



# Developing a resilient and valued workforce: Views from the Frontline Network Wales

Mandy Powell, Policy and External Affairs Manager - January 2022

## 1. Introduction

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Cymorth Cymru has written this paper to assist the Workforce Task and Finish Group, which has been established by the Housing Support National Advisory Board to advise the Welsh Government on how to deliver the workforce-related recommendations from the Homelessness Action Group reports.

We have long advocated for frontline homelessness and housing support workers to have opportunities to share their experiences and ideas, and actively contribute towards the development of policy. Members of the Workforce Task and Finish Group (WT&FG) shared this view and agreed that Cymorth Cymru should utilise the Frontline Network Wales to engage with frontline workers and gather their opinions on workforce issues.

The [Frontline Network Wales](#) is delivered by Cymorth Cymru in partnership with the Frontline Network, which works across the UK to support workers from the public, statutory and voluntary sectors working on the frontline with those experiencing homelessness. Established in late 2020, the Frontline Network Wales holds regular regional meetings for frontline staff to share their experiences of working in the sector, and discuss suggestions and ideas for developing policy.

One of the many strengths of the network is that it enables us to gather the experiences and ideas of frontline staff across Wales, helping to give a clear view of the sector across the different regions. CEOs and leaders of services have numerous opportunities to shape policy and have their voices heard, but as this task and finish group has acknowledged, it is critical for this piece of work that the voices of frontline workers are included from the start.

Right now, we have a unique opportunity make significant and lasting improvements to the sector, guided by the recommendations of the Action Plan for Ending Homelessness, and backed by the recent Welsh Government draft budget announcements to achieve the Programme for Government commitment to transform homeless services in Wales. It is crucial that we listen to the views of frontline workers in the sector, and utilise their experience and insight.

## 2. Frontline Network Wales meetings: Participants

Approximately fifty homelessness and housing support workers from twenty different organisations attended six online regional meetings held in December 2021. The majority of participants worked for third sector support providers or housing associations, delivering services which are predominantly commissioned by local authorities via the Housing Support Grant. Other attendees worked for local authority homelessness and housing support teams.

### 2.1 Current roles

Frontline workers taking part in the network discussion across Wales include a range of job roles:

- Advice Worker
- Bond Scheme Officer
- Business Consultant
- Case Worker
- Community Link Worker
- Crisis Response Worker
- Emergency Accommodation Officer
- Employer and Partnership Manager
- Employment Engagement Manager
- Family Intervention Worker
- Family Support Assistant
- Family Support Officer
- Finance & Housing Benefit
- Floating Support Worker
- Head of Resettlement
- Helpline & Refuge Senior Practitioner
- Homeless Prevention Support
- Housing & Prevention Services Manager
- Housing Advice Officer
- Housing First Co-ordinator
- Housing First Support Worker
- Housing IDVA
- Housing Law Caseworker
- Homeless case officer
- Housing Options Advisor
- Housing Options Officer
- Housing Solutions Manager
- Housing Support Worker
- Lettings Facilitator
- Neighbourhood Officer
- Outreach and Resettlement Officer
- Partnerships Officer
- Project Manager
- Project Worker
- Project Worker, Engagement and Awareness
- Prison Liaison Officer
- Senior Housing Intervention Worker
- Senior Lettings Facilitator
- Senior Support Worker
- Service Coordinator
- SMS Outreach Worker
- Specialist Support Outreach Worker
- Specialist Support Worker
- Substance Misuse Worker
- Support Advocate
- Support Assistant
- Support Worker
- Supported Lodgings Development Worker
- Team Manager Team Around the Tenancy
- Tenancy Floating Support
- Tenancy Support Officer
- Tenancy Sustainability Officer
- Welfare Rights & Money Advice Officer
- Young Person's Housing Support Officer

### 2.2 People's backgrounds

While many people had worked in homelessness and housing support for several years, or even decades, others had entered the sector more recently and had previously worked in very different roles and industries. This included retail, factory work, administration, the civil service, special needs education, the police and nursing. There was clear evidence that people had gained transferable skills in other jobs, such as teamwork, building trust and developing positive relationships, which were really valuable in support work. Many talked about the job satisfaction they gained from their new role and illustrated the potential for recruiting people with the right values and skills from outside of the sector.

**“Was a sales manager in retail before - bit of a culture shock [moving to support work] - but I wanted to give something back, retail can be takey, takey.”**

**“Worked in factory, always liked helping people, did some mentoring, gained numerous qualifications. When the factory closed down I worked with a hostel, then street homelessness project, and progressed to tenancy support.”**

### 3. What do you enjoy about your job?

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#### 3.1 Making a difference

What united attendees, and in many cases keeps people in what is often a challenging sector, is the desire to help others and make a positive difference to people lives. Helping people find and sustain tenancies, gain access to support for mental health, substance use, and advice with financial planning were repeatedly mentioned as motivating factors. Many recognised the positive impact of early intervention in reducing harm, particularly when working with young people. One person spoke of their lived experience of homelessness, explaining that their motivation for working in homelessness and housing support comes from wanting to give something back to the sector that helped them. Another person who used to work as a debt collector with responsibility for evictions realised they wanted to help people stay in their tenancies, so became a housing options advisor. This is clearly a sector that is attractive to people with empathy and a drive to help others, and these are clearly things to be celebrated.

**“The reason I stay is because I love it, it’s the best job I’ve ever had, I love to see people able to move on and continue with their lives.”**

**“I love it, helping young people to find independent skills, caring about them, making sure they are moving forward with their lives.”**

**“The ability to help someone set up their own place and feel confident is the reason why I do this job, a sense of achievement and worth, we certainly don’t do it for the money.”**

**“I’ve got lived experience and I want to give something back and share what I have learned.”**

#### 3.2 Variety and challenge

A desire to help people is a big part of people’s motivation for working in the sector, but not the whole story. Variety was also a very common factor, with many members of the network stating that the wide variety of support they provide makes their work really interesting. The opportunity to learn about a number of different issues, from debt advice to health care is clearly something that attracts many to the profession and keeps them motivated. Many of the staff we spoke to said that no two days were the same and they enjoy the challenge involved in delivering support, often dealing with complexity in pressurised circumstances.

**“I like the variety of people, variety of challenges, no one day, or hour the same, what keeps me going are the occasional successes we have – and we’re always learning.”**

**“This line of work is interesting, challenging, never boring, and it can be rewarding.”**

### 4. What do you dislike about your job

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The answers that were given to this question were consistent across all of the regional meetings, it is very clear that wherever someone is based in Wales, the challenges they face in the sector are the same and while this may be disheartening, it does present us with the opportunity to make major improvements to the sector as a whole; by addressing the issues raised here we have the chance to not only improve the working conditions for staff in the sector, but also improve the support people receive.

## 4.1 Pressure, risk and complexity

Working with people experiencing homelessness, fleeing domestic abuse, or struggling with addiction and mental health needs will always have an emotional impact, however frontline workers have shared experiences of a stark rise in difficult working conditions during the COVID pandemic. Case loads have increased, and the people they are supporting are experiencing loneliness, frustration, boredom and much poorer mental health as a result of COVID restrictions, the lack of permanent accommodation and difficulty accessing other services. Frontline workers are experiencing a rise in levels of abuse from some people using services, who have been made evermore desperate and frustrated by the lack of permanent and even temporary accommodation available.

Many of the frontline workers we have spoken with feel they are close to burn out, after using all their energy and resourcefulness during the height of the pandemic. Although society is starting to open up again, the huge numbers of people in temporary accommodation and requiring support feels overwhelming to many frontline staff, some of whom feel unable to carry on in their roles.

The exploitation of children and adults by organised gangs involved in cuckooing and county lines is also putting support workers in dangerous situations, such as having to visit temporary accommodating targeted by criminal gangs. As a sector we owe a duty of care to these frontline workers, already working in stressful situation, not to let them go unprotected.

Trauma informed, empathic support workers have a lot of experience of working with people in desperate situations, but the combination of the factors mentioned above: pressure of the last two years, lack of resources, means that increasingly people are at crisis point when they present as at risk of homelessness. Support workers are in the unenviable situation of having to tell people in need of support that there is not enough to meet demand, this inevitably leads to worry and adds the emotional strain of an already challenging job, many of the frontline workers who spoke to us said they take these worries home with them, finding it difficult to switch off knowing there are people in desperate need who they are unable to help.

**“This job is harder and more emotionally draining - keeps you up at night.”**

**“I don’t want to be here so long that I don’t care but I’m waking up at 3am because I’m worried about the people we are trying to support, it is a tremendous strain.”**

**“I’m having some kind of therapy at the moment, because I’m having panic attacks, my work load is off the scale, I know I have the knowledge and skills to do the job, but not the resources.”**

**“Case load has doubled since Covid, really stressful [...] I do enjoy the job but the stressful side has caused the panic attacks.”**

## 4.2 Lack of resources

The impact of public spending restrictions over the last decade means that services were already stretched before COVID hit the UK. A lack of suitable properties, in particular single person accommodation, were well documented before the added pressures of the pandemic. The enormous effort that went into getting people off the street and into some form of accommodation during the start the crisis showed everyone what was possible. However, as society opens up again, the issues that were present pre-pandemic, lack of suitable permanent accommodation, lack of available temporary accommodation, stretched budgets are still there.

Support workers are faced the impossible task of trying to meet the needs of people without having the resources they need to do their jobs. With approximately 1,000 people a month currently presenting to local authority homelessness departments and a severe lack of suitable properties, staff are having to tell people they cannot find them accommodation.

This situation turns an already challenging situation to a crisis point as burned out staff are forced to consider leaving a job they love for another than pays better and comes with less emotional strain. The dangers for the sector are clear, as we risk losing talented, empathic staff to other sectors, resulting in further strain on homelessness and housing support services.

**“We’re not able to move people on so we’re getting a backlog, there are no easy cases – they are incredibly complicated - we don’t shut off at the end of the day - but limited as to what we can do when the tools aren’t there, single person accommodation is a real issue, the baggage that you go home with at the end of the day is what we really struggle with.”**

**“I need to find temporary accommodation for someone who has been kicked out – our whole day is negative, I’ve never been this negative - I feel useless, there is nothing I can do to help them - there is no temporary accommodation, no social housing - I don’t feel I can cope with this job much longer - and I never thought I would say that - I want to do a bloody good job, but I’m drained, there are not enough resources to help people and we can’t help people.”**

### 4.3 Bureaucracy

Frontline homelessness and housing support workers expressed frustration about the burden of bureaucratic processes and having to navigate complex systems on behalf of the people they support. This was exacerbated during the pandemic, as many services moved online and were very difficult to contact and engage with. Many of the frontline workers who spoke to us shared their frustration at the amount of time they needed to spend trying to obtain information from other services, which often resulted in being kept on hold for long periods of time, time they would prefer to spend with people using services. Accessing and navigating the welfare benefits system consistently came up as a drain on their time.

Within the homelessness sector, some of the bureaucracy and reporting requirements were reduced during the pandemic, to enable services to be agile, flexible and meet the challenges posed by COVID. This provides an opportunity to consider whether some of the systems and processes are needed in future, and whether some of these burdens could be permanently lifted to ease the pressure on frontline workers.

### 4.4 Job uncertainty

The way in which many support services are funded, with annual tendering processes and short-term contracts, results in uncertainty for workers. Not knowing if your job will be funded beyond the end of the year adds to the already pressurised environment, and can force people to choose between doing a job they love, and applying for more secure work that provides financial security for them and their families. This annual funding cycle risks losing talented people to other sectors, and can hinder investment in developing services to meet the needs of people already struggling to access support, a project or a new role often need time to bring about real change.

## 5. Pay and T&Cs

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As above, the feedback from frontline workers regarding pay, and terms and conditions in the sector was consistent across Wales; the pay does not reflect the knowledge needed, or the levels of responsibility expected of these workers.

### 5.1 Pay

As we see within the social care sector, vital frontline roles in the homelessness and housing support sector are often the lowest paid; as a society we have not yet learned to value these roles enough to make sure that the pay matches their worth. We have a unique opportunity now, as governments around the world reflect on the impact of the global pandemic, to make sure that those frontline workers who have put themselves and their families at risk in order to keep services running to meet the needs of others, are recognised for their expertise, and rightly remunerated. It is a shameful irony that some frontline workers in the sector have described themselves as being pushed towards homelessness by low pay and the uncertainty of short-term contracts.

**“Underpaid and undervalued, despite dealing with hugely challenging, complex issues.”**

**“Low pay pushes us closer to homelessness.”**

**“It’s a systemic problem – it’s a female dominated profession, so it is undervalued.”**

**“Our salaries don’t go up with inflation but our cost of living does - so council tax bill goes up but my wages don’t.”**

**“I’m paid equivalently less now than when I started, cuts have driven down wages.”**

**“We didn’t have a pay rise for 10 years – a lot more people hired on higher wages while the frontline workers have stayed on the bottom as if we are not worth more.”**

**“I’ve done the same job in 2 different local authorities but was paid 2K more in one, and as much as I love the job I’ve had to jump from job to job to get the pay I need to look after my family.”**

### 5.2 Comparisons with other roles

There is a very strong feeling from frontline workers across Wales that their roles often compare unfavourably with higher paid roles such as social workers and housing officers, while containing many of the same responsibilities. As mentioned above 3.2, one of the key aspects that attracts many frontline workers, and keeps them motivated, is the variety and challenge of the work. However, in order to provide support to the wide variety of people and support needs they encounter, frontline workers need to have a range of detailed knowledge and skills, as well as staying up to date with policy and legislation. And yet, the pay does not compare with staff in similar roles, some of which have been able to move to from home working, while frontline housing support workers continued to go out into the community and were asked to take on additional responsibilities during the pandemic.

**“Similar role to social workers but don’t get the same level of pay.”**

**“Started as a housing officer and was paid £4k more than what I’m now on as a support worker.”**

**“Underpaid and undervalued as a sector – it’s often suggested it is an unskilled job, but this is not the case. We deal with very challenging situations - clients have mental health problems, substance use issues, difficult childhood experiences, need help with benefits. I feel like an underpaid social worker.”**

Another common comparison was with higher paid roles that carried much less stress and responsibility, for example working in retail, admin or as delivery drivers. Many people commented that it was difficult to recruit and retain staff to the homelessness and housing support sector when higher paid opportunities existed in sectors with less pressure, complexity and responsibility. Some people also referenced the impact of increases to the National Living Wage for other roles, stating that roles with much less stress and responsibilities are becoming equitable to support worker pay.

**“If you work in Tesco you don’t have these issues but you’ll get the same pay or better pay.”**

**“Office staff are getting more money than support workers.”**

**“Better off being a delivery driver - more pay, less stress.”**

**“I always considered myself to be helpful and positive but I am exhausted [...] I can get paid more for doing track and trace. Sorry to sound so negative but this last year in particular has taken its toll on me.”**

**“[As a result of NLW increases] housekeeper wage and support worker wage are only 30p difference.”**

### 5.3 The impact of competitive tendering

Frontline workers felt very strongly that current commissioning processes contribute to the driving down of wages as organisations are forced to compete with each other in order to secure funding from already stretched budgets. Some commented that it feels like there is ‘a race to the bottom’, particularly where cost is given priority over quality, with frontline worker wages being a significant casualty. This can lead to suspicion of some organisations undercutting of wages in order to compete in a tender process.

One example was given of a role being reduced from £24K a year to £19K a year for people new to the role, which due the pay discrepancy resulted in all staff being brought down to £19k a year, regardless of skills and years in the sector. Many staff fear the consequences of being moved from one service provider to work for another (TUPE) and the uncertainty this brings of having to work for a lower salary. Many members of the network called for a national minimum pay framework that would set a minimum rate of pay, effectively removing this as a variable from the commissioning process and helping to stop the race to bottom as organisations compete with each other in order to secure funding.

**“Have seen some organisations offer lower rate of pay and are awarded the contracts, undercut others, worried I might be TUPE over onto a lower rate, would welcome a national rate of pay, and not to cut it, but increase it, or we risk losing expertise from the sector.”**

**“Squeezed salaries - the tendering process, would like to see salaries taken out of the tendering process - set a minimum salary.”**

## 5.4 Terms and Conditions

Another consequence of stretched budgets is the downgrading of terms and conditions, with frontline workers losing shift allowances, weekend pay, Banks Holidays and overtime pay. Poor terms and conditions have pushed some frontline staff into having to do more than one job in order to be able to support their families and afford their own housing costs. Again, as with social care, this sector employs a high proportion of women, so the low pay, short- term contracts and poor terms and conditions results in further inequality.

Rising travel costs are yet a further drain on frontline workers salaries, with expenses policies not reflecting fuel price rises. As one of the few services that kept going out during the pandemic to deliver vital face to face support, this hits support workers while other services have been able to move to working from home.

**“Need to look at whole thing - not just role and pay but support, counselling, flexi days - word gets out to staff of a good organisation and others want to work there.”**

**“Support workers don’t get shift allowance, weekend pay, so we are seeing staff leave.”**

**“We get paid 45p a mile for travel but actual cost is much higher, plus we have to pay own business insurance, needs to be looked at.”**

### **Recommendation:**

- The WT&FG should consider the development of a national pay framework to set minimum salary levels for homelessness and housing support workers.
- The WT&FG should consider how commissioning processes could further avoid creating a ‘race to the bottom’ for staff salaries.
- The WT&FG should consider how terms and conditions could be improved across the sector.

## 6. Progression and qualifications

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### 6.1 Progression

There was a mixed response regarding progression in the sector from frontline, with the number of opportunities for progression appearing to depend on the size on the organisation, with larger organisations such as housing associations being able to offer more in terms of career development opportunities. Others felt that they would need to leave their organisation to progress in their career, as there were a small number of managers and they were unlikely to leave soon.

However, it is important to note that not all frontline workers in the sector want to move in to management roles, with many feeling that this would take them away from the interaction with people using services. Examples were shared of workers who did gain promotions to managerial roles but missed the interaction with service users and so went back to frontline work. There was a strong feeling from some frontline workers that pay progression should not just be linked to moving into management roles, but that frontline staff should be rewarded for their years of experience, and be able to remain in frontline roles and still having some form of progression. Others felt that greater funding certainty could lead to the development of more senior roles, which retained contact with people using services, but provided an opportunity to gain skills and increased responsibility. A more nuanced approach to promotion in the sector would help to develop different career pathways to suit more workers, and would also prevent the loss of knowledge from frontline services.

The lack of clear career pathways has also resulted in some staff struggling to gain recognition for past work experience when returning to the sector after a break, rather than being able to build on their previous work in the sector, some have had to go back to the lowest pay grade when returning. As well as developing clear pathways, some form of careers advice would be useful for helping frontline workers document and gain recognition for experience gained in previous roles.

**“I got up to senior management – but didn’t like it because I missed working with the clients. So we need to recognise people who work in frontline services, reward them for their knowledge and experiences so you don’t lose them from the frontline.”**

**“Career wise – I haven’t progressed – but I don’t want to apply for manager roles – I want to work with clients. I think I could be happy staying in this role until retirement if pay reflected my work.”**

**“Manager role – weighed it up, it was £70 more after tax, more responsibility and would take me away from my team and clients, so not much incentive to go for it, but I want progression. We all want better ourselves but work life balance is important too.”**

## 6.2 Qualifications

More research needs to be done to explore the role of qualifications in supporting and developing the sector. There was a mixed response from the network on this topic and a number of issues were raised which need further consideration. Many workers in the sector already have qualifications but these aren’t always recognised or valued. Some people suggested that this was due to the lack of a clear qualifications framework for this sector. Others felt that their qualifications were viewed as not being directly relevant to the sector, but as with people coming from other sectors bring transferable skills, qualifications from other disciplines, such as sociology for example, can add value. The removal of financial support for staff to gain qualifications while working is a barrier for many. With low levels of pay there is little incentive to study to join the sector, and for those already in the sector, it makes paying for study inaccessible.

Some people felt that specific qualifications for the homelessness and housing support sector might be helpful for setting a minimum standard, and could help to increase recognition by other sectors as a ‘profession’. However, it is important to ensure that any move towards qualification and professionalisation does not become a barrier to starting a career in support work. As with social care, the sector risks turning away people with great potential if there is too much focus on qualifications as an entry requirement. Consideration also needs to be given to any additional burden that qualifications or accreditation will place on individuals and organisations, in terms of time, capacity and cost.

**“[My qualifications] have not made any difference to my role or how I’m perceived in my role, it won’t help me advance in floating support as there are limited roles, it is more of a personal achievement.”**

**“A lot of support workers have got qualifications, the organisation used to support staff to do qualifications in social work but there are too many financial restraints now.”**

### Recommendation:

- The WT&FG should explore the issue of qualifications in more detail, reflecting on developments in other areas and seeking to get the right balance between providing opportunities without creating real or perceived barriers for people entering the sector

## 7. Trauma and support

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As detailed above, work in the sector is extremely challenging; supporting people to deal with personal crises and the impact of trauma has a considerable emotional impact on staff. A support worker may spend much of their day listening to people's experiences of abuse, violence, exploitation, self harm or suicide, as they support people who are living through significant trauma. They encounter truly awful experiences, with a number of support staff telling us they have found people dead as a result of suicide, overdoses or the impact of physical health inequalities. The horror of finding someone they have been building a trusting relationship with for months, sometimes years, cannot be easily forgotten.

Support workers use high levels of empathy and trauma informed approaches when working with the people they support. However, that same duty of care is not uniformly given to frontline workers in the sector. There appears to be differing levels of support for staff depending on the organisation, with some providing very good support and others falling short.

Staff need access to a range of support that suits the individual and is ongoing. Some organisations provide access to phone helplines through their employee assistance scheme, but many of the frontline workers who spoke to us said they could not talk to an anonymous person on the phone about some of the things they have witnessed in their jobs. There was a sense that these are generic employee assistance programmes and were not equipped to support staff with the levels of vicarious trauma they experience. Many called for psychological support provided by someone independent of their organisation, but with the knowledge and experience of the trauma involved in their roles.

**“I’ve seen people hanging from light fittings, found dead in properties, experienced abuse, had to perform CPR on people.”**

**“We see people we have worked with for a long time who have overdosed and died, but we’re told to get on with it - there is a phone line offered – not used it, it’s impersonal.”**

**“When a client was found dead, I didn’t want to talk about that with someone on the end of phone who didn’t know the circumstances. Would be better if there was something in house, a phone line feels like the organisation is passing the buck.”**

### 7.1 The importance of teamwork and good leadership / management

Given the low pay and the stressful nature of the job, it can be difficult for anyone outside of the sector to understand what keeps people in these roles. It was very clear from the network that many would not be able to continue if it were not for the support of their managers and colleagues. The overwhelming majority of responses stated that the support of their co-workers and managers kept them going. It is humbling to hear the levels of commitment staff have towards each other - with some managers making themselves available 24 hours a day if staff need to contact them. However, it is clear that this way of working is not sustainable and the risks of burn out from frontline workers and managers is huge.

**“Close bond with colleagues - we support each other through all the different work we do.”**

**“Constant frustrations in the job, I would leave the job and sector if I didn’t have the support of a wonderful team, great organisation and manager, so that really buffers all the bad stuff.”**

## 7.2 Psychologically Informed Environments

As described above, many frontline workers spoke about the psychologically informed or trauma informed approaches they take when supporting people using their services. However a truly psychologically informed approach includes the provision of reflective practice and appropriate psychological support to enable workers to reflect on some of the challenging situations they encounter and to process the vicarious trauma experienced by many.

There were differing levels of access to reflective practice from the network, but all staff who spoke acknowledged the benefits of reflective practice and wanted to see this offered to all staff as part of ongoing support. Staff working in services which include regular access to clinical supervision spoke of the positive difference it makes to them and their ability to continue to undertake their roles and support the people using their services.

It was clear that the provision of psychological support varied considerably between services. Workers were acutely aware of the cost implications of providing this type of support, and the time and capacity implications of taking time out to engage in reflective practice, clinical supervision or other forms of psychological support. It appeared as though some of the larger organisations had greater capacity or funds to provide these things, but others were unable to.

Attendees were very strongly of the view that this type of provision should be included in the Housing Support Grant contracts awarded by local authorities, that enough funding should be awarded to pay for independent clinical or psychological support for staff, as well as to cover the time for staff to engage with reflective practice.

**“Feel very well supported, with PIE [Psychologically Informed Environments], someone comes in every 6 weeks or more if needed to deal with issues we have.”**

**“We’re supposed to be able to access counsellors via an app but we are so busy and don’t know how to use it, would be good to have someone in the team to help us with the emotional issues that staff face - we work with clients who have experienced domestic abuse, child protection, suicide attempts, substance use.”**

### Recommendations:

- The WT&FG should consider how to further support and develop supportive and psychologically informed leaders and managers.
- The WT&FG should recommend that reflective practice and appropriate psychological support should be provided to all homelessness and housing support staff – and this should be fully funded through the commissioning process.

## 8. Recruitment and retention

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### 8.1 Salaries and T&Cs

The two key things that frontline workers identified to address the current recruitment and retention issues faced by the sector are: salaries at the right level to attract the right people for the job, and good terms and conditions (including good levels of support for staff) to retain staff. As explained above, frontline workers felt very strongly that current salary levels do not reflect the responsibilities expected of support workers or the levels of knowledge and skills needed in the job. The insecurity of short-term contracts and the stress of annual funding applications also causes staff to move to more secure, and often less stressful sectors such as retail and hospitality.

## 8.2 Attracting people from outside of the sector

As highlighted at the start of this report, a number of attendees at the Frontline Network Wales meetings had come from very different professional background. However, there was a real sense that there was an untapped resource of potential support workers, who simply didn't know what the homelessness and housing support sector entails – or even know it exists. The impact of this is that the same pool of workers are simply moving around the system, securing new jobs but leaving further vacancies that need to be filled. There was some discussion about what could be done to increase awareness of the sector in order to attract more people to apply for homelessness and housing support roles and help to mitigate the recruitment issues facing so many organisations.

## 8.3 Job descriptions

Many of the frontline workers who spoke to us shared their frustration at inflexible and out of date job recruitment processes, including the use of job descriptions that do not reflect the realities of the job. This leads to two problems, firstly it results in a high turnover of staff as people apply for roles that in practice do not reflect the role they applied for on paper. It also acts as barrier for those already in support roles who want to apply for similar roles, because the experience they have gained in their current role does not match what is being asked for in the job descriptions.

This approach to recruitment risks overlooking potentially great applicants, and further disrupts teams with high levels of staff turnover as people who are not a good fit for the realities of the job leave soon after induction. This further stretches budgets as organisations need to spend more on the recruitment process, meanwhile current staff are put under more pressure to deliver extra shifts while services are understaffed.

There needs to be a balance between a recruitment process and job descriptions that reflect the realities of job, and ensuring that people with great values and transferrable skills are not put off from applying because they feel under qualified.

**“We’re seeing the salaries are not attracting the right people suitable for the job, so we’re using agency workers but it doesn’t make the young people [we support] feel secure, no disrespect to the agency worker, but they don’t have the connection with the young people.”**

**“Paying an appropriate wage will attract people initially but you won’t keep if them if the T&Cs aren’t good.”**

**“Often the role description is far removed for how we actually work - it doesn’t reflect the true skills and work load and responsibilities - we have much higher responsibilities than the pieces of paper we sign up to suggests.”**

### Recommendations:

- The WT&FG should support the Welsh Government’s planned communications campaign to attract people to work in the sector and consider what else could be done to improve recruitment and retention, beyond the recommendations above on pay, T&Cs and support for staff.
- The WT&FG should consider how recruitment processes and job descriptions could be improved to attract and retain the right people to the sector.

## 9. Recognition and respect

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The issues around pay, conditions and a lack of a formal qualifications framework within the sector also have a negative impact on perceptions of support workers roles outside of the sector, with frontline workers experiencing a lack of respect for their work from other professions. Staff spoke of their frustrations of not being seen as valid profession by others, and of the negative impact this had on services users. Support workers develop a detailed understanding of people's experiences, but are often cut out of meetings with other services or don't feel as though their views are being listened to or respected.

Improvements in pay and the development of a framework to formally recognise the skills of support workers, along with efforts to increase understanding of their critical work could help to improve the status of the sector and improve interactions with other services.

Another issue raised by a number of attendees was the Welsh Government's Financial Recognition Scheme, as many support workers have been refused the payment, despite floating support workers being included in the original guidance.

**"A lot of other services rely on housing - we find that social services and health board come to us for assistance – but they try to tell us how to do our jobs because they don't understand what we do."**

**"There is a perception from statutory services that we will provide the help people need, when it should be coming from other services, our work is seen like the poor relation, it's very frustrating."**

**"We're treated like we're bottom of the food chain - "you're only a support worker" - but I am the one who puts someone a house."**

**"Not so much about the pay but the sense of not being appreciated, our team are great and we support each other, but things like the £500 bonus, we are now having to appeal it because we're being told that we don't do frontline work, so for me it's not the pay but the feeling of not being recognised."**

### Recommendations

- The WT&FG should consider how we can improve the recognition and respect for homelessness and housing support workers among other professions and sectors.

## 10. Next steps

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Frontline workers would like their views to be considered by the Workforce Task and Finish Group and incorporated into the recommendations made to Ministers and the Housing Support National Advisory Board. If any further engagement is required, Cymorth Cymru is very happy to utilise the Frontline Network Wales to gather any further insight, through further meetings or surveys.