "when we first went into lockdown last March, it was all panic, then [we] got used to it". Some frontline workers mentioned vaccines and the prospect of going back to the office as a continued source of stress.

Online working

The full or partial move online has had its effect on how frontline workers feel about the way they deliver services. To continue to deliver support, many visits have been reduced to telephone conversations or video calls, with mixed results. Whilst some, especially older clients, have struggled to adapt, according to one support worker, "some clients have bought into telephone support, more than they would have if it had been face-to-face". This was echoed by other frontline workers, finding that some clients became more independent as a result of the reduced face-to-face contact, doing things, such as phoning the utility companies, which they would probably not have done before. It is important to note that homelessness and housing services do not just aim to prevent homelessness, but also to promote independence.

Despite the positive outcomes, a general feeling among support workers is that they preferred face-to-face contact with the people they support. One support worker explained that their main role was going out to see people and that phone or video call support is not what they signed up for. A similar view was expressed by another frontline worker saying that "[the] team [have] adapted well, but working from home and doing support over the phone is not the same, it's not as rewarding, it's not human contact".

Thinking about the crucial relationships built between support workers and people in support, one support worker reflected "we spend so much time building up relationships with clients in everything we do", adding that "a big part of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) is about those relationships with residents", before concluding that the lack of face-to-face support "feels like a step back" and that they wanted to get back to face-to-face support. Non-face-to-face support means that without seeing people's environments, support workers are unable to see the non-verbal clues about the issues of the people they support, as for example, where they are with their mental health. Another issue presented by the lack of face-to-face support is that support workers are unable to speak on behalf of their clients, meaning that people in support have to phone utility companies, local authorities, etcetera, themselves, with, in the opinion of a frontline worker, "everything taking longer".

Challenges

An issue highlighted by some frontline workers was the challenges presented by delivering support to clients who did not adhere to social distancing, staying at home, mask wearing or socialising restrictions. In spite of this, there was sympathy from the frontline workers, expressing that “it was unfair to expect residents to stay in one room”. Some of these issues were especially persistent in young people schemes, due, in no small part, to the myth that the virus did not affect young or healthy people. One frontline worker pointed out that this was further exacerbated by the unhelpful messaging perpetuating this myth from official and government sources earlier in the pandemic.

Some of these feelings and experiences extend to no longer having been able to work closely with colleagues. Reflecting, a frontline worker said “it has been an incredibly lonely time. I’ve not been able to see family and friends and can’t even be in work with colleagues. You can’t join colleagues for lunch. It has been a really difficult time. We’ve lost the emotional side to work. Even when you want to let off steam, you have to put PPE on, etcetera. It becomes very impersonal”. Apart from missing the social interaction, the lack of contact with colleagues has also affected work performance. Frontline workers have been unable to consult with colleagues asking for their expertise and experience to deal with their workload. This has been especially negative for those frontline workers who have begun their jobs during the pandemic, who have been unable to ask as many questions as they would in normal circumstances or be part of an office environment in which they pick up key information from informal. A frontline worker complained that with the new working arrangement “getting energy off colleagues for keeping energy levels up for delivering support” had not been possible.

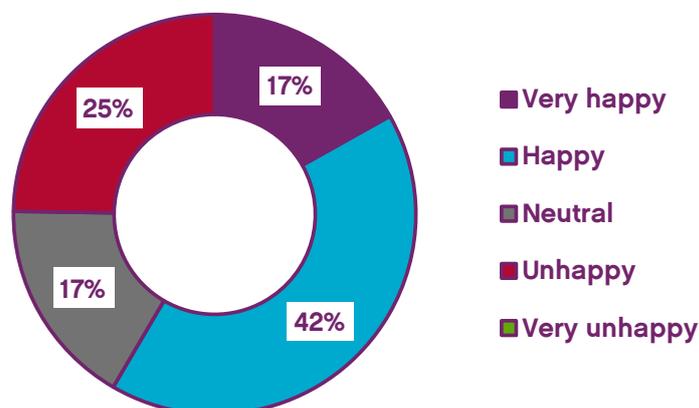
Work-life balance

Whilst there were some positive stories of frontline workers being able to spend more time with their families, the reality for many was that the pressures of home-schooling and managing the work-home balance contributed to negative feelings about the last year. With schools in Wales closed for large parts of the period from March 2020, frontline workers faced additional stresses on top of those outlined above. One frontline worker with a six year old daughter complained that “every time the schools are closed, I get very little time or space to do my work”.

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In the poll at our event, frontline workers were asked about how they feel about their work at that point in time. A majority said that they were very happy or happy, though there was a significant percentage who described themselves as unhappy. Fortunately, nobody responded considering themselves to be very unhappy.

Thinking about your work role, how do you feel right now?



Mental health and well-being support

The aim of the second question was to find out what support was offered to frontline workers by their organisations and explore the nature of this support. By far, what was most appreciated by frontline workers was flexibility. This came in handy for those who had to balance work with home-schooling or other family or caring duties. The introduction of flexible working time has also been useful in dealing with a lack of motivation and the monotony experienced over the last year, with staff being able to take time out to re-energise themselves.

Among the activities offered to frontline workers in this last year there were many directly aimed at improving mental health and well-being. Some of these included a 7-day a week helpline, the availability of counselling, well-being sessions, yoga or chair yoga, mindfulness, staff surveys, 'Time to Talk' events, stress management classes, well-being email checks or 'LifeWorks apps'.

In addition to the activities specifically organised to offer support with frontline worker's mental health and well-being, a number of other activities were mentioned. Among the more common ones were virtual coffee mornings, virtual kitchens or virtual quizzes. Some of the more unique ones included a sports and social club, an online Christmas party, an activity challenge to come up with recipes from food that traditionally gets donated to food banks or creativity workshops. The fundamental objective of these activities was to maintain morale.

Contact

However, what seemed to be most appreciated by frontline workers were efforts to retain office normality. A small team of frontline workers had virtual team meetings every Friday, where they were able to talk about achievements and challenges, not necessarily work related. It was similar in other teams, where they would have "weekly Zoom chats where we talk about absolute rubbish, where we talk about whatever we want, blow off steam". Another frontline worker said "talking about absolutely anything over Zoom, not just work, is invaluable. Having humour is important for morale".

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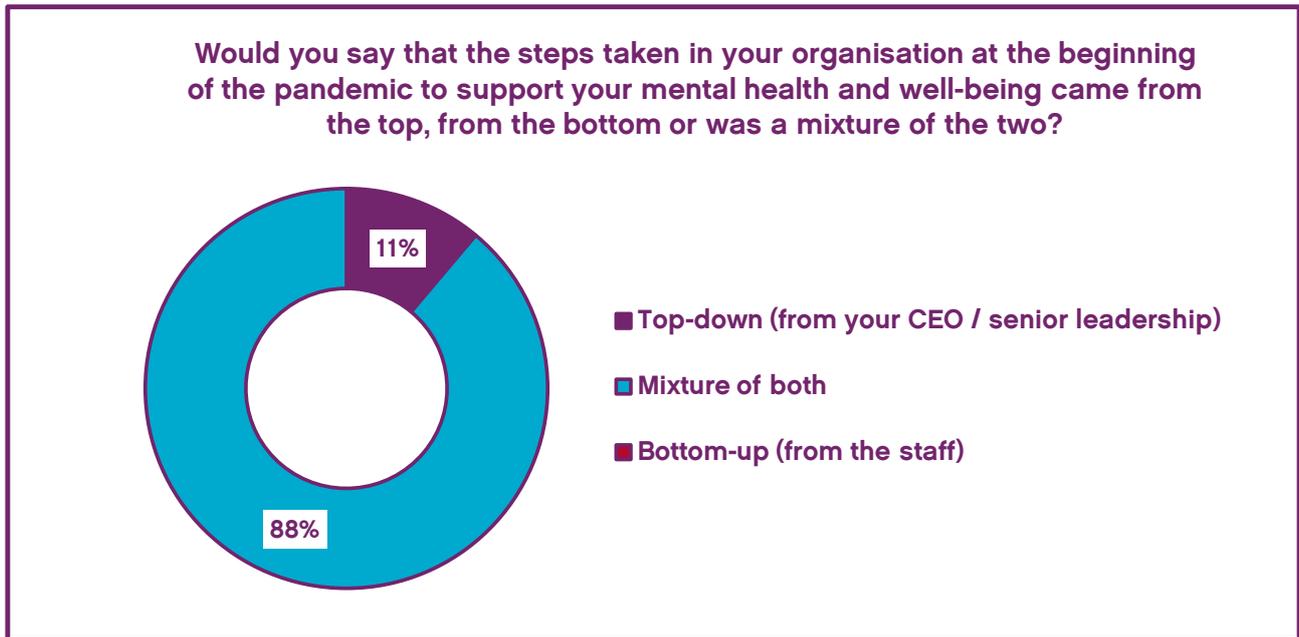
A frontline worker thought that through team meetings they now speak to more people within their organisation that they did before the pandemic. From what we learnt, in some cases, what worked best for frontline workers was when meetings with the whole team had no hierarchy between Chief Executives, Managers or the general team. Although, in other instances, what worked best was team meetings without managers where frontline workers could express themselves freely. In all, being able to speak in a relaxed manner about work and non-work matters with colleagues was highly regarded by frontline workers.

One of the reasons given for taking care of oneself was to be able to continue to deliver high quality services and support. In the words of one frontline worker, "if you don't look after yourself then who is going to look after the people [we support]". This sentiment was shared by another frontline worker, who, referring to a supportive more senior member of staff, said "he knows that all our clients need assistance, but if you don't look after your staff then you're not going to succeed".

"If you don't look after yourself then who is going to look after the people [we support]"

Based on responses during the meet-ups, it seems that the majority of initiatives to support frontline workers with their mental health and well-being over the last year were initiated by the senior leadership. There were several stories of CEOs, managers and directors taking a lead early on into the pandemic and making resources available. A frontline worker explained that the working flexibility offered in their organisation was established because their manager was in the same situation as the team and pushed for flexible working times, which followed soon after. Talking about a more senior member of staff, one frontline worker expressed that "if stuff has been going on, he's put a cloak around us and protected us". Another frontline worker wished to share a story of how their director fought very hard for their services to have the same footing as care homes at the beginning of the pandemic.

Some activities were put forward and run by frontline workers, but based on the feedback from our meet-ups, these were much fewer in number. However, the poll response from the online event showed a different perspective, suggesting that it was very much more of a mixture of both top-down and bottom-up approaches.



Permission and ongoing assurance

Several frontline workers pointed out that when it came to flexible working times, taking time off or partaking in activities during work hours, the most important factor was permission and ongoing assurance from the organisation’s leaders and managers. As one frontline worker put it, “the important thing for me is that you have permission to do these things, and it comes from the top”.

The sentiment was shared by another frontline worker claiming that “people want that ongoing assurance, not just saying it once. It is important to remind people of the importance of looking after yourself, especially when workloads increase. If you’re not fit and well then your performance is not going to be fit and well”. One frontline worker speculated that differing experiences regarding permission and assurance were down to having different managers. This points to the importance of recognising the imbalance of power between frontline staff and managers, and the reluctance that staff might feel if they do not have the assurance to take time out and look after their own well-being.

In response to the later question regarding what had been missing, permission and ongoing assurance was once more brought up. As one frontline worker put it “we would appreciate something from the organisation, from the leadership, that says you can have the flexibility and to look after your well-being. Otherwise, you feel a bit guilty for taking time out”.

Another frontline worker explained the importance of this when they “had an activity during work time and did feel a bit guilty about it. But when we did chair yoga, it was booked by work, so it felt like there was explicit permission and [I] didn’t feel guilty about it”.

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Based on the meet-ups, it seems that there has been some clash of priorities between frontline workers and more senior organisational staff regarding taking time off or working flexibility. A frontline worker commented that “we’ve been told we can have flexibility but there is the expectation that we have to work it back later, so we have no choice and have to keep working”.

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A frontline worker expressed frustration, stating that “we’re spending less time in the car travelling to see people using services, so really we should have some more time”. Even if it is just anecdotal evidence, it raises concerns of higher expectations than usual on behalf of managers from their staff which have to be considered.

Was support consistent?

In three of the meet-ups, there was an additional question regarding the changes in the consistency of support and activities on offer and if there had been a reduction as months of the pandemic had passed.

Whilst in some instances, frontline workers expressed that there was more support than in the first months of the pandemic and that in some teams or organisations there were more people involved, these were a minority.

As with society at large, the initial rush to replicate social life online and sign up to a plethora of online activities has faded as the novelty wore off. For frontline workers, this has resulted in a decrease in activities on offer, for example quizzes. A frontline worker speculated that this was down to people getting into the swing of the ‘new normal’. Another said that “people are fed up of sitting in front of a screen. It reminds you that you can’t get together”. In some cases, the frequency of team meetings reduced due to time constraints.

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The nature of these changed, too. As one frontline worker put it “at the beginning we were having meetings out of necessity, now we’re having them to say how are we doing... a lot more relaxed than at the start of the pandemic. At the beginning it was like ‘where do I start?’... ‘I’m too scared to move’, ‘what do I do next?’, whereas now, it’s more like an informal chat rather than a formal meeting, where we start with ‘how are you?’”. The feeling of a slide to informality was replicated by another frontline worker who said “at first I was worried about things like the washing machine going off and people on the video meeting thinking ‘what’s going on?’, and children appearing in meetings”. However, these worries decreased considerably as people became more relaxed about online interaction.



What support was missing?

One of the polls at the online event asked frontline workers if they felt their organisations had done enough to support them with their mental health and well-being throughout the pandemic. Whilst over half said they did feel supported, a sizable majority did not. This section will explain some of the support frontline workers were missing based on what they said at the meet-ups.

The third main question was designed to explore what additional support frontline workers would have wanted.

In some cases, having heard the experiences of other frontline workers and what they were offered, frontline workers expressed an interest in those activities and wished they had been offered them too. For some, they would have preferred more variety in what was on offer.

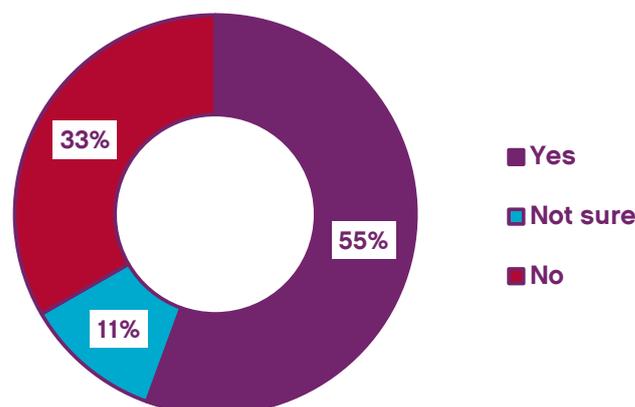
Some frontline workers expressed displeasure at the time it took to set up support, with some activities only becoming available a few months into the pandemic. However, they also understood that nobody could comprehend how long the pandemic was going to last. There was also an understanding that larger organisations with greater resources were better placed to invest in staff well-being activities, whereas some smaller organisations were unable to provide as much support.

Whilst highlighted as one of the things that worked the best, for other frontline workers the thing that was missing the most was contact with other colleagues. For some, speaking to colleagues in their own team or other teams within their organisations are great opportunities to bounce ideas around and share knowledge and best practices. With the pandemic, some frontline workers feel that they have lost the opportunity to speak with other teams, even those within their organisations. Similarly, a frontline worker noted that prior to the pandemic, they had had peer meetings without managers, which they would have greatly appreciated having taken place throughout the pandemic.

Lastly, a frontline worker was frustrated at being left out of the Welsh Government's £500 bonus for social care workers, saying "we are doing similar work with similar risks but didn't get it". Evidence collected outside of this report found that there were cases of staff receiving the £500 bonus who were working side-by-side with others doing almost identical jobs who did not. In response to the first question, another frontline worker expressed a similar dissatisfaction with pay, stating that "staff feel they are left behind in comparison to other roles. [Staff are] often doing several roles in one. They seem to be at the bottom of the salary scale". However, since the meetings, it has been announced that frontline homelessness and housing support workers are being awarded the second bonus scheme payment.

"Staff feel they are left behind in comparison to other roles. [...] They seem to be at the bottom of the salary scale."

Do you feel that your organisation provided enough support for your health and well-being over the last year?



Post-COVID support

Whilst the majority of questions were reflective on the previous year's experiences with Covid, the fourth main question asked if frontline workers would want mental health and well-being support to continue after the pandemic.

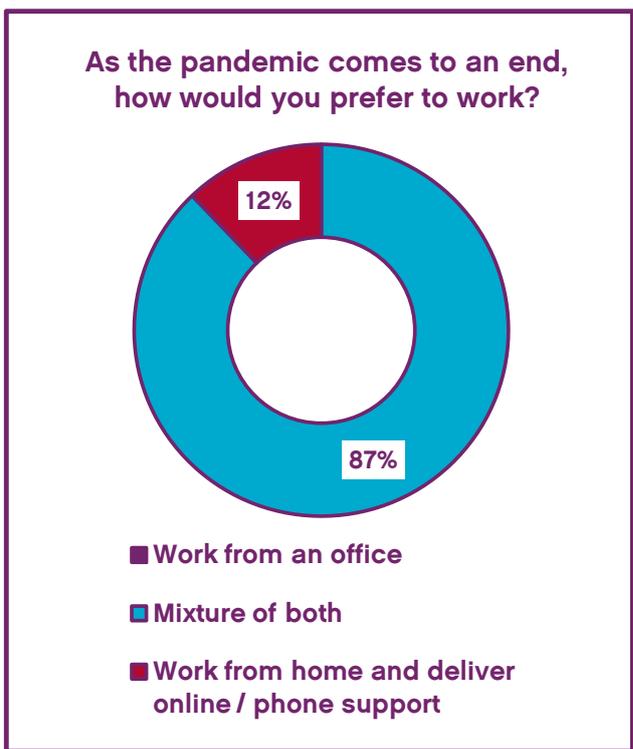
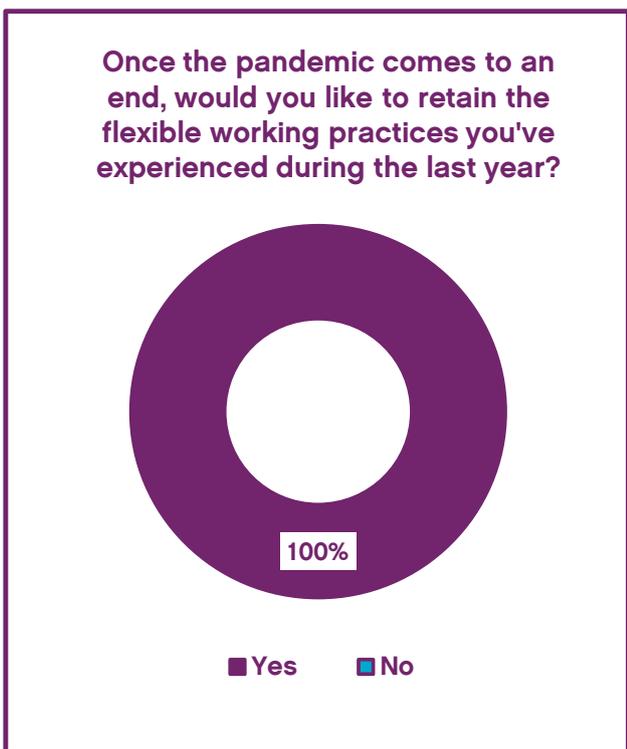
As both hinted at and overtly expressed in previous questions, working from home and flexible working times were rated highly. A frontline worker justified this by saying that whilst there are some issues in delivering support without face-to-face contact "we've proved that working from home is deliverable". Another frontline worker, hoping to have more flexible working hours and the option to work from home in the future, challenged the pre-Covid resistance of some organisations to allowing their staff to work from home by the fact that they have done their jobs well in this way during the pandemic.

"We've proved that working from home is deliverable."

Reflecting on pre-pandemic working, a frontline worker explained that working 9-to-5, with commuting, they would not get back to their homes until after 6 pm, hence they would like to see some flexibility to continue. Some frontline workers explained that within their organisations, they were already planning for the post-Covid work environment and considering "more agile working", with one explaining "it seems like flexibility is working for a lot of people so they're putting measures in place to continue the flexibility". Even for those who did have the opportunity to work from home before the pandemic, they feel that in the future, they would take greater advantage of the opportunity.

When asked about flexible working practices once some sort of normality returns, frontline workers at our event were unequivocally in support in these to continue. However, there was also recognition that this could prove to be difficult for staff in supported accommodation schemes, as they were needed on-site during their working shifts.

Similarly, when asked about the future environment, frontline workers at our event were almost fully in agreement in that they would want to have a mix of working in an office but also have the opportunity to work from home when they want to.



No going back

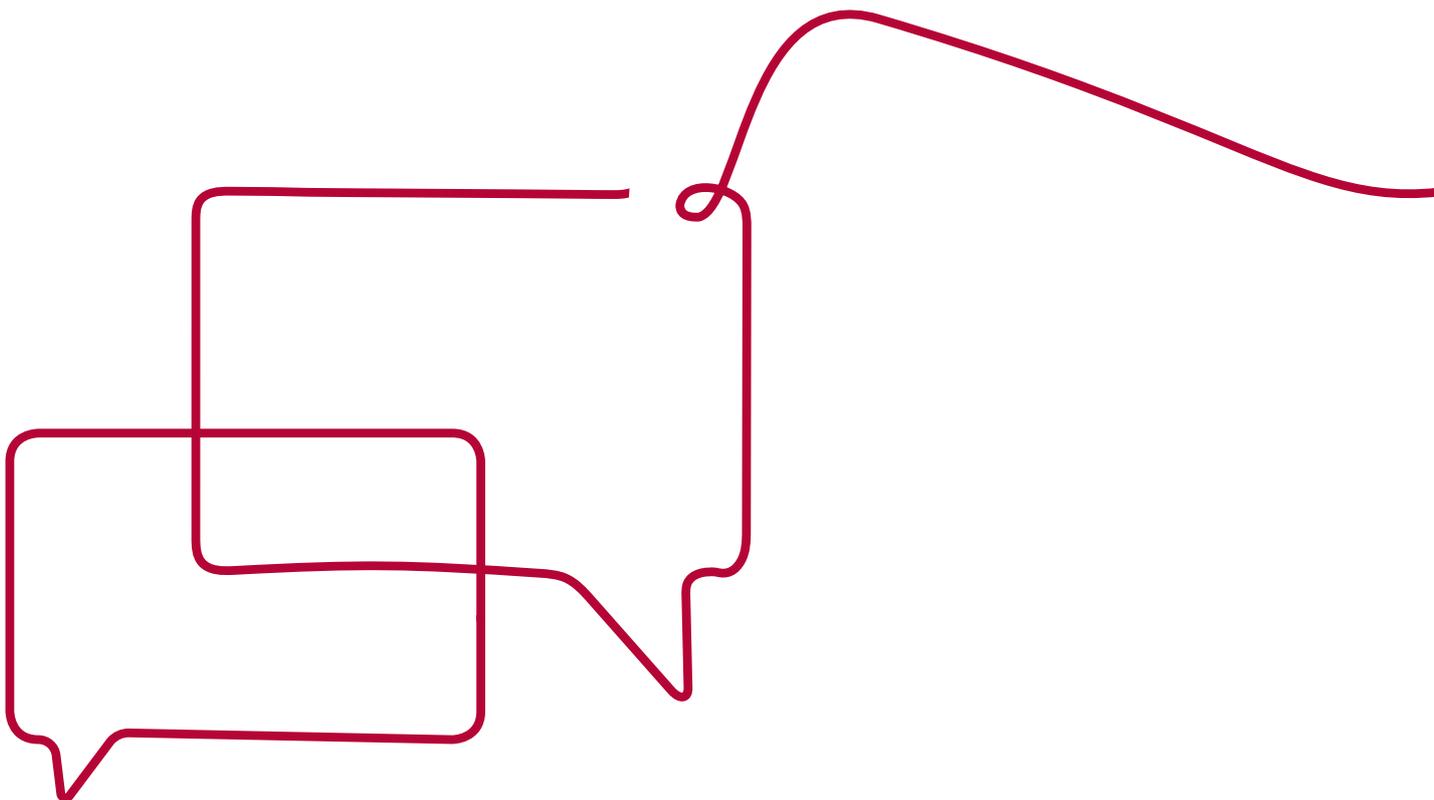
Frontline workers agreed that there should be an ongoing focus on well-being. A support worker reflected that “it’s just a shame it took a pandemic for these services to be put in place. We had these stresses before the pandemic and the pandemic has just magnified them. It would be a real shame to see them disappear when Covid starts to disappear”.

Similarly, another frontline worker remarked that “I think it would be really daft not to continue it [support for staff]. The benefit to the staff and therefore the organisations is huge. We’ve had some people in our team with mental health issues, and it makes you think whether we could have prevented people being sick if the support had been in place then”.

This extends to time to reflect and dealing with second hand trauma, prominent within the sector. A frontline worker said “I’d really like the mindfulness and armchair yoga to continue. You often get really stressed with the issues raised by clients so it would be great to see it continue, to know that you don’t need to hang onto that emotional impact”. As another frontline worker put it “we deliver support, and we should follow that through with staff”.

The team comradeship created over the last year seems to be crucial for future working in the shape of a support network. A frontline worker hypothesised that “newer people coming in won’t have shared experience of what we’ve gone through”. Another frontline worker explained that in their organisation “we are quite spread out so we’ve actually seen each other and got to know each other better because of the video meetings and would like to see this continue”. Thinking about working within an organisation, a support worker pointed that “it’s about knowing team members, and that people feel they can come to you when they have issues”. Thinking of the future, one frontline worker said that in their organisation “we will be keeping the team meetings twice a week if people want to attend. I think a lot of things will continue if it’s wanted”.

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How has COVID affected your work?

Lastly, the fifth question asked about the impact of Covid directly on work practices, especially focusing on the fear driven by the virus.

Some teams were unfortunate to have deaths among their colleagues or some who became very ill with the virus. In the words of a frontline worker “a staff member was very ill. It crystallised for us all how dangerous it could be”. Another one explained “we had someone very early on in the team who was very very poorly and caused massive concerns. As a result, staff were more aware of the impact of Covid. Lots of rumours were going around about it just being like the flu, but when they heard how poorly this person was, it opened the eyes of the team to be more careful”.

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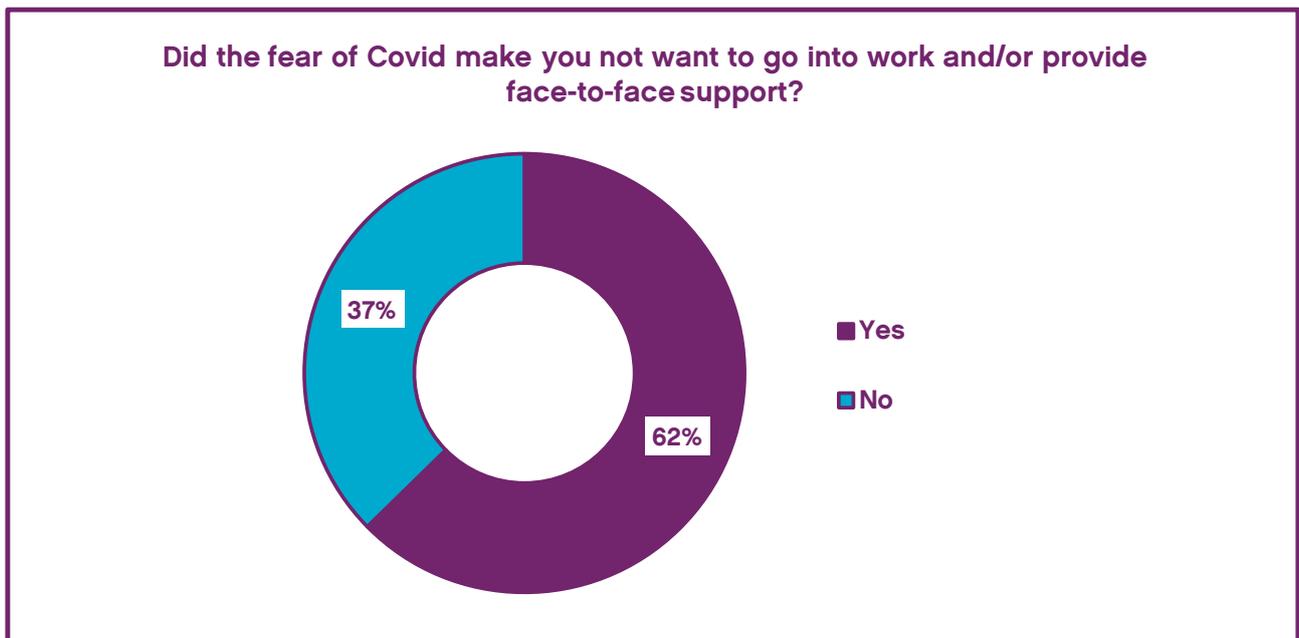
From the meet-ups, we found it was a mixed story. In the words of one frontline worker “I found it very different from one person to another. It’s a very personal thing, people have different levels of health anxiety”. The majority of teams were split between those who were not fearful and willing to go on shifts and those who were a bit more risk-averse.

Some frontline workers speculated that the initial alarming messaging from officials and government agencies contributed to really put fear into some people.

Among the multiple reasons why some frontline workers were more fearful of going out on shift to deliver face-to-face support were underlying health conditions and vulnerable family members or people in support. One frontline worker explained “you do worry about whether you’re going to catch it, or pass it on to someone more vulnerable. But because of what we do, we tend to think more about our clients”.

Results from the poll would suggest that a majority of frontline workers did feel that the fear of Covid made them not want to go into work or deliver face-to-face support.

As a result of this, some frontline workers took on additional shifts to support their colleagues. This resulted in having to remind some staff to only go out when it was an emergency.



Ongoing risks

Covid has presented some massive challenges to delivering support. Some of them have already been covered previously in this report. One frontline worker complained that the “hardest part was getting clients to respect social distancing”. Another frontline worker explained “our work is potentially higher risk and there are lots of unknown risks – where have they [people in support] been, what have they been doing”. A frontline worker shared an anecdote where “we saw clients sharing a face mask, each taking it to go in the shop one by one”. Frontline workers also found that as a result of the media and campaigns of misinformation, a number of people in support did not want to be vaccinated.

A frustrated frontline worker complained that “there’s still a risk. We only control ourselves, we don’t have control over how others behave”. Nevertheless, as a counter, as one frontline worker put it “there are worries, but you work around it, you use PPE, you use your common sense”.



“There’s still a risk. We only control ourselves, we don’t have control over how others behave.”

Speaking about the solutions they found, a frontline worker explained that on top of providing face-to-face support from the doorstep instead of indoors and sending documentation which needs signing in advance, “it’s being aware of different people’s attitudes, anxieties, and complacency, so it’s about being aware and trying to be consistent with gloves, masks, etcetera. It’s also about modelling the behaviour we want from them [people in support], for example, turning up in a mask might encourage a resident to put one on”.

It seems vaccine rollout has provided more trust and a sense of safety. Some teams complained that they had not been offered the vaccine or knew of other schemes which had not been vaccinated by that point. However, from the meet-ups there is a sense that a majority of frontline workers had been offered the first dose of the vaccine.

Similarly, whilst there was an initial delay in the delivery of PPE and hand sanitiser, for staff, these became very regular a few weeks into the initial lockdown in March 2020.

Conclusions

The findings from the meet-ups and the polls offer us a first-hand account of the successes and failures in supporting frontline workers over the last year. Furthermore, and probably more importantly, they also offer some insight into how to improve in supporting our staff in the years to come.

It almost goes without saying, but everyone is unique and the pandemic has affected us all differently. Not just in the initial fears of the virus, with people having different pre-existing conditions, levels of health anxiety and vulnerable family members, but in coping mechanisms. For some, the last year has been very enjoyable, but for the majority of frontline workers it has been a very challenging period. On top of delivering support to people with significant experiences of trauma, mental health problems and substance use issues in an unprecedented way, some frontline workers have also had to care for vulnerable relatives and home-school young children. Every frontline worker's situation is different and thus, flexibility is needed, as one size does not fit all.

In terms of delivering support there have been both positives and negatives. From the evidence, some people who would not have been engaged with previously have bought into new methods of engagement, and forced under the circumstances to develop a high level of independence and autonomy which they most likely not have done in normal conditions. At the same time though, the lack of face-to-face support has hindered some, especially those who lack digital literacy skills or are less comfortable using phones or video calls. As explained at the beginning of this report, many of the relationships built on trust and understanding between someone in support and a frontline worker need repeated face-to-face interactions. With less face-to-face support, some of those hard built relationships have been eroded or lost.

The biggest success and the biggest failure in providing support to frontline workers throughout the pandemic has been the same thing; permission and assurance. Where this has worked well, it has been because frontline workers have felt that their managers, directors and CEOs have recognised the challenges presented by the pandemic and given them ongoing permission and assurance to take time out when they needed. Where there have not been the same levels of assurance, frontline workers have felt guilty about taking time out or engaging in activities which are not strictly related to their job description.

The previous three points and the evidence from the meet-ups and polls clearly show a need for flexibility. To deliver support more efficiently, frontline workers need the flexibility to work in a way they are comfortable. Doing a lot of work from home throughout the pandemic has demonstrated the ability to do this work well. It would be incomprehensible to take this away once we return to something resembling normality. The same goes for flexible working times. This is something managers, directors and CEOs should not just understand and facilitate, but also encourage. Flexibility also extends to offering and delivering support, as again, not one person in support is the same as another one, and different engagement and communications methods have different results with different people.

Last, but certainly not least, are the importance of teams and the networks these create. One of the things frontline workers have missed the most is being able to work out of an office with their colleagues. Due to the nature of the job, a lot of frontline workers experience second-hand trauma, and being able to share these experiences with colleagues who experience and hear similar things is critical to maintaining a healthy staff and avoiding burn out and mental fatigue. Working out of an office is also indispensable in sharing best practices and leaning on more experienced frontline workers to help less experienced ones. Whilst flexibility in working from home does have to be offered, offices are still too important to discard, and forms of online communication, no matter how good they are, in the majority of cases, are no substitute for real face-to-face interactions.

Recommendations

- 1. Welsh Government:** Ensure recognition of homelessness and housing support staff as key workers in policy decisions across government and allocation of resources.
- 2. Welsh Government, commissioners and service providers:** Ensure that frontline workers have enough guidance, support and PPE to feel safe and secure in the workplace - now, and in the future.
- 3. Welsh Government and commissioners:** Provide the funding to enable support providers to pay frontline workers a fair wage for the invaluable work they do.
- 4. Welsh Government:** Consider whether wellbeing support for frontline workers can be provided nationally, to reduce the inequity between organisations with greater or lesser capacity to provide this internally.
- 5. Welsh Government:** Provide policy direction, guidance and funding to enable the delivery of psychologically informed services, including the provision of reflective practice and psychological support for frontline workers.
- 6. Commissioners:** Structure contracts and provide appropriate funding to enable frontline workers to benefit from reflective practice and psychological support.
- 7. Service providers:** Provide wellbeing support, reflective practice and psychological support to frontline workers.
- 8. Service providers:** Provide a range of opportunities for frontline workers to interact with colleagues while working from home, including formal meetings to provide clarity and direction from management, spaces for frontline workers to access peer support without managers, and informal spaces to improve wellbeing and reduce isolation.
- 9. Service providers:** Chief Executives and managers should provide clear leadership on staff wellbeing to ensure that frontline workers know it is a priority, actively encouraging participation and giving explicit permission and ongoing assurance that frontline workers can take breaks, work flexibly and participate in wellbeing activities.
- 10. Service providers:** Create a culture that encourages, empowers and resources frontline workers to come up with their own ideas to support staff wellbeing.
- 11. Service providers:** Endeavour to share and learn from good practice regarding staff wellbeing, and consider what activities and support could be offered to their frontline workers.
- 12. Service providers:** Continue to provide flexibility for frontline staff with regards to working hours, the ability to undertake caring responsibilities, and the option of home working alongside office working where this is possible.

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

