AGENDA ITEM
4

Corporate & Housing Services Performance Update

Falkirk Council

Subject:	**Corporate & Housing Services Performance Update**
Meeting:	**Performance Panel**
Date:	**11 August 2016**
Submitted By:	**Director of Corporate & Housing Services**

1.   Purpose of Report

1.1   This report sets out an executive summary of Corporate & Housing Services performance for the period April to June 2016 and includes our:

- key priorities;
- key areas for improvement;
- significant challenges, risks and changes in Service pressures since last Performance Panel update;
- important indicators; and
- engagement with our customers.

1.2   The attached Performance Panel Statement seeks to update Members on progress towards achieving the important actions and indicators drawn from our Service Plan.

2.   Recommendation

2.1   The Panel is asked to note the performance of Corporate & Housing Services over the period April to June 2016.

3.   Key Priorities

3.1   We have set the following key priorities for our Service since the development of the Service in August 2015. These are:

Priority One: Delivering improvement and transformation of services across the Council

Priority Two: Reviewing our services to ensure they meet the changing needs of our customers and communities

3.2   As Officers we continually monitor progress on all of the actions within our Service Plan. We have identified nine key actions which ensure the above priorities are met. Progress on each of these is provided in the attached Performance Panel Statement.

3.3 The Performance Panel Statement also includes our Service Plan actions that are currently significantly behind target.

4.   Key Areas for Improvement

4.1 We have established four Improvement Groups within the Service. An update on the progress of each Group is provided below:

Future Frontline Service Delivery to Customers

4.2 In March 2016 the Council Executive approved the implementation of a pilot project to deliver the hub and spoke model of advice and support in the East of the Council. This will create a main Advice Hub with outreach spokes across the area based in existing facilities, such as libraries, increasing the number of facilities where these services will be available.

- **Staffing** – staff will be seconded to the pilot project from teams who currently provide services delivered via the hub. The Advice Hub Manager has been selected and the selection process for the Receptionists and Multi-skilled Advisers is underway.
- **Property** – the Advice Hub will be located in the current Grangemouth One Stop Shop premises in York Lane following a refit with additional confidential areas for sensitive discussions. Plans for the Advice Hub have been agreed and detailed survey work has been undertaken. This revealed additional work required to deliver the Hub, including removal of asbestos which has impacted on the timescales for this work. We are currently working to finalise the programme for this work which we are aiming to have completed by December 2016.
- **Outreach Spokes** – a number of proposed outreach locations have been identified for trial as part of the pilot. We plan to carry out some community engagement around the outreach arrangements for Bo'ness before we firm up the final model of service delivery in this area. A meeting is being set up with local Members prior to a community engagement exercise to discuss options identified by Officers.

Services to Tenants

4.3 In December 2015 the Improvement Group agreed the following key issues for review:

- performance management;
- participation;
- staff and organisational development;
- image; and
- customer access points.

4.4 The Group further agreed that the following complimentary areas of work should be included in the review:

- collection of rents and payments;
- grounds maintenance;
- waste management;
- void properties;
- tenant and resident involvement;
- housing policy and strategy; and
- investment.

4.5 The main focus has been to consult with staff and tenants on the proposed changes to frontline service delivery, referencing the work of the Chartered Institution of Housing (CIH) in their Frontline Futures document (Appendix 2). Consultation with tenants and staff has taken place in relation to the current role of frontline housing (neighbourhood) officers and customer expectations of the future role of frontline housing officers. Three workshops have been held to consider and progress the changes required to the existing remit of Neighbourhood Officers. There were common principles raised by the tenants and staff for example Housing Officers spending more time in their "patch" and for them to be empowered to deal with all issues relating to tenancies, including rent management; estates management; tenancy matters and housing options advice. Work has commenced on reviewing the existing Neighbourhood Officer job description and the consideration of a new post of Housing Assistant. Draft job descriptions are being prepared.

4.6 Staff and tenants have been kept up-to-date on current progress of the Group through newsletters and an article has also been covered in the latest issue of Tenant Talk.

4.7 The next steps for the Improvement Group are:

- the development of a comprehensive survey of tenants to gauge their view on the future of their service. The survey was issued to tenants on 20 July 2016 and will be open for six weeks (legal requirement). This will be followed up by a series of focus groups in the three geographical areas and will include consultation with local Members. The focus groups will run alongside the survey with results likely to be available by mid-September;
- refine job descriptions – will be completed by end August 2016;
- mobile working to be introduced to provide flexibility – mobile pilot due to be completed by end July 2016; and
- report to Committee, once the structure has been agreed and consulted on within the Service, Member approval for the development of a pilot project will be sought.

4.8 It is expected that a report will be prepared for Members before the end of the year.

Rent Collection & Rent Arrears

4.9 A review of all Scottish local authorities has been undertaken looking at pre-tenancy and sign up, early arrears, legal action, eviction and former tenants. In addition to this work there were a number of site visits, for example, to Glasgow Housing Association, Fife Council and Dundee Council.

A consolidation day was arranged to bring learning back to Falkirk and an action plan agreed. Where possible, all actions are in place for the start of the financial year 2017/18.

4.10 The action plan has been finalised (with the exception of where work intersects with the Services to Tenants Improvement Group) with the following key actions:

- implement a corporate debt policy;
- develop a greater local and personal knowledge about each of our tenants;
- improve the clarity of our written correspondence (reminder letters);
- ensure that all staff involved in administration / recovery of rent are trained to identify potential support needs and equipped to address these;
- establish an 'eviction panel' to consider the more sensitive cases; and
- continue to improve by having a quarterly review of lessons learned from evictions, as well as from sample of court applications made.

4.11 Tenancy Sustainment Officers, over the last two years, have made progress in developing a greater knowledge of our tenants, however this has been predominantly relating to tenants who have already fallen into arrears. Going forward an action for this Improvement Group and the Services to Tenants Improvement Group is to get to know our tenants before they are in debt to allow us to prevent debt accumulating or more effectively intervene at earliest opportunity. Both project managers are actively discussing how the objectives of the two projects can be addressed holistically.

Building Maintenance Division

4.12 The Performance Panel were advised in November 2015 of a number of key actions that would be progressed. An update on actions since then is provided below:

- **Work Scheduling Team** (WST) – extended to cover the entire of east of Falkirk's reactive repairs. The WST are making appointments with customers within the pilot area for all reactive non-emergency works; scheduling and allocating the work for 50 tradesmen; allocating work to over 30 Total Mobile Pilot Team Operatives; dealing with all repair complaints; providing additional work instructions and technical advice.

  Performance in the pilot area at the end of 2015/16 was:

  - over 90% of work instructions appointed (30% other Council areas);
  - 98% appointments kept (97% other Council areas);
  - 5% reduction on emergency work instructions passed to outwith hours standby;
  - 95% of all work instructions are raised with accurate information (88% other Council areas); and
  - 2% reduction on the requirement to extend work instruction targets.

  These headline indicators help to show the positive improvements in efficiency being made.

- **Mobile Working** – first phase complete at East Depot and now working fully mobile within our reactive maintenance which has assisted in better co-ordination of work and increased productivity. This will allow for future savings / advantages of paperless working, working straight from home, up-to-date information on work status and the reduction of staff input from traditional clerical duties. Around 50 mobile working devices became operational in March 2016. Mobile working is now being extended to our technical supervisor within voids contracts and will provide the same efficiencies as above.
- **Home to Work** – benchmarked other local authorities to help us significantly change the way the repairs service is provided. We are at the final stages of finalising zoned working, cross contract working and how the team is serviced with materials from stores. Protocols have been agreed with trade unions for home to work working for lone drivers and we are at the final stages of finalising proposals for passengers and non-drivers.
- **Temporary to Permanent Changes –** all of the 78 employees who were on a temporary contract status have been offered permanent contracts. We now have, for the first time in over 30 years, a fully permanent craft workforce in place. This has boosted morale and allowed employees to plan for their future, provides additional support to obtain mortgages and other financial loans and also provides job reassurance.
- **Cyclical Maintenance** – current market testing exercise undertaken with no detrimental impact to BMD employees, with the majority of painters currently working on the voids contract, undertaking internal painter work, as part of the new enhanced voids standard. Results have been positive with work costing between 50%-70% less than comparable BMD rates and the flexibility in resourcing the contract to meet contract deadlines. There will also be benefit in relation to the current requirement to provide for site welfare facilities, site supervision and vehicles. In addition, due to flexibility of using an external provider, there will be a saving of over 8% in non-productive time currently being experienced due to poor weather conditions.
- **Voluntary Severance** – total of 53 final offers made with 35 accepted. This has supported the move to a permanent workforce and also supports the efficiencies made within cyclical maintenance and the reactive repairs division.
- **Schedule of Rates (SOR) –** reduction from c4,000 SOR to 750. This has reduced time spent by operatives completing work lines as there is now only one individual set of rates over the three main repairs contracts. This will produce savings to HRA through reducing rates to the lowest applicable rate of the three contracts.
- **Depot Provision –** reduction from three operating depots to one has started with a phased approach. Notice has been given not to extend the current lease agreement in Winchester Avenue Depot which comes to an end in November. At present only the reactive maintenance team remain in Winchester with all other staff accommodated between our two remaining depots. Work has started within Inchyra depot reconfiguring the building to allow for the move to a single depot by the end of 2017. All costs will be borne within the building maintenance financial accounts.

5. Update from last Performance Panel

5.1 There have been a number of significant challenges, risks and changes in Service pressures since our last report to Performance Panel. This section notes some of these:

- Best Value Audit Improvement Plan has been agreed by Council and will be supported in its delivery by our Service. The Service has supported the follow-up best value audit which focussed on three main areas. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this audit will be incorporated into the annual audit report which will be received from Audit Scotland in the Autumn.
- The Community Planning Partnership has approved its final plan which will be presented to individual agencies etc. after the recess for approval. This plan sets out clear priorities and outcomes with delivery plans being developed over the coming months by the agreed delivery groups.
- The Service is currently co-ordinating work both within the Council and across the Community Planning Partnership with regards to refugees.

6. Important Indicators

6.1 Our Service has a suite of indicators that are required for statutory and business related purposes. As agreed by members, a proportionate approach would be taken on the reporting of these indicators. We have identified 16 important indicators. We have provided information on all our important indicators in the attached Performance Panel Statement. Indicators that are on target have comparative data for your information. Indicators that are significantly below target or slightly below target have additional background information on the progress and improvement actions for each.

7. Engagement with Customers

7.1 The Citizens' Panel so far this financial year has covered: community participation, a review of the Citizen Panel, customer satisfaction in relation to experience of contacting the Council and receiving information from the Council; and making a complaint.

7.2 Our Service is currently in the process of engaging with our service users on the following:

- **Budget Engagement** – equality and poverty impact assessments (EPIAs) will be updated for previously considered savings not used and prepared for all new budget savings. Appropriate engagement with service users will be undertaken. It is intended a report will be prepared for Council in early autumn detailing savings options. These options will go on the Council website for public information / comment;**Strategic;**

- **Outcome and Local Delivery Plan** – we are developing, with Children's Services, a process for developing locality planning underpinned by a process of participatory budgeting. This model will be developed in conjunction with Members at a seminar in August on the implications of the Community Empowerment Act;

- **Housing Rent** – Tenants will be consulted on rent and value for money through the Tenants & Residents Forum and Tenant's Newsletter in November and December; and

- **Local Housing Strategy** – an online consultation survey was carried out over the summer and briefing sessions held for Members and the Tenants & Residents Forum are arranged. In addition, the next Citizen Panel will be issued at the end of November and will include questions about the Strategy.

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Director of Corporate & Housing Services

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Date: 2 August 2016

Corporate & Housing Services - Performance Panel Statement - April 2016 to June 2016

Key Actions Progress

    Action is significantly behind target.

    Action is slightly behind target or in danger of not achieving deadline.

    Action is on target.

    Action is completed.

Key Priorities CHS

CHS Priority One: Delivering improvement and transformation of services across the Council

Action		Progress	Status
BT15-004	Review business support functions across all Services to streamline processes, eliminate duplication and deliver efficiencies.	On target. Revised approach for schools agreed with Children's Services. Analysis of all school clerical tasks complete. Report with recommendations for model of delivery to be complete by end July 2016. Project plans for functional areas progressing. Revised structure being developed, target completion date September 2016. Communication Strategy now agreed and issued.	▶
BT16-003	Continue to implement and roll out the technology that delivers mobile and flexible working across the Council.	Work continues to progress on the delivery of mobile and flexible working across the Council's corporate network. Work to complete the rollout to the Municipal Building is scheduled to be completed by the summer and preparatory work to roll out the solution to colleagues delivering the advice hub is at an advanced stage. Additionally, development work is ongoing to progress roll out to Adult Services.	▶
CSP15-5.2.03	Continue to develop the Medium and Long Term Financial Strategy.	This process will continue to be reviewed and refined.	▶
CSP16-5.2.01	Review and support progress on business transformation across the Council.	Business Transformation Board continues to meet as per the schedule. Projects are being reported to the Board at appropriate intervals. A new Change Manager will commence in August in partnership with the Improvement Service. A programme schedule is also being developed to support the work of the Board.	▶

CHS Priority Two: Reviewing our services to ensure they meet the changing needs of our customers and communities

Action		Progress	Status
BT16-002	Implement a digital services solution for the Council that supports self-service, mobile working and service transformation.	Council website received 3* rating from SOCITM, June 2016. It is device responsive, based on top tasks and is being further developed based on customer data. To enable online forms linked directly to back office systems Firmstep has been procured. Training has been completed by developers and web staff and work is ongoing with Revenues & Benefits to implement online forms covering direct debit, single person reduction and change of circumstances. A presentation on digital services has been given to the Business Transformation Board and is being presented to all Service Management Teams. A separate presentation on this issue is on the agenda of this Performance Panel.	▶
CSP15-1.2.01	Review and refresh the Council's Poverty Strategy.	Poverty and inequalities are priorities within the new Strategic Outcome and Local Delivery Plan (SOLD), particularly the effect of poverty on Children. The main focus, therefore, over the next few months will be developing a delivery plan for that priority, establishing a community planning group to take forward the outcome within the SOLD and also looking at solutions to existing financial inclusion issues.	▶
CSP15-3.2.01	Implement the 2015-18 Housing Investment Programme to ensure housing stock continues to meet Scottish Housing Quality Standards beyond 2015; improves energy efficiency; provides additional affordable homes to meet needs and improve our housing estates.	**Housing Investment Programme 2016/17 to 2018/19:** **1.** The current 3 year programme includes a total investment of £81.88m was approved in February 2016. **2.** Over the life of the programme c£48.75m will be spent on maintaining our existing council housing stock to the SHQS and improving the energy efficiency of our stock to the new Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (EESSH). **3.** c£33.13m will be spent on delivering a range of initiatives to deliver new and additional affordable homes and to expand the scope of housing options to help meet tenants housing needs. **4.** A target of c90 additional homes will be provided during 2016/17 as part of the Council's Buy-Back programme. A total of 16 Buy-Back sales have been concluded since 1 April 2016, with a further 10 acceptances, pending legal conclusion. **5.** 18 new Council homes will be completed in 2016/17.	▶
CSP16-5.3.01	Support the Council to deliver our requirements under the Community Empowerment Act.	A report was presented to the Executive in June outlining the impact of the Community Empowerment Act. A seminar has been organised for Members in August to discuss in more detail some aspects of this Act, including locality planning and participatory budgeting. A further report will be presented to Members in the autumn outlining proposed processes to address some key elements in the Act.	▶
CSP16-5.3.03	Finalise and then oversee the delivery of our new Strategic Outcomes and Local Delivery Plan	The SOLD was approved by the Community Planning Leadership Board at its meeting in June and will be presented to individual partners for approval. Delivery plans are currently being developed by key delivery groups in order to ensure the actions within the Plan are taken forward appropriately across the Partnership.	▶

Important Indicators

On target CHS ▶

	2014/15 Value	2015/16 Value	2016/17 Value	Target	Benchmark
AHS 1 Percentage of New Tenancies sustained for more than a year	91.5%	88.0%	88.5%	90.0%	87.7% Scottish Housing Network (SHN) Average 2014-15
AHS 12 Percentage of settled accommodation secured by unintentionally homeless applicants	89.9%	90.2%	91.2%	85.0%	80% (Scottish Government report on Operation of Homeless Persons Legislation June 2014) Average
FIN_IMP_001 Number of days to process new Housing Benefit claims	25	20	N/A	25	24 days DWP Scottish average for 2014/15
FIN_IMP_002 Number of days to process Housing Benefit change events	8	6	N/A	10	8 days DWP Scottish average for 2014/15
CHS033 Sickness Absence: Craft Staff	7.1%	6.4%	5.8%	5.5%	4.09% APSE Performance Network (BMD Family Group) Average 2013/14
CNS056 Procurement Capability Assessment	70	N/A	70.4	N/A	60 Scotland Excel Local Authority Average 2014
GGV 5a Gross rent arrears (all tenants) as at 31 March each year as a percentage of rent due for the reporting year	7.66%	8.02%	6.49%	6.10%	5.92% Indicative SHN Average 2015-16
GGV 6 Percentage of Rent Lost through properties being empty during the last year	1.72%	0.98%	1.05%	1.0%	1% SHN Average 2015/16
HQM 1 Percentage of Stock meeting the Scottish Housing Quality Standard	82.79%	91.10%	N/A	95%	92.2% SHN Average 2015/16

	2014/15 Value	2015/16 Value	2016/17 Value	Target	Benchmark
HQM 3a Average length of time taken to complete emergency repairs (in hours)	5.35	5.86	5.66	6	5.7 hours SHN Average 2015/16
HQM 9 Percentage of Tenants satisfied with the standard of their home when moving in	84.1%	90.8%	91.4%	90.0%	84.10% SHN Average 2015/16
HQM 11 Percentage of Tenants who have had repairs or maintenance carried out in last 12 months satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service	89.3%	93.4%	92.8%	90.0%	87.9% SHN Average 2015/16

Slightly below target CHS ⚠

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	Target	Benchmark
CHS060 Percentage of FOI enquiries dealt with in 20 working days	N/A	93%	87%	100%	No Benchmark applicable, however expectations would be 100% as per FOI timescales.

Progress
Performance levels will continue to be closely monitored on a monthly basis. YTD Number of FOI's received: 103 YTD Number of FOI's responded to: 112 YTD Of those responded to, number within statutory timescale: 97 April 85%, May 87%, June 88% Year to date performance 87%. Information updated July 2016.

Improvement Action
Tightened timescales and ensure staff awareness of response timescale requirements. A new spreadsheet has been created which allows active cases to be closely monitored and regular contact will be maintained with departments to ensure that Freedom of Information request are responded to within the timescales specified.

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	Target	Benchmark
CHS061 Sickness Absence: Corporate & Housing Services	N/A	4.86%	4.62%	4%	No benchmark - target locally determined

Progress

May 2016: Absence days 1474.5, Working days 31179= 4.73%
This is an increase of 0.1 % from April.

Absence is managed in line with the Council's Managing Sickness and Absence Policy. This involves a combination of Return to Work interviews; specialist medical and OH referrals; workplace adaptations; informal and formal monitoring. All staff has been trained on the Council's absence policy.

Information updated July 2016. Absence stats for the previous month will be reported at the end of the next month.

Improvement Action

A number of measures have been taken to minimise sickness absence across the Service. These include:
• Barrachd has now been rolled out and provides management information. Work continues to develop this process.
• New divisional absence targets have been identified and agreed by Joint Consultative Committee.
• The trigger process has ceased and has been replaced by a number of new actions as reported at Joint Consultative Committee.
• The revised Managing Sickness Absence Policy was considered at Informal JCC in January 2016 however further discussion with the trade unions is required on some aspects of the policy. The Capability Policy will be reviewed following the agreed revisions to the Absence policy.

Significantly below target CHS 🛑

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	Target	Benchmark
CHS047 Percentage of 1st stage complaints responded to within timescales	N/A	82%	86%	100%	100% SPSO Target

Progress

Performance levels will continue to be closely monitored on a monthly basis. 1st stage complaints received year to date was 261. Those closed within 5 working days were 224.

April 96%, May 79%, June 82%
Year to date performance is 86%.

Information updated July 2016.

Improvement Action

Increased focus on checks by Customer Service Team and Service Unit Managers on a twice-weekly basis on overdue cases and increased focus on performance.
We are continuing to develop our processes to ensure that timescales are adhered to.

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	Target	Benchmark
HQM 4a Average length of time taken to complete non-emergency repairs (in working days)	12	11	12	9	9.2 days SHN Average 2015/16

Progress

Total number of non-emergency repairs completed year to date (2016/17) was 5,962.
Total number of working days taken to complete non-emergency repairs year to date (2016/17) were 71,251.

Therefore, the average length of time taken to complete non-emergency repairs for 2016/17 was 11.95 days.

For April 2016 the average length of time was 10.89 days

For May the average length of time was 13.28 days.

Information updated July 16
June data not yet available

However this was to be expected as there was a high level of manufacturing items completed during this May. There is a minimum of 4 week manufacturing period to produce these items (windows and door fittings), which has impact negatively in our performance during May.

We would expect our performance to have improved once June's data is available.
June data not yet available due to the invoicing timescales used to report on this indicator . This Information will be available from the 14th of August

Improvement Action

The introduction of the Workflow Planning Team at the beginning of August 2015 has assisted in reducing our timescales. This was introduced for the East responsive repairs.
The West will be added to the Workflow Planning Team later this year. This should again reduce the timescales for the forthcoming year.
Appointments for non-emergency repairs are still provided within 72 hours of the repair being reported.
We are currently in the process of introducing a mobile working solution for reactive repairs which will include improvements to our appointment scheduling process. This will improve the way in which we schedule non-emergency repairs and have a positive impact on our performance against this indicator.

Audits

Title		Update	Status
AU15-004	BSI Accredited Services - Internal and External Audits	The BSI audit is carried out yearly. The next visit from BSI is expected to be May 2017	▶
AU15-005	Members Services: Civic Receptions, Training, Allowances and Expenses	Final report circulated on 10/12/15 by Internal Audit. All recommendations now on Covalent and being updated individually. See listings IA_97 to 109.	⬢
AU16-001	Procurement of Services from External Providers of Social Work Services (Joint with Adult Services)	Audit outcome awaited.	▶
AU16-002	Housing Rents	Audit outcome awaited.	▶
AU16-003	Integrated Housing Management System - Security & Management	Audit outcome awaited.	▶

Inspections

Title		Update	Status
INSP15-001	Benefit Risk Inspection	Stage 8 of 8 completed re Chief Executive response issued to Audit Scotland in February 2016 which included our Action Plan to target the identified 4 new risks by 31st March 2017.	✓
INSP15-003	Annual Inspection of Registered Events	The annual inspection continues to be delayed due to staffing changes at National Records of Scotland. No date has been given when this inspection will take place. Due date changed to end July 2016.	△
INSP16-001	Procurement & Commercial Improvement Programme Assessment (PCIP) - Scotland Excel	Assessment undertaken on 11/07/16 with a score of 70.4 placing the Council in the top ranked section.	✓

New era, changing role
for housing officers

Executive Summary

The shape of the future frontline housing role

The housing front line is changing. This research has helped to identify some core characteristics for frontline roles and the qualities that people in these roles need to possess.

Future frontline roles will be:

- Differentiated – using data intelligence to guide how officer time is used, rather than providing a blanket service for all residents
- Relational – doing things with residents, rather than doing things to or for them
- Interactive – working alongside professionals from other disciplines to achieve a broader range of outcomes for residents
- Varied and creative – finding solutions, even if they lie outside of 'normal activity'
- Engaged and impactful – doing things with the intention of having a positive impact on people's lives and the organisation's bottom line
- Novel and anticipatory – doing something now to avoid negative consequences later on.

Key future qualities and competencies

The key qualities and competencies that frontline officers will need to possess are:

- Ability to be effective in a quickly changing environment
- Commercial awareness – how the way they do their job supports company finances
- Ability to solve problems – to be flexible and adaptable and able to respond to situations creatively, in the moment

- Good listening and communication (people) skills – to interact, liaise and negotiate effectively with sometimes vulnerable residents as well as technical staff and local partners
- Resilience and emotional intelligence – to be able to cope with difficult situations and handle them well
- A 'can do' improvement-focused attitude – not precious about rank or job boundaries, but prepared to take responsibility and get things done
- Ability to analyse and interpret customer insight intelligence and to allow that to drive their actions
- Ability to be self-aware and critically reflective and a desire to keep learning
- Confidence to assess and take calculated risks
- Ability to connect their experience on the ground with the bigger picture and to inform policy
- Ability and willingness to make a positive contribution to team culture and to inspire and gain the confidence of others
- Ability to self-manage.

Social heart and commercial head

Frontline housing workers are expected to be much more 'commercially minded' in the future than they are now, but the research found respondents were keen to underline this is 'business for a purpose' and there was a strong sense of the social value that the frontline role can bring to tenant-customers and to wider communities.

Judgement not processes

It is worth noting that there is a high level of consensus that effective frontline workers will not just be following procedures or simply processing in the future. A downgrading of 'process' as an effective way of doing business is one of the most consistent pieces of evidence coming through the survey, interviews, focus groups and appreciative inquiries.

Recommendations

The report makes a number of recommedations in Chapter 9. The key recommendations are included here:

Frontline housing workers

- Frontline workers need support and resilience training to help them deal with the challenges of the role in future and in the current context of the impact of welfare reform.
- Frontline staff and their organisations need to identify ways to evidence the social value of what they do – through a Social Return on Investment or similar approach – and communicate their impact effectively to all stakeholders to demonstrate how housing helps with myriad social problems related to health, well-being and isolation.
- Frontline housing workers need to work with their employers to ensure support is given through health and safety processes to ensure that workers are enabled to do the best job they can do, whilst staying safe.
- Work with CIH to facilitate networks with other services, such as health and social services. These networks should be for frontline workers to gain the support and help they need to co-ordinate transdisciplinary responses to meet tenant-customer needs across localities.

CIH, educators and trainers

- There is an urgent need for a nationally recognised campaign to promote a more positive profile of housing professionals and the role they play in communities and to promote housing as a career.
- The professional body, trainers and educators should continue to work with housing employers to ensure the sector is equipped with the skills and expertise needed now and in the future.

- CIH and housing educators should continue to work with housing employers on flexible and bespoke courses to suit a range of different experience and expertise. They also need to sell the value of housing education, with the help of CIH, so that housing employers recognise what a qualified housing frontline worker will bring to their organisation.

Managers and leaders

- Housing leaders would strongly benefit from greater exposure to day-to-day practice to maintain their understanding of the pressures faced by those on the front line.
- Housing leaders should also foster a 'can do'/'think yes' culture, particularly in terms of working with tenant-customers in the co-creation of services.
- Housing employers would benefit from more detailed understanding of the competencies required for frontline job roles and better matching of candidates into these roles.

Housing sector influencers

- Tenancy sustainment is vital for the future of the 'business for a purpose', but there are fears amongst frontline workers that the focus may 'lock out' those who cannot afford rents or who may be vulnerable in the future.
- Housing professionals will benefit from better networks within the health and social services professions.
- Tenant-customers feel they would benefit from improved access to benchmarking resources and good practice information to better equip them to hold their landlords to account.

Foreword

I'm delighted to introduce our Frontline Futures research, which we hope will be the start of an industry-wide debate on the future role of the frontline housing professional.

This report is a timely reminder of just how valuable frontline housing workers are – they are changing and in some cases saving lives. But they are also under huge pressure from welfare reform and the housing crisis, and the diverse range of skills they need to master is changing along with customers' expectations.

I believe this research will be incredibly useful for housing organisations. It highlights the skills frontline workers need now and in the future and what employers must do to ensure they have the training and support they need. For CIH, it gives us invaluable evidence on what we must do to make sure that our support, qualifications and education are fit for the future.

It also throws up a range of challenges. What can we do to showcase the enormous value of people who live and work in social housing? How can we promote careers in housing more effectively? And how can we help housing professionals connect with their counterparts in health and social care? We are determined to resolve these challenges, and with your help, I believe we can.

Grainia Long
Chief executive,
Chartered Institute of Housing

Wheatley Group is delighted to be involved in this important and timely research.

We have long since recognised the vital role frontline staff, particularly housing officers, play in sustaining communities. As we look to the future, that role has never been more important. The ongoing difficult economic environment, coupled with the UK government's welfare reforms, continue to challenge many of our customers.

It is also a particularly challenging time for housing professionals. In supporting customers and communities, we need to think and work more creatively, more collaboratively, as we reach out to colleagues in the statutory, voluntary and commercial sectors.

At Wheatley, where we have patch sizes of just 200 homes, we expect and support our housing professionals not only to know their patch intimately but to have personal, informed relationships with the people they serve. Increasingly, we are also recruiting, developing and retaining housing professionals acutely aware of the importance of maximising income, while addressing sympathetically the often desperate needs of our hard-pressed tenants.

No profession can afford to stand still, least of all housing.

Martin Armstrong
Chief executive,
Wheatley Group

Acknowledgements

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

The housing front line is changing. This study seeks to examine the challenges that housing organisations are facing, and how frontline services are adapting to meet new demands driven both by the socio-political economic environment and by the housing customer.

The study published interim findings in March 2014, which we have expanded on in this report in order to meet the following key aims:

- Understand the context for change and implications for frontline housing delivery.
- Specify key issues emerging and provide examples of different responses across the sector.
- Suggest recommendations for the future: where should the sector look to adapt its responses and frontline delivery?

We have also drawn out some good practice examples to illustrate points throughout the report. Whilst not necessarily indicative of what the whole social housing sector is doing, these examples from forward-thinking organisations are included in the interests of lesson-learning.

Research methodology

The research team used a number of approaches to collect evidence:

Surveys
Using survey monkey, we analysed 1,054 online survey responses (1,013 to the main survey and 41 to a tenant-customers' survey).

Online engagement
Social media was important in terms of raising the profile of the research project and highlighting the link to the online survey. There was a good debate on Twitter and 135 people engaged directly using the project hashtag #housingff.

Webinars
There were two webinars hosted by the research team via CIH online for those professionals interested in the research project.

Focus groups
In total, the research team held 13 focus groups. These groups allowed collective reflection for a wide range of different organisation types and levels of professionals to think about the frontline housing role.

Appreciative inquiries
Four of these sessions were held in total – two in England and two in Scotland. In each of those two countries, one of the sessions was for housing professionals and the other was for tenant-customers. The appreciative inquiry method is to focus on what works now and visioning for the future – it is a positive, forward-looking style of engagement.

Interviews
In order to probe deeper into some of the themes from the survey, focus groups and indeed wider literature, the team undertook 49 interviews across the UK with a range of professionals.

Profile of survey responses

There were 1,013 respondents to the main project survey and a further 41 surveys from tenant-customers.

Out of the 1,013 main survey responses, 983 people told us about the type of organisation they worked for. This is shown in the pie chart opposite.

Type of Organisation

- Local authority (stock holding)
- Local authority (no stock)
- Housing association (general needs)
- Housing association (specialist)
- ALMO
- Private landlord
- Consultancy/Agency
- Professional body
- Other

In the main survey, 989 responses included information on the approximate stock size of the respondent's organisation. The chart below shows the range of organisations answering, from non stock-holding through to those with more than 40,000 homes.

Zero - we are non stock holding	7.58%
<100	2.33%
Between 100 and 1000	6.98%
Between 1000 and 10,000	39.43%
Between 10,000 and 20,000	21.23%
Between 20,000 and 30,000	9.00%
Between 30,000 and 40,000	4.75%
>40,000	7.58%
Other	1.11%
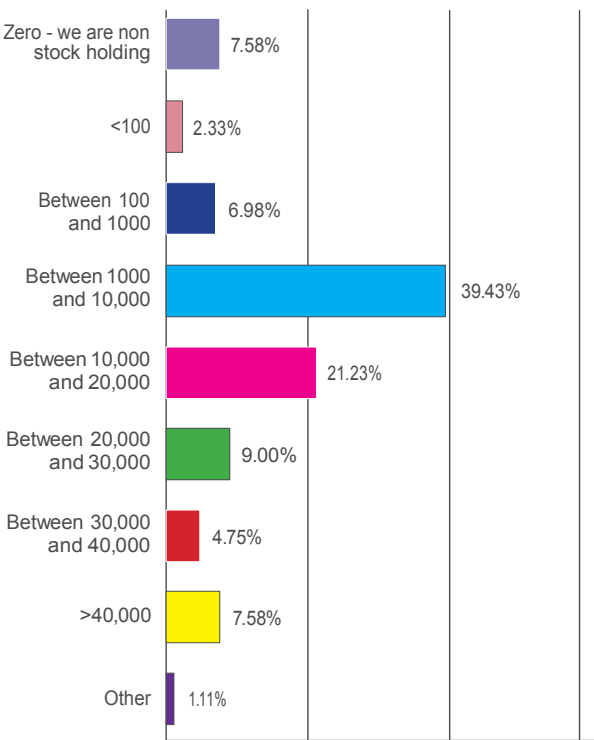
In terms of geographical spread, both by country and area characteristic, the results are shown below. We didn't see a strong correlation with findings based on country of origin – for example, there isn't one 'core competency' that Scottish housing organisations valued more than those in England. Influencing factors were not markedly different in any of the countries either. Indeed, the themes on where change was heading for the housing sector appeared consistent across the UK from the survey responses.
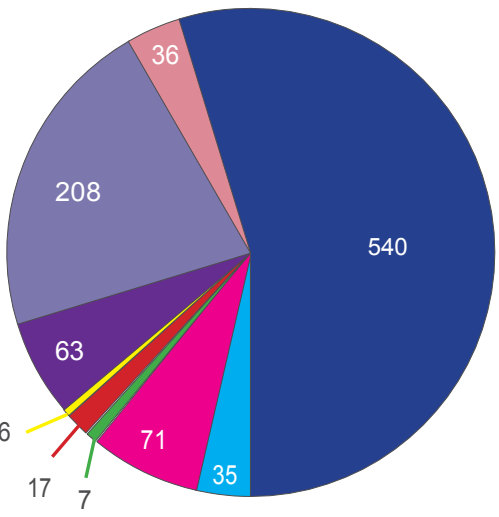
990 respondents told us which country they were based in:
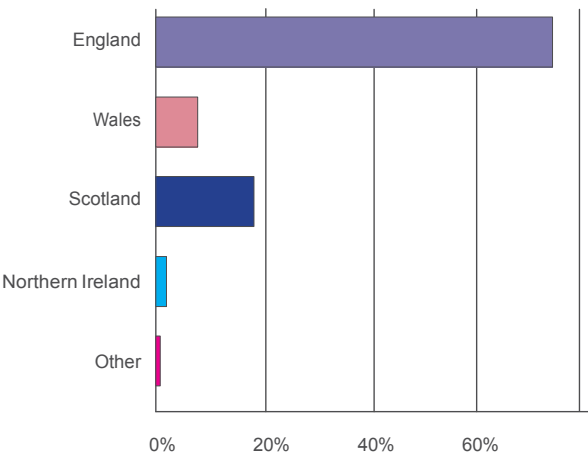
973 respondents told us about the character of their area:

Mostly urban	42.45%
Mostly rural	7.71%
Mostly urban and rural	48.82%
Other	1.02%
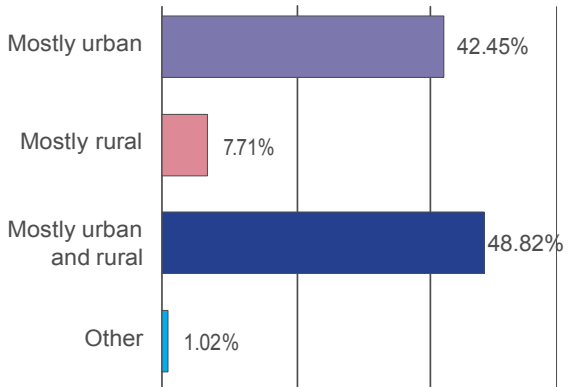
A total of 873 respondents gave their job title, which is where the complexities within the sector become more readily apparent. We purposefully used a free text response for this question so that people would 'self-define' their role, rather than using a drop-down menu of pre-selected options. Of the 873 responses, there was a real diversity in job titles given. In many cases, it was possible to group types of titles together to establish that the majority of responses were in 'core' frontline housing management roles, but there were very many in a range of roles reflecting the wide and varied tasks associated with 'housing'. In total, 174 respondents to our survey used 'housing officer' as their title, or as part of their job title. In addition to 'housing officers' and 'neighbourhood managers', the range of roles included welfare reform officers, customer focus roles, estate management and repairs, care and support as well as a small number of Chief Executives who responded.

In the tenant-customer survey there were 41 responses, so this was a much smaller data set. Of the 41 tenant-customer respondents, the large majority were from England, with a handful from Scotland and one in Wales. Most tenant-customers rented their homes from housing associations, with a few renting from councils with retained stock.
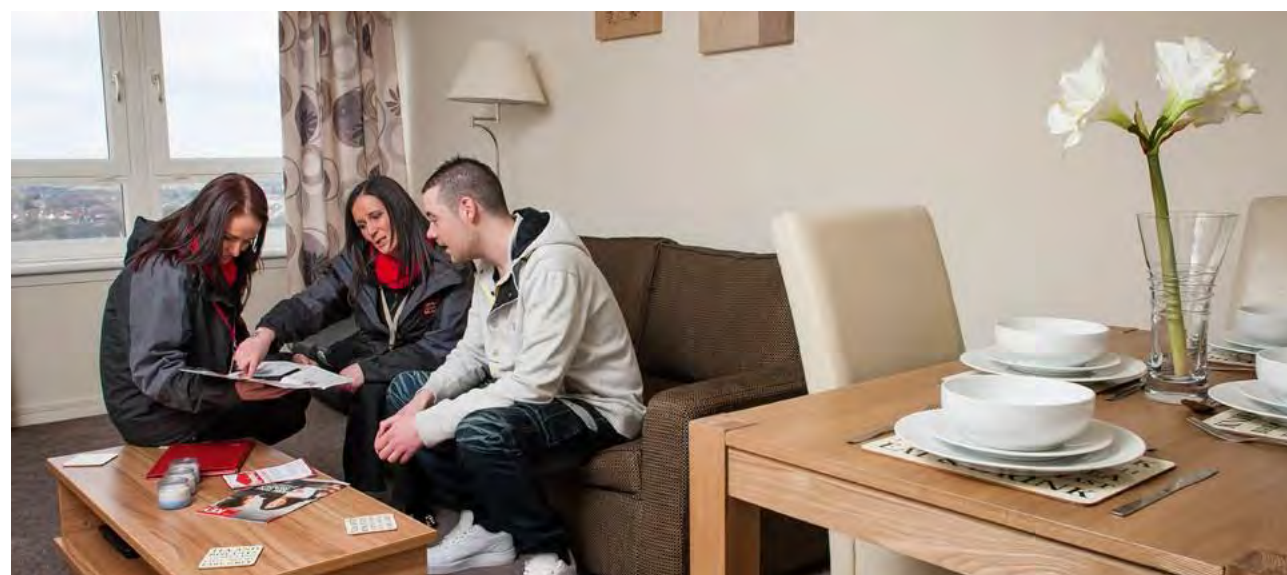
Balancing a variety of primary sources of data

The research team was delighted at the response rate to the survey which gave us a solid base from which to draw findings. In the main, the survey used closed questions where respondents had to tick boxes or select options. One of the reasons for this approach was so the data could be readily analysed, but primarily it was so that people would take part if the survey could be completed quickly. Nevertheless, there were options for each question for the respondent to type a comment and this was a good source of qualitative data. The other methods, such as the interviews, focus groups and appreciative inquiries, asked participants to think more deeply and as such there is richness in the reflective process that warrants sufficient detailed analysis in the report. We attempt to balance these different methods of data collection, as well as the nuances and contradictions inevitable in such a large data set from a diverse group of people, throughout the report. Where there are contradictions and complexities, we raise questions and moot suggestions that feed into the recommendations in the final chapter. This balancing of the data and the findings therefore means the report hopefully is of use as a discussion point and a springboard for further debate.

Outline of the report

This report sets out the changing context for housing and the implications that has for the future of frontline services (Chapter 2). Clearly, there are different emphases in the way changes affect different types of housing organisations, and also a range of ways in which the sector is responding, dependent on local need and circumstances. However, there are key themes emerging and Chapter 2 debates these.

We asked people working in housing what the core competencies were for those working on the front line. Chapter 3 analyses the answers and the issues raised, as well as deliberating on the 'social value' of frontline housing roles. In Chapter 4, a key theme emerging from responses is examined in further detail – the balance between 'commercial head' and 'social heart' in frontline housing roles. There are complexities and contradictions inherent in these terms and in the debate which are explored further.

When we spoke to tenant-customers as part of the research, there was a request for accountability in the delivery of frontline services and that the relationship needed some reframing around the 'tenant-customer' to demonstrate this. There is critical discussion on this topic in Chapter 5. Linked to the issue of accountability and delivery, there is a further debate on the use of technology in Chapter 6.

A number of strands from the findings are brought together in Chapter 7 on the management and performance management of frontline roles which allows a pause for reflection and a link forward to Chapter 8, which discusses findings and offers practical ideas on delivery of recruitment, training and education for frontline housing professionals. The report concludes in Chapter 9 with some ideas and recommendations to help take the findings of this research forward into deliverable action points.

Chapter 2

Complex challenges – the changing context for housing services

Introduction

There have been changes to several external factors, placing new pressures on both housing organisations and tenant-customers and which are, in turn, impacting on the role of the frontline housing worker. The top external drivers of change are (1) welfare reform, followed by (2) lack of housing supply and (3) the increasing gap between income and housing costs. This is borne out in the testimony of frontline workers who are seeing customers experiencing increasingly desperate circumstances, often presenting with complex and compounding needs. There seems to be a tacit expectation that frontline housing officers will fill the gap left by the withdrawal of other local services.

Crises

Throughout the research period, housing professionals and tenant-customers expressed a sense of people being in crisis. Respondents said things like "it hasn't been like this before" in terms of what they felt had to be delivered to help their customers.

> "This year, for the first time ever, tenants are coming to us with no money at all – perhaps benefits have been suspended for whatever reason. We're giving out food parcels. People are increasingly desperate. Last year a young man tried to hang himself." (interview with Housing Officer, Scottish housing association)

The pressures that frontline housing workers are facing are in their tenant-customers' lives, in partner agencies cutting services or closing down, and in their own increasingly stressful roles. There are many positive stories of organisations adapting to the new circumstances their customers find themselves in, some of which we include in this report. However, it is important to

recognise that 'crisis' can now be a daily part of frontline workers' lives and this has a significant emotional impact on them.

Changing context: key influencing factors

Our survey asked respondents to select and rank the top six external drivers that are changing the frontline role. Respondents identified welfare reform as the major driver for change.

Top Six External Influencing Factors	
Influencing factor	Total rating count
Welfare reform	677
Housing supply	625
Increasing gap between earnings and housing costs	558
Ageing population	550
Technological advances	406
Grant reduction	361

When examining the segment of 174 'housing officer' respondents, the ranked order of six external influencing factors was exactly the same as the ranking in the wider data set above.

Ranked one and two in the list were welfare reform and then lack of housing supply. These themes are well rehearsed in the housing sector discourse and they are touched on in respect to the wider debate in the literature review in Appendix A to this report. The increasing gap between earnings and household costs was ranked third in our survey. Whilst there are links to welfare reform, there are also issues around in-work benefits, zero-hours contracts for consistency of income and wage levels too. There are regional implications, as shown in the Northern research of Real Life Reform, but the impacts of housing affordability, resulting from disparity in income compared to housing costs, is shown across the country. This influencing factor also resonates with another ranked factor, 'inequality'. Bristow and Healy (2013) discuss a framework for understanding

the behaviour of human actors in shaping resilience through (1) anticipating developments, (2) reacting to shocks and crises, and (3) transforming behaviour strategically over the longer term. This resonates with our findings in two ways: the term 'resilience' was frequently used by respondents to describe qualities that frontline housing workers (and tenant-customers) need; and frontline housing workers and their organisations, in the responses to the financial crisis and the impacts of welfare reform, seem to be helping their customers according to these three stages of anticipation, reaction and transformation.

Ranked fourth in the list of top external influencing factors was 'ageing population'. In their report The Generation Strain, the IPPR (McNeil and Hunter, 2014) expect that the number of older people needing care will outstrip the number of adult children able to provide it as early as 2017. They recommend 'building new community institutions' and 'adapting social structures' to enable communities to provide themselves with the care they need. The government's New Deal for Older People, along with structural changes in the Care Bill 2014, set out a framework for change in the provision of housing for an ageing population in England. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 looks at social care for old and young, with further advancements in Scotland under the Reshaping Care for Older People government programme of change, but there are still big concerns as reflected in our survey and in the wider literature such as the impact of social isolation for older people. Within the housing sector, Orbit Charitable Trust (Hucker, 2014) has looked at ways in which housing organisations can be more 'dementia friendly' in the approaches taken by staff and in the design of properties. The study includes a checklist and examples from a number of small housing associations, several of whom were included in this research as part of a focus group.

Technological advances were seen as the fifth most important influencing factor changing the housing front line. More in-depth conversations underlined the complexities inherent in new technologies which could act as both enablers and barriers in differing circumstances. This particular aspect is discussed in more depth in Chapter 6 of this report.

Finally, in sixth place was 'grant reduction'. Within the additional comments made by survey respondents, there was also debate on the overall 'income reduction'. In one example in England, an organisation's HRA was being treated in a similar way to the General fund and services were being cut because of income reduction not just grant reduction. There is also an issue in England related to the shift in focus of grant from object to subject subsidies with the changes through the Affordable Homes grant programme and the subsequent reaction that some housing organisations will instead develop small levels of non grant-funded housing. In Scotland, the grant context is different with the Affordable Housing Supply programme demonstrating the commitment to build.

Other drivers of change

Survey respondents were provided with a 'comments' box where they could identify other drivers that are impacting on the role of the frontline housing officer. Some of the additional themes identified were:

Reductions in local authority services – both direct provision and grant funded services
- "The contraction of the Public Sector and the impact strategically and operationally." (Director of Housing Services)
- "I believe that we will see a shift to more remote service delivery with a focus on tenancy support to cope with the problems caused by welfare reform and housing shortages. Other support services are disappearing fast due to

lack of funding and we will rely heavily on volunteer agencies to fill the gap." (Estate Manager)
• "Services get cut, but then Housing gets left to come up with 'creative solutions' (read: do it ourselves)." (Estate Manager)

A changing relationship with customers
Respondents focused on the way that organisations are having to change in response to political and economic drivers, and also on how that impacted on tenant-customers' expectations of the frontline housing service:
• "Tenants failing to understand changes to social housing needs and demands against their own expectations/ experience." (Neighbourhood Housing Officer)
• "… the expectations of the traditional 'social tenant' need to change away from the idea that 'the council have to help us'." (Principal Housing Officer)

Mixed tenure and commercialisation
• "Commercial/increasing focus on reducing costs – ranked 3." (Chair of Board)
• "Increasing emphasis on profitability ie 'for profit' providers, outright sales and shared ownership sales affecting development. Targeting higher aspirational groups as potential owners/ shared owners/tenants." (Housing Services Team Manager)

Some of the 'other' issues outlined by respondents were also echoed in interviews and focus groups:
"Direct payments are an issue with about 30% of tenants needing intense 121 work to cope with budgeting for example. Tenant vulnerabilities are exposed as they have the money in their hands." (Birmingham Social Housing Partnership focus group member)

This view seems to show the cumulative impact of a number of changes and influencing factors. The processes of administering benefit and managing

housing may have hidden some of the vulnerabilities in the tenant-customer population in the past, but these are now exposed.

Case Study: East Midlands Housing Group
"We are progressing with a major restructuring of the organisation, there being a number of drivers for this including the economic situation, the housing market, changes in regulation; our wider mission to keep building homes. It led to a number of discussions (below). We started our 'Fit for the Future' programme 18 months ago.
1. We looked at new sources of finance as banks were no longer interested and have high rates. We agreed to go to the market for bond issue which we have now done, without any restrictive covenants. You can't go to capital markets without an organisation that is fit for purpose as they will be investing into the company. Until recently there was a 'federalist'/group structure so we amalgamated parts and reorganised.
2. Welfare reform. We centralised some services whilst localising others, with a central team to deal with processing. A specialist team was established to support community, signposting, help with debt and find jobs.
3. We did some care and support but only at the edges. We recently took 'Enable' Care and Support into the organisation so we are now structured as a Housing and Regeneration body with a separate arm for Care, Support and Social Enterprise.

It's a much better way of saying to investors we found efficiencies and we're a fit organisation going forward."
(Chief Executive, EMHG)

The response of housing organisations to the key influencing factors
Many organisations we spoke to had recently, were planning, or were in the process of reworking the way they carry out the frontline housing role as a result of one or more of these drivers.

Supporting vulnerable tenant-customers
"Council housing in the 1970s and 1980s always dealt with a variety of people with varying problems and now the Registered Providers are also dealing with these client groups; poor and stressed people who leave 'it' too late, go into panic mode and can't think straight. Creating greater churn and less security creates greater risks." (Midlands specialist provider)

"We do not want to suggest that all tenants are vulnerable but we do believe that, for a variety of reasons, many are. As such, we believe that vulnerable people should be a priority for everyone, including frontline staff. We recognise that this will always be in partnership with relevant agencies such as health and social work, but ensuring that the needs of vulnerable people are being met should be paramount for frontline housing staff." (Glasgow Homeless Network)

"8 out of 10 people I speak to have problems: they're in debt, worried and anxious. I'm dealing with the people who've got the problems." (interview with Income Management Officer, North West housing association)

Exploring customer support needs beyond the initial presenting problem commonly reveals multiple underlying problems. Housing providers spoke of customers with often multiple needs and complex vulnerabilities where a housing-only response is not enough.

Some of the issues raised by survey respondents include:
• "Complex needs, mental ill-health and social isolation/social exclusion." (Chief Executive)
• "Risk is not picked up as well as it could be. A changed client group has increased risk of eg harm. Serious case reviews could be more common for us in future. We are now talking more robustly to social services and others." (Midlands housing association focus group)

While there is a clear requirement for support providers and statutory agencies to be engaged, almost all of the housing providers we spoke to had real difficulties in obtaining help and support. Waiting times and referral routes often prevent people from accessing timely customer support and frontline housing officers are increasingly being required to step in. We found that housing organisations are effectively 'plugging the gap' in support services and by doing so are treading into unfamiliar territory. Effective problem identification, appropriate signposting/ referral and timely follow up as part of a coordinated case management approach are new skills required of frontline staff. Whilst many organisations have specialised and extended the income function to include financial inclusion work, benefits advice and support to enter education or employment, others are moving towards a housing service which includes assessing customer needs and facilitating support packages.

"We are trying to get frontline staff to blend in support... we (housing providers) often underestimate the amount of support needed. As a result, the required skill set is dramatically changing. From doing rents and lettings, we are now going into the support role which is completely alien to general needs housing." (Welsh housing association)

Case Study: Trident Social Investment Group

Recognising the increased level of disadvantage that its residents are now facing, Trident has taken a decision to employ people with skills in care and support to undertake all of its customer-facing work. The job title of this patch-based and people-focused role is Tenant Support Officer (there is no longer a job title of 'housing officer') and the goal is to support people towards self-sufficiency, rather than being a steady state landlord. The TSO service is being delivered by Trident Reach, the charitable care/support arm of the business.

This new role has been 'bolted on' to existing specialist housing teams – repairs, lettings, voids, arrears, asset management etc – making effective liaison between the TSOs and specialist teams crucial. There has been a rigorous recruitment process which has seen some people move across into the new TSO role and others remain in specialist housing roles.

Who should be supporting vulnerable tenant-customers?

There is debate regarding the extent to which support can be provided by housing organisations and the type and level of support that can be offered. Tenancy loss creates costs to the organisation in terms of unpaid last month's rent, rent loss during void period, repairs, re-let costs and the costs of 'getting to know' the new tenant-customer. Providing support in order to maintain tenancies therefore makes good business sense, but it is important to understand where partner organisations can help:

> "How much does housing do versus partner organisations? What's the housing offer? How far do we go with debt, unemployment etc? Is it about capacity and resource? At the cost of fundamental housing services, we could do more... or …should we do everything not very well?" (West Midlands housing association focus group)

Managing the risk to frontline housing workers

Recent reports that nearly half of social landlord employees had experienced tenant-customers making suicide threats (New Charter, 2013) and the shooting of a housing officer in July 2013 during an eviction in Brixton highlight the extreme customer distress that frontline housing officers are facing. Organisations frequently reported frontline housing staff finding themselves in challenging customer situations.

Some organisations we spoke to have reconsidered their safety policies following the Brixton incident.

> "After the shooting we were horrified so we went back and got a group together (lone workers etc) and revisited our lone worker policies also putting coaching in place. Mobile coverage is patchy so we are piloting the reliance card system for frontline housing officers. It's about safety but also about productivity."
> (Welsh housing association)

> "Society is becoming more dangerous. Sometimes the people we deal with require an approach where one housing officer isn't sent to visit on their own. Safety of housing officers and frontline housing staff needs to be taken into consideration a lot more. Police officers wouldn't visit these properties alone, and housing associations are sending staff out alone. There has to be some form of change."
> (Housing Officer, Northern Ireland housing association)

There is a clear need to manage the risks posed to frontline housing workers, to ensure procedures are up to date and that workers are trained with the latest skills and also counselled to deal with challenging issues.

Stress, challenge and operating in psychologically informed environments

Our survey did not specifically ask questions about stress or support, but under the section titled 'anything else you would like to tell us about' a considerable number of frontline staff reported feeling stressed and unsupported in their roles:

> "It becomes more and more stressful as each day goes by."
> (Housing Officer, English local authority)

This finding confirms the New Charter (2013) findings that more than half of employees reported that they felt more stressed at work.

We spoke to some specialist housing providers who are geared up to work with customers who are difficult to engage, often chaotic and 'challenging' in nature and who often require multi-agency inputs. There was a view that their staff are attracted to work with the client group in the support function and may have greater tolerances to and different responses to customer-related concerns and behaviours. Nevertheless, we found clear differences between their ways of working and those of general needs housing providers with greater emphasis on reflective practices and the use of emotional intelligence.

Case Studies: Specialist providers

> "Staff tend to be used to dealing with challenging people. We offer regular team meetings and supervision. Managers are always available (open door policy) and able to discuss problems. We have on call systems (1st and 2nd tiers) we can call out of hours. We use reflective practice in team meetings so people can discuss concerns and feelings. It has to be safe as people won't open up otherwise. We have a counselling and care line (therapist or councillor) who they can call independently."
> (London based specialist provider)

> "We operate within a PIE[1] environment, training staff in a variety of techniques to have difficult conversations. Frontline staff get a monthly reflective practice session with a local psychologist from the mental health trust. We try to understand behaviours as we don't want to exclude people. We needed to build staff resilience and coping skills so they don't burn out or overreact to challenges and behaviours from clients." (Midlands specialist provider)

Customer outcomes for the Midlands specialist provider over a two-year-period included a 13% reduction in serious incidents and 50% reduction in notices to quit issued for behavioural issues. Staff outcomes included a 26.8% reduction in sickness and 7% reduction in grievances/ disciplinary actions. Psychologically informed environments have recently been developing within the specialist housing sector. They use the latest insights and practice from psychological disciplines to give rough sleepers and other homeless people the best chance of sustainably escaping the cycle of poor well-being and chronic homelessness. They also help staff and services understand where 'challenging' behaviours are coming from, and so be able to work more creatively and constructively with people.

> 'An explicitly psychological framework can legitimise and inform the different approaches staff can use and gives them

[1] Psychologically Informed Environment – see further Keats et al 2012 and the brief discussion in the introductory chapter of this Frontline Futures report.

additional insight into how people may behave... This approach will help clients who often behave chaotically to gain an understanding of their behaviour, take responsibility for themselves and develop negotiated, positive relationships. This in turn will help them move away from a street lifestyle and rough sleeping."
(Keats et al, 2012)

Two key elements of a psychologically informed environment (Keats et al, 2012) are (1) reflective practice and (2) action learning. Reflective practice concerns the process of recapturing and analysing actions and processes in order to learn from incidents and improve the responsiveness of services. It enables clients to feel that their problems are recognised and that they are being heard. It gives staff a perspective on the emotional challenges of their work and also helps to develop learning cycles and skills development. Action learning has been defined by its original champion Revans (1982) as 'a social process: people learn from and with each other, and a learning community comes into being'. It relies on the understanding that the emphasis of the activity is about the learning that arises from the process rather than the solution to the actual problem. Development of a solution will encompass identifying and analysing experience, reflection and feedback skills.

Recruitment of staff

We found one of the responses organisations are making to the external influencing factors is to consider more carefully how and who they recruit, as well as how they train existing staff. Organisations are recognising that different skills sets are required for a successful frontline service. For example, some have recruited from the private sector to support their income management role and this has led to both financial and organisational culture benefits. Chapter 3 provides more detail on the skills and competencies needed for the front line. However, it is an important point to raise here in terms of organisational change in response to external influencing factors.

Case Study: Merthyr Valleys Homes
"Within the income team there have been three new posts: two welfare benefits advisors and one debt collection post, together with a generic post for chasing arrears and other debt such as service charges. The debt collector came from the private sector, previously working for a personal loan company. Liaising with housing and income teams, his skill is in doorstep collection. We gave him a 'chip and pin, and a van'. He brought in £68,000 in a year, which may not have otherwise come in. There are knock-on values too, in that he reports potential abandonments and such like. It's another pair of eyes on the estate. Not sure that having another housing officer in his post would work. We have had no complaints from customers and in the customer satisfaction surveys he is said to have a 'firm and fair' approach. Great attitude, staff and tenants love him; he works hard and gets results. He brings different skills than the normal housing officer and has a different attitude to tenants as customers; he's not jaded and goes on a visit with an end game in mind. He has a strong work ethic."

'Patch' size/focus

Other organisations are changing the focus at the front line or some are reducing patch sizes (although there are also organisations increasing patch sizes too) to provide a particular focus.

"We are changing the focus from estate to neighbourhood management and are thinking about the required skill sets. We are also changing our culture and values."
(G15 focus group member)

"We have a mix of generic and specific roles but the big issue is that we have reduced the patch size to enable a better relationship between the frontline housing officer and the customer."
(Birmingham Social Housing Partnership focus group member)

Case Study: Notting Hill Housing Group
Notting Hill Housing Group reduced the size of patches that Housing Officers managed and:
"Customers told us they wanted three things:
1. A good repairs service
2. Communication – someone to listen and respond
3. They wanted the job done.

This chimed with what housing officers told us they wanted:
1. Authority delegated to us to do the job
2. A personal relationship with customers like the old days
3. Ideally, control of own budget.

It became obvious in response [to] customer and staff requirement[s] we needed smaller patches an[d] responsibility. Housing officers [have] over day-to-day budget but not [for] repairs and they work with appr[ox] 125 families in their patch. We've [had a] really big bounce in satisfaction [...]"
(Chief Executive NHHG)

Changing relationship with the [...]

We found that some organisations are rethinking their relationships and interactions with customers. Routine transactions are dealt with by back office teams and the customer service centre, whilst functions such as income management and lettings are looked after by specialist teams. Other frontline staff take on a relationship management role with customers enabling them to focus on solving more complex issues and support vulnerable customers.

Participants spoke of using conversations to seek out customer vulnerabilities and need for additional support. In one instance, a frontline housing worker, through noticing the condition of the property or garden, was able to identify stress and mental health issues and lever in additional support for the tenant-customer. This is viewed as a more personalised response to previous practices

where one example included sending out a notice seeking possession where gardens were not being properly maintained. An alternative view put forward in one of the appreciative inquiries with tenant-customers was that the inside of the property was a private domain and should not be judged.

Case Study: Bromford
Bromford is changing its relationship with customers.
"The how is that we have a deal with customers and the why is because we want to change customers' lives. We have made our expectations of customers clear, mandating actions within the tenancy agreement with sanctions for non-compliance. For example, we no longer do key changes. Instead, we expect customers to take responsibility and leave a spare with a family member, friend or neighbour just as everyone else does. If a customer reports a catch on the window that needs tightening, our response now is 'well tighten it!' Obviously we respond differently to vulnerable customers.

Most organisations complete a pre-sign up interview but now our lettings team do a 'home visit' prior to allocation to see how customers are living – we don't allow them to ask us to visit anywhere other than their 'home'. This enables us to be clear about any customer vulnerabilities or additional needs prior to sign up.

Case Study: Midland Heart
We had lots of good people but found they were all 'rescuers'; staff would take the problem from the customer and deal with the issue. So we trained housing officers to be 'trusted advisors' and to have parent/parent relationships rather than parent/child.

Focus group participants recognised that the relationship management approach requires staff to respond differently to customer requests and can put them into unfamiliar territory. Staff will need to learn to assess situations, make perception judgements and take decisions which will sometimes be a 'no service' response. This is a move away from the traditional housing management approach and frontline staff may require training and coaching to prepare for new roles and both organisational and managerial support in operation. Organisations spoke of reviewing policies and procedures to ensure adequate back up for frontline staff. A more robust approach is being taken to customer complaints, with 'unreasonable complainant procedures' starting to be used. One organisation proactively contacted the ombudsman to discuss actions.

Changing approaches (channel shift)

Most of the organisations we spoke to were changing the ways in which customers interact with the organisation, with many establishing self-help routes for information and transactions filtered through customer contact centres or via the organisation's website.

> "Currently we deliver all things to all people with issues of consistency. Now we're thinking that not all customers need the same approach. So we are being more flexible; some customers are encouraged to channel shift and self-help whilst others get the housing officer." (Birmingham Social Housing Partnership focus group member)

Offering multiple ways for the tenant-customer to interact with the service can free up frontline housing workers to spend more of their time with the customers who need their help. This approach is linked strongly to advances in technology, and so is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this report.

Future change

There are more changes ahead with many survey respondents commenting that the sector, its customers and front-line housing staff are yet to feel the full impact of welfare reform. We asked respondents in our survey and the interviewees if there was anything else they would like to say about the future role of the front-line housing officer:

> "I don't think the traditional model of 'housing officer' will exist within three years. [It'll] be more akin to relationship manager with a network of support on and offline." (Staff Coach, English housing association)

Summary

Frontline housing workers are well aware of the need to juggle a wide range of tasks to meet the changing context and increasingly complex demands of tenant-customers:

> "Frontline Housing Roles are the New Social Workers, Police, Welfare Advice Officers. Frontline staff offer an all-round service to the public sector signposting the vulnerable, advising the needy, responsible for child welfare, neighbourhood policing and ensuring estate satisfaction and cleaning for the community." (Housing Officer, English housing association)

There are many external influencing factors determining the direction of change for the social housing sector, and this impacts on housing organisations, frontline housing workers and, importantly, tenant-customers. One of the most dominant factors is welfare reform, but there are many others impacting in varying degrees. There are implications for frontline housing workers in how vulnerable tenant-customers are looked after.

Chapter 3

Core competencies required for the future frontline role

Introduction

The previous chapter has shown some ways in which frontline roles are changing in response to external factors. The role of the future is significantly more complex and this is reflected in the competencies required. Although the majority of the core functions have not changed, the way that they are managed and delivered have changed and will continue to change in the future.

Key functions of the frontline housing role

The top six functions of the current housing frontline role, as identified by survey respondents, are:

1. Rent collection and arrears – 436 saying this is a key function, and of these 239 ranking it number one
2. Dealing with antisocial behaviour – 423 saying it is key, and of these 57 placing it at number one with proportionately more respondents ranking it between second and fourth place
3. Lettings/allocations
4. Estate management
5. Tenancy sustainment (support)
6. Partnership working/gateway for residents to other agencies.

Top Six Functions of the Current Frontline Housing Role
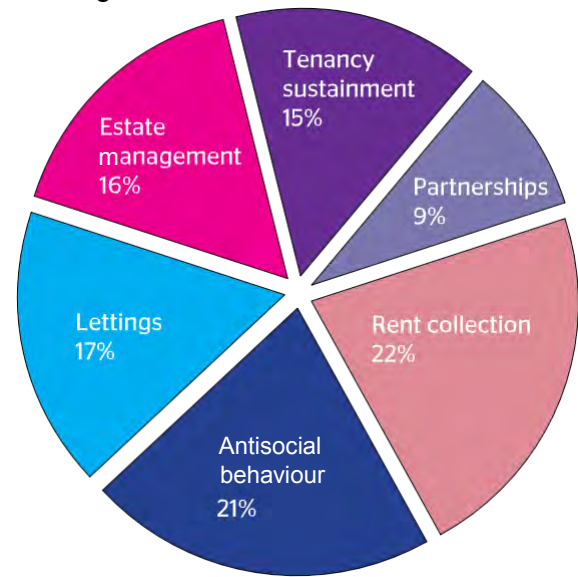
While this priority list presents no surprises, some of the ways in which the functions are being carried out are changing. It is interesting to note also that when we segmented responses to this question to see what the 174 'housing officer' respondents prioritised as the key functions of the housing role, they suggested:

1. Antisocial behaviour
2. Rent collection and arrears
3. Allocations/lettings
4. Estate management
5. Tenancy support/sustainment
6. Applications and pre-tenancy interviews.

Antisocial behaviour is the number one priority, and one can see in Chapter 5, which looks at what is important to tenant-customers, that we found this was equally a priority for tenant-customer participants in the appreciative inquiry.

Some of the survey respondents offered their views on the functions that other frontline staff, working alongside housing officers, had to deliver:

"1) Offer advice, support and assistance to landlords and/or tenants 2) Ensure landlords comply with legislation 3) Protect tenants 4) Ensure homes are fit for habitation." (Environmental Health Officer, Northern Ireland local authority)

Rent collection and arrears: In addition to automated systems and call centres, some organisations are returning to door-to-door rent collection. There are links between rent arrears and 'tenancy sustainment', with the former being seen as a failure of the latter. For many organisations therefore, tenancy sustainment practice includes money advice and assertive support to tenant-customers to prioritise their rent payments.

Antisocial behaviour (ASB): Preventing and dealing with ASB was a key priority a decade ago and remains a key issue today for housing organisations and tenant-customers. In some cases, certain antisocial

behaviours are indicative of crisis in a person's life and new ways of responding are being developed.

Lettings and estate management (ranked number three and four): Tenancy sustainment now forms a key part of the lettings process for many organisations. Orbit Housing, for example, uses a sustainability checker at the point of sign up to ensure the rent is affordable and the tenancy sustainable. Face-to-face time of estate managers with tenant-customers in their homes or neighbourhoods is valued greatly, according to tenant-customers in the appreciative inquiry sessions.

Tenancy sustainment (support): Comments in interviews and focus groups suggest that this is of increasing importance, particularly as a response to the impact of welfare reform. Some felt tenancy sustainment was linked strongly to rent collection and arrears, whereas for others it was couched in the language of supporting vulnerable tenant-customers and linked to issues around social isolation and mental health. In reality, some of the cases we heard of housing officers intervening in complex tenant-customer crises had a bundle of organisational functions tied in together, but for the tenant-customer it was the intervention of another human being to offer support that in some cases, literally, saved their life.

"We have always had a much broader remit than is acknowledged by the wider world. The biggest change recently is that more frontline staff are conscious of the link between income and business sustainment."
(Housing Services Co-ordinator, Scottish housing association)

Partnership working: This is discussed in more detail further on in this chapter as it is a complex, yet important issue for frontline housing workers.

Key competencies of frontline housing workers

Survey respondents (687) were also asked to select the six most important characteristics and skills of a frontline housing worker now, and also what they would require in the future. Looking at the total number of respondent choices of competences (adding 'now' and 'in the future' to establish a ranking), the top six list shows:

- Ability to problem solve
- Customer focused
- Good communicator
- Understands the needs of vulnerable groups
- Ability to negotiate and liaise
- Ability to manage change.

If we segment again, just looking at the responses from the 174 'housing officers', the ranked competencies are:

- Ability to manage change
- Good communicator
- Ability to problem solve
- Customer focused
- Ability to negotiate and liaise
- Understands the needs of vulnerable groups.

So the same six competencies are seen as important by the frontline workers actually doing the job now, but it is interesting to note the priority of the ability to manage change for frontline respondents.

Competencies that are seen as becoming more important in the future

Six competencies outlined in the survey were seen by respondents as being more important for the future than for now[2]. They are listed below in order of the size of the difference in importance. For example, at the top of the list is 'commercially minded' which saw 61 respondents say this was important now, but a large increase to 336 respondents who thought it would be important in the future. At the bottom of the

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[2] 'Technical knowledge' also increased, but only minimally from 167 to 169. Because this is not significant, it is not included in the list.

list is 'ability to inspire and gain confidence of others' which saw an increase of just 27 (169 respondents thought this important now and 196 saw this as a future skill).

Competency	Now	Future
Commercially minded	61	336
Ability to manage change	268	390
Critically reflective practitioner/self-awareness	111	119
Able to be creative and respond according to the situation	255	294
'Can do' improvement-focused	238	269
Ability to inspire and gain the confidence of others	169	196

Commercially minded
The huge jump in importance of being 'commercially minded' – of understanding the cost and value across all activities – is backed up by numerous comments in interviews and focus groups. In the segment of 174 housing officer respondents, 'commercially minded' also missed the top choices, but like the wider data set there was an over fivefold increase (from 11 now to 64 in the future) in the importance of this competency for the future. Because it is a standout finding of our research, we have devoted the whole of Chapter 4 to exploring it in depth. A key difference is that, whilst in the past the emphasis seemed to be on re-housing people as 'fast as possible', the focus has moved to housing the right people at the right time in the right property to create a sustainable tenancy.

> "Frontline staff need to be more commercially minded, know how to achieve Value for Money for example. In a changing economy officers must understand the importance of getting homes let and an income coming in to the organisation." (English housing association worker)

"I feel the tasks within the role may develop to be more financial than community minded."
(Senior Housing Officer, Scottish housing association)

Ability to manage change
The housing industry has always been subject to change but there is an acknowledgement that the size and pace of change is increasing.

This research itself presents the key underlying factors of what amount to huge and fast changes to the sector driven by a range of external factors coming together. The ability of frontline workers to respond positively to change, and to operate within a constantly changing environment, has become more critical over the last few years.

> "I think that we just need to be ready. Things are changing, we need to be out there explaining the changes to our tenants and putting things in place. We can see from what is happening now with the extra room. So many tenants want to move, however the one bed properties are not available. When you want to instigate change you have to ensure the availability is there… Lots of challenges ahead."
> (Housing Officer, English housing association)

> "We have been very good at training people to deliver on key lines of enquiry ... but now we need people who see the big picture. They are dealing with a lot of unknowns and we need people who can deal with change."
> (Chief Executive, English housing association).

The change from generic to specialist roles and vice versa is one of the more regular changes within the housing environment, but this in itself creates a whole range of issues and challenges for the frontline role from a skills development perspective.

Critically reflective practitioner/self-awareness
The everyday frontline role now throws multiple challenges at the individual and the need for continuous, reflective learning has become more important. Organisations are increasingly concerned about the mental well-being of their staff due to the increase in suicide threats and part of their resilience development strategy has been to encourage colleagues to share, reflect on and learn from their experiences.

> "We need to develop staff who are more '3-dimensional' – less precious, more reflective and interactive." (Board member, English housing association)

Ability to be creative and respond according to the situation
This competency links closely to that of problem solving, although survey respondents regard this specific manifestation as being more critical in the future than problem solving in general. The move away from a highly process-driven environment to one where individuals are more empowered to make decisions, whilst on the front line, makes it more critical that they can respond according to the situation. This could present a challenge to managers when their frontline staff make decisions that they do not agree with.

'Can do' improvement-focused
A cultural shift is needed in some organisations. It may be that for some individual officers it is less 'can't do' and more 'not allowed to decide to'. This is where organisational projects like Wheatley Housing Group's 'Think Yes' campaign can help free staff to think that they 'can do' and that the support and organisational structure allows them to respond to customers' needs.

Wheatley Group

Wheatley Housing Group's 'Think Yes' ethos is that there is 'no universal customer – no universal solution'. Services are designed at the point of request from the tenant-customer. A flat structure supports first point of contact decision-making. Small generic Housing Officer patches enable a case management approach, rather than process-focused service delivery. Transactional processes are delivered by a 'transactional hub' and the housing officer is empowered to draw down wraparound services including debt advice, fuel advice, tenancy support and employability services.

When a customer-tenant called in to end her tenancy, a Housing Officer from the Wheatley Group did all he could to find out why. He discovered that the tenant had lost her job, her self-esteem and her friends as a result of cancer treatment and extensive surgery. The tenant didn't want to go out, couldn't work and was terrified of the cancer returning. The only thing she had left was her home, which she loved. But she felt it would be better to move in with her mother. Dan used the 'Home Comforts' furniture service to make her house into a home, got her into training to help her boost her confidence and make new friends and makes regular visits to the tenant to make sure she's seeing her doctor and psychologist. Think Yes means we don't give up on our customers, even when they've given up on themselves.

Ability to inspire and gain the confidence of others
While the increase between 'now' and 'future' is relatively small, it is nevertheless indicative that people want positive people around them. People who embrace the future with optimism and confidence, and who behave in a constructive manner with colleagues, are highly valued in uncertain and difficult times.

Competencies that are seen as being less important in the future

Thirteen out of the 20 competencies from which survey respondents were asked to select the more important were seen as less important in the future than now. However, despite this decrease in importance, some are clearly seen as still important in the future, while others are clearly seen as less important.

Ability to follow procedures: the least important competency in the future

One finding that has come out loud and clear in the survey (reducing by 50% from 253 to 127), as well as in the interviews and focus groups, is that the ability to follow procedures will be less important in the future. Strict process backed up by procedures, as a means of doing business, is going out of fashion.

One housing organisation was shocked to find that a process-led way of working had resulted in its mutual exchange process having 57 steps. It has since simplified and web-enabled most of the activities involved so that tenant-customers can manage the process themselves.

Problem solving and ability to negotiate and liaise: still important in the future

Two of the top five most important competencies for the future, as shown in the list below, have actually been demoted. They are (1) problem solving, which has been demoted from first to third, and (2) ability to negotiate and liaise, which has maintained its fifth position, despite being chosen by less people.

Frontline worker roles are changing from being process-led to being more able as individuals to use their initiative and making decisions whilst 'out on the patch'. They will need to solve problems. The nature of the problems may be changing, but the skill will still be important going forward.

Earlier in this chapter, it was identified that partnership and multi-agency working will become more prevalent and the previous chapter noted a change in the relationship between organisations and their customers. Both of these require skills in building and maintaining effective relationships, of which a key part is being able to negotiate and liaise.

> "We changed the relationship with the customer so that the role now is about negotiating and enabling so it's a different skill set. Not all will make the grade." (Midlands housing association)

Competencies that were rated lower in the future than now

Several competencies presented in the survey appear to be perceived as less important for the future.

When we probed deeper into some of these topics in the interviews, focus groups and appreciative inquiries, we found they did not match the apparent downgrading of importance seen in the survey. For example, being customer focused and able to work with minimal supervision were cited as being of continued importance as frontline workers spend more time 'on the patch'. Some respondents on some of the competencies listed important now but not in the future, suggested that "Everyone

is expected to be numerate so it is not so important [in the future]". Customer focus, for example, is expected to be so embedded that it is not seen as an explicit competency for the future. Similarly, understanding the needs of vulnerable groups and being empathetic are seen as important responses to an increasingly vulnerable client group.

One interesting observation is tenant-customers who took part in the appreciative inquiries felt that being a 'good communicator' (and especially a good listener) is very important indeed. It is possible that the downgrading, in this instance, is due to a difference of perspective between customers and officers.

The results from the research are complex and sometimes contradictory. Where the survey might suggest a particular characteristic is not so important in the future, for example, when the result is debated in more depth with respondents there were more nuances in their responses.. Figures on their own should always be treated with caution, and it is for this reason that the report includes many

of the responses from interviews and focus groups where more time was given to respondents to be critically reflective and allow for nuanced in-depth debate.

Resilience – a core characteristic

Resilience is a word that emerged time and again across all elements of the research as being important in the future, even though this was not presented within a list in the survey:

> "There is the potential for frontline housing roles to be relied upon to a huge degree to try and support some of the most vulnerable individuals. We've already seen a huge increase in evictions due to rent arrears and less ability to cope with daily life amongst our tenants. I think we need to ensure that our housing staff are supported and resilient to deal with really complex and often distressing situations." (Housing Team Leader)

This particular theme is picked up in more detail as part of a discussion on how best to equip the housing sector in Chapter 8.

	Now	Future
1	Ability to problem solve	Ability to manage change
2	Good communicator	Commercially minded
3	Customer focused	Ability to problem solve
4	Understand the needs of vulnerable groups	Ability to be creative and respond according to the situation
5	Ability to negotiate and liaise	Ability to negotiate and liaise

Partnership working – a key focus

Partnership working has always been an element of the frontline role and this is becoming more, not less, important. In the survey, partnership working and signposting to other services came sixth in terms of importance as a function of the job. When discussing with staff and tenant-customers, the word 'signposting' was frequently used, particularly in the more reflective appreciative inquiry workshops.

"The core skills of frontline officers are communication and awareness of need for signposting and the follow up after signposting." (Welsh housing association focus group)

Partnership was also seen to be key to the way housing would do its business in the future and there were particular links suggested with health and care.

Organisations are now challenging the makeup of partnerships and focusing much more clearly on getting the right people round the table. The critical partners are people from education and health, and sometimes local businesses who have the expertise in certain areas. Drawing on these is often more cost efficient than trying to develop skills in-house.

"Advice and a community wide point of contact to either deal with enquiries or problems or to signpost to other professionals or services."
(Area Housing Officer, Welsh housing association)

In some areas, there is the feeling that effective partnership working is still in its infancy. One organisation expressed frustration when resource limitations meant that some of the key players – police, health and education – could not be released to attend crucial meetings. Organisational

size and capacity, and the geographical area covered can also limit the extent of partnership working.

New Charter is trialling the concept of a single point of contact across all disciplines in each area. So, if an officer has concerns they report it through the designated local officer, which could be a health worker, for example. This has resulted in faster referrals.

Wheatley Housing Group piloted a housing options service which is now being rolled out across the city of Glasgow. Inherent in its success is a focus from a customer point of view and close collaboration with named contacts in other agencies to help prevent homelessness. The housing options service engages with a wide range of collaborative partners and the 'in-house' wraparound services provide support to both frontline staff and tenant-customers.

Summary

This chapter has examined the survey responses, interviews and focus group data to assess the core competencies that will be important to the frontline housing role in the future. The picture is complex and there are also competing claims that need to be balanced between the snapshot survey data and the more reflective points from the focus groups and appreciative inquiries. The headline from the survey is a fivefold increase in the importance of being 'commercially minded', but there is much more to the future of the housing role than that, and the commercial must also be balanced with the social role. There is also a need shown in the research for stronger partnership working, especially through development of frontline collaborations and networks. The balancing between social and commercial elements of the role is discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

INFLUENCING FACTORS

1. Welfare reform
2. Housing supply (lack)
3. Increasing gap between earnings and housing costs
4. Ageing population
5. Technological advances
6. Grant reduction

Commercially minded
Empathetic
Problem solving
Good communicator

KEY FUNCTIONS

1. Rent collection and arrears
2. Dealing with antisocial behaviour
3. Lettings/allocations
4. Neighbourhood & estate management
5. Tenancy sustainment (support)
6. Partnership working/gateway for residents to other agencies

RESILIENCE

- This way social services
- That way community mental health
- This way money advice

Mentoring
Training
Mobile technology
Linked systems
Partner agency support
Named contacts

Infographic by Jo Richardson

Summary

One of the most striking findings from the survey was the overwhelming consensus that frontline housing workers need to become more commercially focused. Specifically, survey respondents see this as being five times more important in the future than it is now. This is consistent with findings from other strands of the project where people talked of how 'massive commercial pressures' are affecting the way they do business. Maximising rental income has risen up agendas with many organisations spreading the responsibility for this activity through 'rent first' policies.

> "By commercial, I mean focused on maximising income, minimising costs, cut out waste, a different attitude and approach to customer care – it's about attention – communication, knowing the customer well." (Chief Executive, English housing association)

Business for a purpose?

Becoming more commercially minded is widely seen as a much bigger task than just maximising income. This was expressed in different ways by different people with words like 'quality', 'sustainability' and 'business with a purpose', used alongside an acknowledgement of a 'tension between doing more for people and commercial imperatives'. Organisational efficiency is also seen as a significant part of the picture; some organisations are thinking deeply about and adopting new working practices to reduce their expenditure. New opportunities to condense tasks are emerging, such as IT systems that were not available even three to four years ago.

Respondents are also acutely aware of the vulnerabilities of many of their clients and of the communities in which they live. One interviewee summed this up, saying: "… there's not much difference now between our residents who live in general needs and supported housing". They know that any actions they take to be more commercial must not detract from their work to support individuals and communities, but instead that it must reinforce it. Another ALMO focus group member said: "Housing organisations have an interest in keeping communities sustainable… it will be much worse if we don't do it, if we have families in crisis".

We found some housing providers going to some lengths to consider how the way they carry out the frontline roles can improve the experience of their residents, including those with greater needs, as well as improve the business. Empathy is seen as an essential attribute for frontline workers and there is a commitment to continue being both supportive and caring. At the same time, the point was made that increasing placement of homelessness households in private rented housing means that many of the most vulnerable households are now outside their sphere of influence and the responsibility of social housing providers.

We have summed up what housing providers are trying to achieve as 'having a social heart and a commercial head'. Contributors to the research identified many ways in which they are trying to achieve this blend and we present those that we came across in this chapter. Chapters 3 and 8 also consider the competencies and behaviours required and how this might translate into recruitment, training and staff development practice.

A different relationship with residents and customers

Housing providers are starting, consciously, to redefine their relationship with customers because they see it as a route to the right kind of commerciality. There are three elements to this: getting closer to customers; clarifying and reinforcing responsibilities; and developing customer roles.

Getting closer to customers
Having gone through a period of hands-off management, enabled by automated payment mechanisms and call centre management styles, many organisations are now looking to increase their local presence. Getting closer to customers is now seen as a means of managing proactively and staying on the front foot.

While day-to-day communications now come in many forms, organisations aspire to IT-enable their frontline staff to be 'out on the patch' more and in the office less. The value of free-flowing conversations between staff and customers is starting to become recognised, not just as 'nice to have' but as central to the way organisations do business.

> Seven Locks Housing thinks about its delivery of service as 'the conversation with the customer', so that the process for managing void properties, for example, is shaped with the involvement of the customer rather than imposing a rigid process on them. This can make for a more streamlined, quicker process moulded around individual customers.

Organisations are getting better at sharing information about individual customers that they pick up day to day through a mixture of (1) training of staff who come into regular contact with residents, (2) IT systems that allow information sharing and (3) 'cause for concern' cards. Sharing information places staff in a much better position to spot emerging difficulties before they reach crisis point, including potential safeguarding matters. Building a constructive personal relationship with customers provides the context for constructive challenge where appropriate. It can give legitimacy to personal and challenging, but sometimes life-changing questions.

Being out and about more, piggy-backing popular community events, and an expansion of social media are all helping staff to pick up information about matters of interest and concern to customers in an informal way. All of these methods have the potential to become vehicles for engaging residents in both the management of and vision for their neighbourhoods.

Developments in IT-enabled remote working are, paradoxically, supporting the development of closer face-to-face relationships between frontline workers and their customers.

Clarifying and reinforcing responsibilities – doing 'deals' with residents
The legal contract between housing providers and residents is now seen as a key mechanism for organisations to develop their commercial head and social heart. Some providers are using the tenancy agreement to articulate details of the 'deal' between them and their customers, including commitments about what the provider and what the resident will do.

> St Vincents has gone one step further by developing and articulating a set of consequences around non-compliance. Its 'Fair Play' policy, developed with residents, makes it clear that people in arrears or with other tenancy breaches will receive a reduced repairs service (whilst also ensuring health and safety is paramount). This, along with changes to rechargeable repairs – now named 'Tenant Responsibility Repairs' – has so far saved the organisation over £300,000 and, while initially this was controversial, it has been popular with those residents who want everyone to access the services fairly, and also with frontline staff. Take-up of other opt-in deals with residents has also been increasing and this is bringing about cultural change and a more grown-up relationship with residents.

Another area in which providers are asking residents to be more accountable is in relation to sorting out disputes between neighbours. Landlords have become the

first port of call for many residents, but some are now putting responsibility back to the residents to sort matters out between themselves in the first instance.

Frontline workers need to use appropriate language if the deals made with residents are to be reinforced effectively. Several housing providers have put their frontline workers through language training to give them the skills to put responsibility back to residents. For example, "I'm just ringing you about your rent" does not have the same urgency as "You need to listen to this or you could end up in court". Using language well in order to be assertive but also empathetic is a high level skill and many officers have found the training quite tough.

Developing customer roles

Residents are much more likely to be regarded as actors in the management of communities alongside frontline housing workers than they were even a few years ago. Many and varied volunteer frontline customer roles have developed, including for example, tenant inspectors, resident contacts and resident champions. Volunteer counselling and decision-making in relation to dedicated community budgets have also grown. This has been accompanied by an increase in tenant scrutiny activity at a governance level. While there is no obligation for tenant-customers to take on this type of role, some feel it is something they want to do to contribute to making their neighbourhoods friendly and better managed places and to improve the housing service. Housing professionals seem broadly happy to integrate these volunteer roles into those carried out by paid staff, although some are concerned about where they stand if something goes wrong. There are some risk management issues to be worked out.

Seeing potential problems ahead and stopping them happening

One image of the frontline role that emerged clearly from one of the appreciative inquiry events, and that was corroborated by others, was that of solving problems almost before they happen and certainly before they become big problems.

Changes for individuals and communities happen much more quickly than in the past. In this visual representation that one group of managers used to express its vision for the future of the frontline role, the river represents a fast-evolving journey with rapids, floods and waterfalls and where nothing's ever the same. Housing's job is to spot problems bubbling up in tributaries and making sure they are solved or do not become huge problems before they get to the waterfall. If issues are spotted far enough ahead, then intervention may not always be necessary.
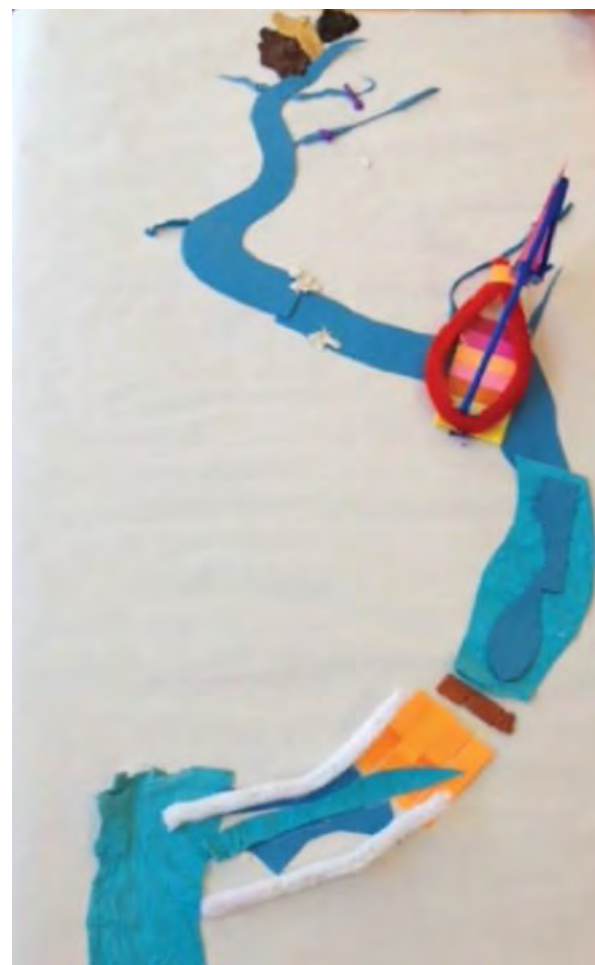
Photograph by Jo Richardson

When considered in this way, problems for customers become synonymous with problems for providers. So an eviction is problematic both for the resident who loses their home and for the landlord who spends money on an eviction process. It is in the interests of providers to evade problems and frontline officers are in pole position to act effectively and in a timely way. It is a high level skill:

"Neighbourhood officers need to focus on identifying the risks in the neighbourhood and go in, not wait for key performance indicators to show there is a problem." (large English housing association)

Providers are developing a number of strategies for stopping problems ahead which underpins this preventative, problem-solving role for frontline workers.

Pre, during and post sign up work

The period either side of the start of a new tenancy is rich in opportunity for getting tenant-customers off on the right footing. Default in rent payment is more likely in the first 12 weeks of a tenancy and investing in the tenant-customer at this stage has been found to prevent problems from emerging and save staff time later on.

- Pre-tenancy work: Some organisations use the three to six month period before sign up to start the conversation with prospective tenant-customers. They help to prepare them for the responsibilities of taking on a tenancy and making sure they understand the costs involved and assisting them, for example to access cheaper fuel or financial help with moving. Undertaking a pre-tenancy risk assessment and checking financial information can help them to get a picture of which of their future tenant-customers may be at risk of losing their tenancy and of ways in which loss of tenancy might be avoided.

One housing provider has a 'Gate Mate' scheme: a housing officer meeting ex-prisoners on release "at the prison gate" to discuss their housing and other needs.

- At sign up: The sign up process itself is seen as an opportunity to prepare tenant-customers well.

Gloucester City Homes now do group sign ups on Fridays which allows them to spend more time and to go into much more depth with new tenants than individual sign ups allow. Tenants also learn from the questions that other tenants might ask at the sessions. It is now normal for new tenants to be requested to bring Housing Benefit forms with them so that they can be completed at sign up and sent off straight away, avoiding delays.

- Following sign up:

One example is Birmingham City Council which gives tenants their own personalised Digital Log Book on sign up. It is an online portal (one stop shop) that helps tenants to manage every aspect of their tenancies online. In addition, it helps tenants with a range of other matters, such as managing and accessing their benefits online, managing their finances with simple to use budgeting tools, gaining digital skills, accessing employment opportunities, viewing their council tax and rent statements, reporting repairs and accessing information on changes to benefits. It is also a medium for learning, for example about what it means to be a good neighbour and for the landlord to keep in touch with residents.

Looking out for and looking after vulnerable people

"I see the role moving away from just housing management to being a more support orientated role as other services get cut and we deal with the most vulnerable and alienated." (Housing Officer, Scottish local authority)

Social landlords in England are becoming increasingly proactive in their efforts to look after vulnerable people; and this is already the position in Scotland. In part, this is because safeguarding responsibilities in England are increasing[3], but they are also conscious of increasing need among their residents. Referrals to other services are now commonplace but as the traditional service providers become more stretched, housing providers are finding that they are sometimes the only service left for their residents to rely on. They feel that if they don't take a proactive approach, the problems could become much worse and more expensive.

One landlord described the sequence they now take when looking out for and looking after vulnerable people:

Step 1: Notice someone is vulnerable
Step 2: Know where to refer the person to
Step 3: Deal with it yourself if there is no obvious place of referral

Proactive tenancy and estate management

Shepherd's Bush Housing established a post of Neighbourhood Action Team Officer (NATO). NATOs deal with all aspects of tenancy and estate management and there is an emphasis on action. The job of these individuals is to solve problems and get things done by whatever means, including engaging and working effectively and proactively with other agencies, and to keep neighbourhoods looking good. The job is regarded as a higher level job than those which are process-led, and post-holders are paid more. Arrears and antisocial behaviour problems are, by contrast, undertaken by specialists.

Income maximisation

Rent first policies
Although income maximisation is often carried out by specialist teams, housing providers are looking for ways of sharing the responsibility across all staff members. In the words of one senior director: "Other staff can't take a jobsworth attitude ... they can't say 'rent payment is someone else's job'". All staff need to understand that their wages and pensions depend on tenant-customers paying their rent, and all need to see it as a priority in the way they carry out their jobs. Sharing the responsibility in this way can also help to reduce the potential for rent officers to cut across the organisation's work to support their customers' livelihoods.

Gloucester City Homes has a blitz on arrears once a month. All staff – no matter what their position or responsibilities – have to make some calls and they make it into a competition to see which team can bring in the most money. They have changed the way they work in other ways too; officers are doing more evening and weekend calls on tenants in arrears because they are more likely to catch people when they are in.

Bolton At Home has brought its income recovery, financial inclusion and money skills sections together into a single Income Management service and has employed people with private sector experience to lead the teams. They aim to strike the right balance between being sensitive to people's needs and helping them to sort out their financial difficulties, and being firm in relation to non-payment and its consequences. Some organisations have found it difficult to expect the same person to be responsible for both enforcement and support. They have had more success by separating the roles of 'hard cop' and 'soft cop', with officers taking on these roles working closely together, so that they are not in danger of giving mixed messages.

Prioritising tenancy sustainment
Many people we spoke to are making tenancy sustainment their top priority. This is because it makes good business sense and underpins resident and community well-being. Management information shows that tenancy changes present a big cost in terms of lost income and cost of works to void properties. Conversely, keeping tenancies going is one way of keeping a consistent rental income. At the same time, tenancies are under threat as increasing numbers of tenant-customers are struggling financially, whether this is due to an increasing gap between their incomes and cost of living, changes to their welfare benefits or difficulty managing debts.

Reducing the number of voids, not only the re-let time, is important. Organisations that are thinking through this believe it is important to choose and prepare tenant-customers carefully so that tenancies are sustainable in the long term. A number of organisations told us that they now take longer to let a property (increasing their void period) because they want to let it to the right person and with the right support in place to increase the likelihood that the tenant-customer will stay for a long time and pay their rent consistently. One interviewee was very clear that their organisation now only gave tenancies to people who can sustain them. So, for example, individuals aged between 18-24 who are not working cannot afford 'the product'. The company view is that they have a duty of care not to put people in the situation of 'buying' a product that they cannot sustain. The question could be raised: "What would happen if all organisations took the same approach?" This practice could be limiting access to housing for some of the most vulnerable people.

Housing providers are starting to look more closely at the underlying reasons for high levels of vacancies in some neighbourhoods and are picking up non-payment at an earlier stage so that early conversations can be started with residents about what the

underlying causes are. Frontline workers are encouraged to see the bigger picture, not just to look at the one empty property.

Prioritisation and actions based on intelligence

Intelligence-led housing management
Housing providers spoke of a shift away from a blanket approach to housing management and to a differentiated one in which different customers received different 'services' depending on their needs and aspirations. One contributor to the research observed that "Customers don't want choice, they want what they want. The challenge is how we deal with that but within parameters".

Some felt that the majority of their customers did not need intensive management and that IT developments were enabling them to reduce the amount of time spent on them (and therefore the cost of management) without any drop in service quality. This freed up more time to spend on those customers whose needs are higher.

Others are using information to assess and manage risks and to put more effort into solving matters that present a higher risk to the business. One large housing organisation in England has stopped doing home checks on 100% of their customers on the basis that 40% did not need them and they could divert resources to focus on the 60% that need more support.

Differentiating the service offer is being led by greater levels of intelligence about individuals and neighbourhoods. Data management systems and customer insight tools are supporting this and enabling different management approaches in different neighbourhoods depending on the character, economic profile, housing market and needs of the area. These sources of information, when married up with information gained through conversations with residents, can be very powerful.

Better partnerships and use of local assets

A number of locally based housing providers told us that local partnerships are becoming more, not less, important. As the cuts to local services take their toll, the remaining agencies are starting to realise they need each other more than ever before. Good structures, shared training and taking the lead on behalf of the partnership (not just the organisation) all help to get the job done efficiently.

Linked to this, frontline officers are well placed to gain knowledge of local assets and resources and to help the landlords or local partnerships to build a 'map' of local assets. They are often in a position to negotiate access of services into neighbourhoods in order to bring them closer to residents.

There was recognition by some that social housing cannot meet needs alone and that there is a need to look beyond the public sector for support in delivering homes:

"The traditional 'landlord' role of local authorities has to remain, but frontline staff across all services have to be made aware of the need for the Private Rented Sector as an equal housing provider without the current stigma of it being seen as the housing option of last resort." (Principal Housing Officer, Welsh local authority)

The social value of frontline roles

Throughout the research we asked people to express the value of the front-line role in a tangible manner. Whilst all agreed that the role was valuable and critical, they found it difficult to measure it. Two of our survey respondents said:

"As social providers we have to prove there is added value to what we do, otherwise what is the difference between the social housing sector and private landlords?"

"… I believe they will always have an important place in our society – serving both the public sector and wider community."

Through the survey, key words were identified that linked to the value of the frontline role. They are shown below.

Responses included:

"Excellent value, as housing roles are often the only visible frontline role on estates and in poorer communities who support marginalised groups." (Head of Housing, Health and Supported Living, English housing association)

"Practical support, realistic advice and value for taxpayers' money." (Housing Officer, Northern Ireland local authority)

"There is now a more holistic, neighbourhood management focus and approach. Housing officers are able to signpost to a variety of services required by our customers… Also frontline housing plays a huge part in tearing down community boundaries and bringing the wider communities together in a variety of ways. So to answer the question, A HUGE VALUE." (Divisional Housing Manager, Scottish local authority)

"One of the biggest values which we have is our support to vulnerable people to get them the help they need in terms of tenancy, health and mental health support. If that support wasn't in place, we could potentially see a lot more evictions." (Neighbourhood Co-ordinator, English housing association)

Demonstrating and measuring social value

We came across a few organisations that are looking for ways of being able to demonstrate the social value they offer, in order to be able to continue to make a case for resources in the future. Where this is happening, it is not typically being linked specifically to frontline roles.

One housing association in the South West of England has carried out an evaluation on selected activities using a Social Return on Investment method. The chosen activities include some elements of frontline officer roles, but the evaluation itself is not focused on the role as a whole. Another Northern housing organisation is looking at the social impact of the whole housing service.

Value to tenant-customers

"Good housing officers know their housing stock and their tenants. The needs of a vulnerable tenant can be met and the knowledge and contacts gained can be deployed for other tenants in similar circumstances who may not ask for help but may be in need. This proactive approach can only work if a strong relationship is in place between tenants and housing officers and saves money and anxiety/stress in the long term." (tenant-customer, small English housing association)

"A localised housing service structure is far more important than that of an integrated service. Local Housing staff know their clients as well as their needs and aspirations." (tenant-customer, Scottish local authority)

"Great value. 1st point of call for any problems. Getting repairs done, dealing with antisocial behaviour." (tenant-customer, Welsh housing association)

KNOWLEDGE
CONTACT EARS
SUPPORT FIRST FACE INVALUABLE VALUE EYES ACT
TENANTS COMMUNITY

The value of the frontline role is referred to by both professionals and tenant-customers in very tangible ways and clearer measures of value could be developed, possibly linked to the holistic well-being of communities.

What does an organisation with a social heart and a commercial head look like?

A commercially minded housing organisation, which also recognises social value, may exhibit:

- an organisation-wide dedication to maintaining financial sustainability
- relational rather than transactional ways of working with customers
- willingness to work with and alongside customers
- an understood context of firm, fair and managed boundaries
- a strong commitment to achieving outcomes
- a willingness to automate, adapt or discard processes
- intelligence-led approach in terms of priorities and effort
- pre-emptive action and proactive problem solving
- a focus on long-term sustainability
- empathy with customers
- commitment to helping customers to address and resolve the difficulties they sometimes face
- a flexible but proactive and firm approach to problem solving
- investment in customers to gain life skills and develop self-sufficiency
- constructive working with local partners
- ability to capture efficiencies that don't negatively impact on customers wherever possible.

Summary

Being commercially minded is no longer an option for housing providers and the commercial imperative is significantly affecting the way frontline roles are carried out. Organisations are finding ways of blending the commercial and the social, and of maintaining their financial sufficiency and credibility in a way that deals more fully and intelligently with customers' needs.

Chapter 5

The tenant-customer

Introduction – a new relationship with tenant-customers

Tenants see the importance in the term 'customer' as it implies a line of accountability and professionalism in the housing service they should receive. Our research team surveyed 41 tenant-customers and conducted two appreciative inquiries (one in England and one in Scotland) to examine their views on the future of frontline roles. Tenant-customers really value the role of the frontline housing worker. They said they liked the face-to-face contact time and liked to see housing workers 'out on their patch'.

Residents who attended the appreciative inquiry events were quite clear about the sort of relationship they want with their landlord. While they want frontline officers to be knowledgeable, professional and businesslike, they also want the boundaries with residents to be less marked. There is a strong desire to be listened to and involved. Some are prepared to take on unpaid communications roles, both to improve the dialogue between residents and officers and to help to build relationships between residents living in a neighbourhood.

Poem on the housing officer
By Valerie Schneider, Nottingham City Homes tenant

My long term vision, to stand firm together
In all the rain, snow and hail, whatever the weather
To help each other, working as residents
Not just tenants paying our rents
We want an organisation with a very big heart
We'll help: we all try to do our part

An officer we want, with ears like an elephant
Who sees and understands everything – is omnipresent
With degrees in everything, all sorts of genius
Sorts out all problems for every one of us
Superman, superwoman, we're not fussed
Someone to stick around, someone to trust

Diversity, ethnicity, all are included
All the young people, no one's precluded
With a smile and a loving, helping hand
Showing all work to our homes being planned

Sequin covered, leaving a trail of glitter
Immediately dissolving, not leaving litter
With wings to transport, all the better for seeing
A truly wonderful exceptional being

Survey responses

A total of 41 tenant-customers responded to the survey. Most rented their homes, with one leaseholder and one shared ownership customer. When asked how long they had been in their homes, most (78%) indicated that they had been tenants for more than five years.

What works best?
- "As it is a small housing association, I like that when you report something it is done fast. Everyone is friendly and very helpful."
- "Landlord is responsive and seeks to excel."
- "Resident Engagement funding."
- "Regular communication."
- "Easily accessible and tenants can contribute to how services are provided."

And least?
- "The lack of adequate communications as to what and how the association is doing."
- "People not knowing what you are talking about when reporting repairs."
- "Lack of communication."
- "We don't seem to have much involvement in them. It's as if it's their way only. Transparency is not always around. Not sure if they like being asked too many questions."
- "I think sometimes the sub contractors pull the wool over their eyes."
- "New customer service centre – awful – not welcoming, staff not very pleasant and they are not housing staff and have limited knowledge – can be hard to get speaking to someone from housing. Corporate image not working."
- "Patronising attitude of many staff. Assumption that if you are in social housing you must be on benefit. Too centralised."

What has changed in the last 10 years?
- "Since stock transfer from Council to Housing Association services are more efficient and attitude to tenants has improved, more respect shown."
- "Much faster service all round."
- "It has got more remote, cutting costs all the time."
- "Cut backs in quality of service relating to personal support – the Council is less accessible for personal contact – no local housing office. Loss of the personal touch."
- "Become worse – they don't care about tenants, just about profits. Houses are cheaper and have no eye on lasting for any period of time – not adhering to best practice for home design."

Value of the housing officer role
- "No, nobody in the area knows who they are or what the purpose of their job is."
- "YES without the housing officer there would not be a direct link with the HA. The officer understands the local community and its tenants and needs and is able to tailor the work to suit."

It is also important to reiterate a point from Chapter 1, that the quick responses in a survey need to be balanced with the more reflected and nuanced considerations in a group environment such as the appreciative inquiries. In both England and Scotland, tenant-customers in those sessions demonstrated the very strong value they placed on frontline housing workers.

### What makes the best housing officers good at their jobs?
- "Good listening skills, negotiating skills, politeness and respect for all tenants and a high level of professionalism and integrity."
- "Being sympathetic to the everyday needs of tenants struggling to pay rent and feed families in these lean times."
- "Compassion."

- "They are efficient and sensitive to the needs of those they serve. Service is the key word. They can make a huge difference in the lives of vulnerable people, protecting their independent living for as long as possible."
- "A belief in social housing and its purpose and acceptance that customers can be challenging."

Regulation and accountability

There are different changes to regulation and scrutiny across the UK, but the one consistency is that there are changes. In England, for example, the role of tenant-customers in scrutinising their landlords is more and more important. Tenant-customers' views of the frontline housing role are therefore not just 'nice to have' in terms of this piece of research – they are vital for assessing the performance of the housing organisation and its duty to provide good value for money.

"Change in the way that we are monitored. Tenants play a much more important role in the scrutiny of Housing Providers now and this has changed the way that frontline staff work, with a lot more emphasis on recruitment into Resident Involvement opportunities." (Resident Involvement Officer, English housing association)

Communication – eyes and ears

This point came out strongly across all of the responses – both positive and negative – to a number of the tenant-customer survey questions. Communication is seen as vital by tenant-customers.

In the appreciative inquiry for tenant-customers in England, the vision of the frontline housing worker for the future was discussed by three groups. Each one drew a picture and provided a commentary to describe their piece. One such example said that:

"The ideal housing person is a 'facilitator'. They have ears to listen and pick things up, a mouth to communicate well, a heart to care and brain cells to think and solve problems. They understand about justice, run a 5* service and make things happen."

Tenant-customers in the appreciative inquiry told us they wanted to be able to access reports and benchmarking data to be able to hold housing professionals to account. They specifically suggested that CIH, as the professional body, might be able to help facilitate this.

Multi-skilled or super heroes?

At the appreciative inquiry in Scotland, again three groups of tenant-customers visioned the future frontline housing worker and one poster particularly stood out as the 'dream' for the future. However, the question needs to be asked: "Are we expecting too much of our frontline housing workers?" The photograph below shows the range of different competencies and skills that tenant-customers rated; they are many and varied.

Photograph by Jo Richardson

Collaborating and signposting

Tenant-customers wanted accountability and help through an increasingly fragmented system of public service delivery and in times where some services are cut entirely. Housing is seen as the service that is "always there" rather than a service which drops in just at times of crisis. So, in tenant-customers' words, housing is the "eyes and ears" of a caring state – one that can see when circumstances change and when customers are struggling and offer a solution or work with another agency that can help. There are clear implications here of the importance to tenant-customers of good organisational partnership working, which should be manifest in the day-to-day actions of frontline housing workers.

Rights and responsibilities – a culture change move towards co-production?

Co-production is an approach which includes a partnership between service providers and customers to the design and delivery of services. Not all organisations across the UK are at the same stage of developing such an approach, but there is an appetite to consider this further.

"Greater emphasis needs to be placed on residents taking responsibility – the balance between tenant and landlord needs to be clear." (Head of Strategic Projects, English housing association)

"A difficult time ahead, challenging in terms of a culture change for tenants in terms of welfare reform and independence, and our role in mentoring the change." (Housing Services Manager, English housing association)

However, there is a need for caution in approach to ensure that co-production isn't used as a term which covers the gap left by public services withdrawal. One survey respondent was clear on the need for a more traditional approach to delivering a service in a community:

"We need to get back to a more personal approach and away from 'self serve'. The local housing officer should be like the old local postie or milk man – well known figure in the community." (Community Housing Officer, English housing association)

Organisations are appreciative of the fact that requiring customers to be active rather than passive receivers of services is a paradigm shift for customers. A small number of organisations we spoke to had or were reorganising their front line into a more supportive role and had actively looked at the behaviours and/or approaches of the existing workforce. Staff unfamiliar with the support function were reluctant to let go of problems, acting as 'fixers' or 'rescuers'. Identifying workforce psychological characteristics is enabling organisations to gear the workforce for the new role.

"The change in culture, in language and way we work has disempowered customers over many years. It will take time to reverse this and empower communities so we need to work out what we need to do versus what we do." (Midlands housing association focus group)

Resident-led and asset or strength-based community development are approaches that identify and draw on the skills and personal agency that exist within communities. Instead of thinking in terms of the deficits or needs of individuals and communities, community development places the focus on the assets owned collectively by that community and how they might be used. This includes individuals' knowledge, skills and expertise and the potential of working through community networks, as well as drawing on other types of assets such as land and buildings.

Successful community development requires faith in the capability of individuals

and communities to be able to manage their own lives, an open mind about how problems might be solved and a flexible approach to getting things done. It also requires a commitment to creating the conditions and providing the right sort of support that will enable individuals and communities to grow in confidence and to be proactive rather than reinforcing dependency.

Future ways of working together

The figure below, based on the idea of a ladder of involvement from Arnstein (1969), suggests future steps to co-creation/ production of housing services with tenant-customers.

Stepladder of co-creation for frontline housing services
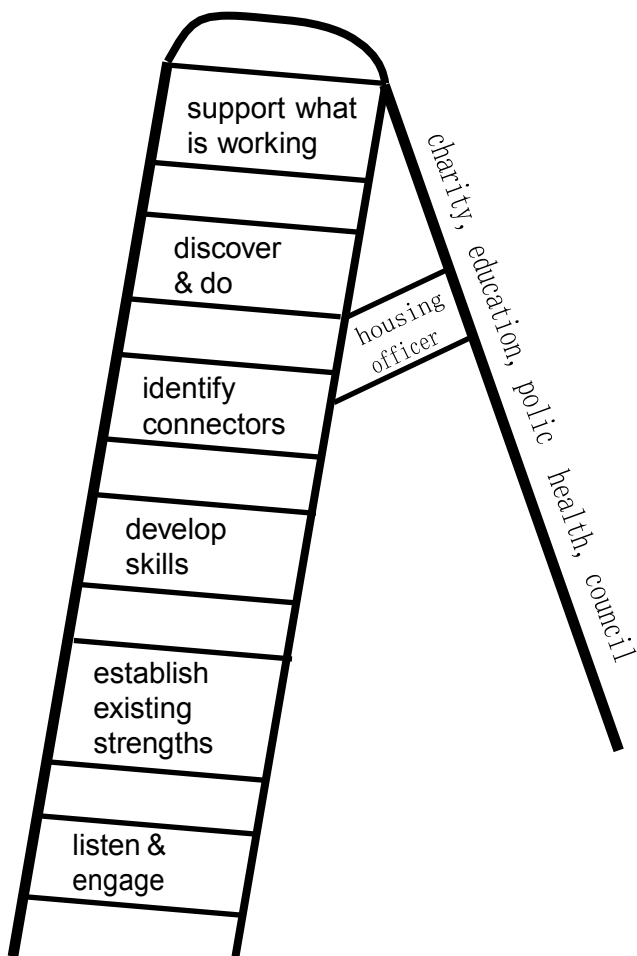
(Richardson, 2014)

STEP 1 – Listen and engage: genuine listening exercises, asking people what they feel, are the first step to take towards co-creation of frontline housing services.

STEP 2 – Establish existing strengths: using an 'asset' or strengthsbased approach to developing community-led services requires an assessment of current skills and strengths. You need to know what you have got in terms of skills in the community (most of the time, more than is realised), before establishing what you want to do.

STEP 3 – Develop skills: This builds upon Step 2 but is tenant-led. Tenant-customers identify the community skills they need to have to be involved and then identify where skills need to be developed to meet their aims. This can be achieved through the informal sharing of knowledge, as well as through more official training.

STEP 4 – Identify and support connectors: those people in the community who know a wide network of people in the neighbourhood. They may not be able to be involved directly, but they always know someone with a particular skill, asset or further connection.

STEP 5 – Discover and do: in the words of Wheatley Housing Group: 'Think Yes'. If a tenant-customer discovers a way that a group of customers can work with the housing organisation to help deliver a better service or offer support to a particular neighbourhood and community, they need a quick response to enable them to 'do'.

STEP 6 – Support what is working: It is important to be flexible and support ways in which people are already delivering services through small informal schemes. Not everything needs to be constituted and speak the same bureaucratic language. If tenant-customers see they are supported, they are more likely to listen and engage (Step 1) in future projects.

Summary

This chapter has underlined the vital importance of tenant-customers to the delivery of the frontline housing service. They demand accountability and quality of service. There is a very clear preference shown for more face-to-face time with housing officers 'out on the patch', but with the recognition that technology needs to set them free from routine tasks that might bind them to the desk otherwise. Tenant-customers wanted to be involved, with some suggesting that housing organisations could work more closely with tenant-customers as they were the experts in their own neighbourhoods. There is caution advised by some participants in the tenant appreciative inquiry that one tenant-customer in a neighbourhood shouldn't have too much power over others. However, a strength-based approach to community co-creation of housing services should help to achieve wide engagement with tenant-customers to ensure inclusion.
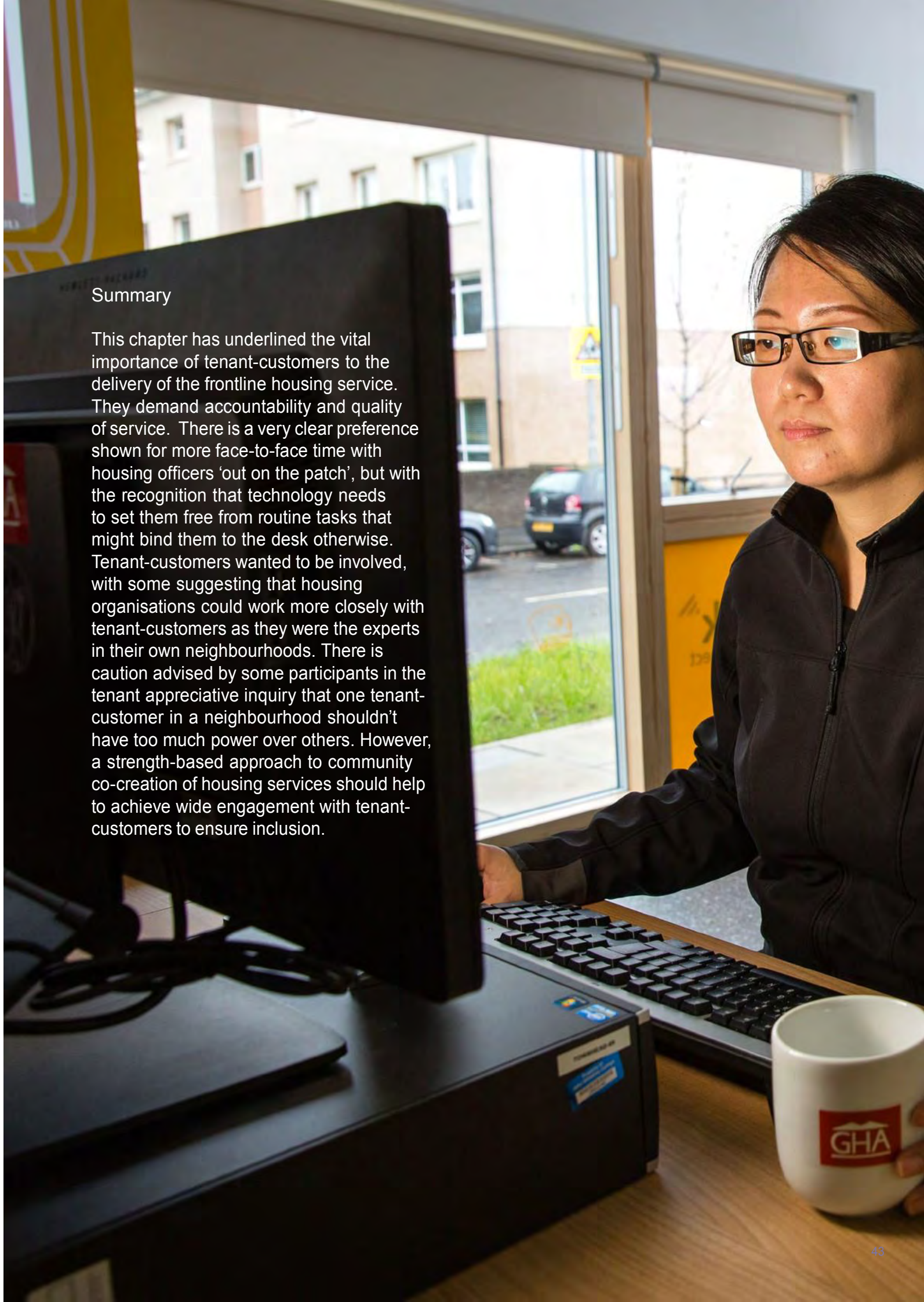
Chapter 6

Technology – opportunities and challenges

Introduction

Technology is very important in the delivery of housing services and in the way that we communicate with tenant-customers. There is openness from management and frontline staff and tenant-customers, particularly in discussions in focus groups and interviews, to the increased use of technology as long as it facilitates frontline workers to spend more time 'on the patch' speaking with tenant-customers. Tenants do not want technology to become the service – for example, 'press 1 for rent payments'. Those in the appreciative inquiries made it clear that technology needed to support and facilitate the service, not replace it.

Organisations are using technological advances to enhance the customer experience through freeing up frontline workers' time and offering a choice of ways to access some services. It enables visiting frontline housing staff to respond immediately to additional customer requests. This is leading to an increase in mobile and remote working. Better technology allows housing officers to be 'out on the patch'. It helps to compress some of the more routine tasks and enables officers to deliver information and services in customers' homes. Some channel shift is occurring, enabling those who can to self-help for simple transactions.

The research did not uncover an opinion on whether the growing use of technology in the delivery of housing services on the front line was a 'good' thing per se. Most frontline workers in the survey acknowledged the freedom this gave them from the office, but

some also acknowledged the additional responsibility to make decisions quickly in tenant-customers' own homes. We found four key areas of importance when talking about technology for frontline housing services:

- Freeing up frontline workers' time through technology – to be 'out on the patch'.
- Automation and choice in managing and accessing services (channel shift).
- Digital divide.
- Social media – conversations with the tenant-customers.

Freeing up frontline workers' time through technology – to be out on the patch

Frontline housing workers are frustrated if they feel that processes and procedures are keeping them at their desk rather than 'out on the patch':

> "My role as a Housing Officer has seen me, in the last 10 years more in the office than on my schemes, which is a challenge. Communities want to put a face to a name."
> (Housing Officer, Northern Ireland housing association)

More and more housing organisations we spoke to either had or were developing customer service centres which resolve basic customer queries and process transactions, with the exception of some smaller, locally based housing organisations, in order to resolve this frustration. This means that frontline workers are more free to be 'out on the patch' working to deliver quality services to tenant-customers in their homes and neighbourhoods. Issues which cannot be resolved by the customer service centre are referred either to specialist teams/local 'relationship' manager (if the service is specialised) or to the housing officer where the role is generic. Organisations spoke of the importance of a well-trained, informed and connected customer service workforce.

> "There has been a drive over last two years to move neighbourhood officers out onto estates with computers. We used IT as a way of changing how staff work (not behind desks churning out letters). Staff embracing technology has not been an issue but the culture in the organisation is a bigger issue and 'connectivity' is a huge issue. Staff don't have to come into the office so there is an economic and environmental benefit to it in there being less petrol usage."
> (Welsh focus group)

Organisations are equipping staff with handheld equipment such as tablets to enable them to address multiple issues whilst conducting visits.

> "Repairs officers: we're about to give them all iPads – automatically linked in to repairs and other systems." (participant, technology webinar)

Using technology in customers' homes can however be problematic and in some areas, connectivity can be a real issue. There is also a preference for some tenant-customers to keep hard copies or receipts of transactions, as one tenant-customer told us in an appreciative inquiry session.

Through the use of technology, there is a greater possibility to share information – between service providers to enable better partnership working, and between housing provider and tenant-customer. When asked about the impact technology would have on frontline housing workers, the view from participants in the technology webinar was positive, but the need for a wholesale change in approach was discussed.

> "Big cultural shift required. Reliance on data rather than gut instinct, sharing information rather than owning it – curiosity/data management... It's not about diminishing the role, but working out how housing officers can have more time to do more of the social stuff."
> (participant, technology webinar)

Technology may feel like a threat though for some traditionalists:

> "Lettings – customers sign up online now. Frontline roles first thought – this is fantastic, it saves us doing it and we can get on with other stuff, but then they realised that more and more of their role can be automated." (participant, technology webinar)

However, there are complex and difficult tasks, as highlighted throughout this report, which require human empathy. Tenant-customers have also said loud and clear that they wish to have more human contact, not less, but that they wish for the technology to set frontline staff free to deal in an expert way with the complex issues and not be tied down by the routine tasks. Indeed, as was discussed in Chapter 5 of this report, tenant-customers wished to be involved more in the delivery of their services. They are experts in their own neighbourhoods and that should be harnessed by housing organisations.

There is a positive assumption by many that if we can get people online and skilled up to use technology, then we will have the answer. However, there is also a need to ensure that technology empowers frontline housing workers, rather than puts them under further stress. Some frontline workers interviewed and surveyed felt that the immediacy of the technology was an added pressure, as is shown in the response below:

> "Growth in social media via smartphones... More pervasive though, is the low-level fear of 'getting something wrong' and having a complaint made, feeling powerless in the face of overwhelming demand and people's frustration. I'd rank that latter one up at #1." (Corporate Services Director, English housing association)

We found many organisations moving towards remote working, with a small number who have used this practice for some years. With staff equipped with remote technology, they are able to access customer information and deal with other arising issues on site.

> "It's rarely one issue when the tenant rings in so we invested in mobile technology so issues can be resolved when an officer visits. We can also see what housing staff are doing and how they are doing it. Mobile working is integrated with our housing management and repairs systems." (interview with Welsh housing association)

> "We undertook data protection training with staff. It addressed things such as paperwork left in cars and keeping information secure." (West Midlands focus group)

We also found that staff commonly worked from home with organisations arranging remote access to relevant organisational systems. The roles of frontline housing staff are changing, with greater emphasis on staff making decisions and dealing with issues away from the office. This represents a major operational shift for staff more accustomed to making decisions in an environment where advice from colleagues and managers is on hand. Frontline staff who are not used to working away from the office need training, advice and support to manage independently. Managers also need to be trained to manage the performance of a remote workforce and keep staff informed and motivated.

Automation and choice in managing and accessing services

Interviewees were unanimous in their belief that organisations need a system that works for them in supporting service delivery to tenant-customers on the front line and which allows for automation of some transactional services so that tenant-customers can 'self-serve' direct online, and that information systems will support this

and allow ease of access. Frontline workers and strategic organisational roles alike noted that existing systems are inadequate and fail to link people and property-based data as required.

> "We installed a system at [our organisation] three years ago, but have now thrown it away. There was no detail in the interaction on the Customer Relationship Management and it seemed to encourage officers to 'close cases'. We need to make sure we know the questions we need to ask of the system." (participant, technology webinar)

> "Frontline housing roles will need to become more effective which they can only do with the correct information and technology. The housing sector needs to catch up with the rest of the world in terms of technology or the services will go elsewhere." (Business Support Manager)

Increasingly, housing organisations are looking towards integrated systems that interface with staff and customers. Systems that enable frontline officers to have information regarding the property and those living within it are being adopted:

> "We are looking to have CRM accessible to all staff so they will know any ASB, capital works etc."(interview, Chief Executive, North West England housing association)

We also heard of one organisation, a local authority in England, that has a 'Bring your own computer to work day'. The idea is to draw on the IT skills of the younger workforce in particular by encouraging them to design bespoke IT applications to support them and their colleagues' roles. Some of the ideas have worked better than off-the-shelf systems.

Channel, here, means the distribution path of goods or services from the provider to the consumer (Housing and the Customer, Richardson 2010). Where there is an alternative channel from the traditional model, which either consumers choose or providers encourage, then this is a channel shift. There has been a lot of channel shifting in the private retail sector (think online shopping) and the technology is also enabling shifts in services and in the social housing sector too. For the purposes of making efficiencies, the place to start examination would be on the low volume/high cost channels – for example, face-to-face delivery. For some cases this will still be the best method, such as complex and specialist cases. However, for others it may be possible to shift the tenant-customer to a more cost-efficient channel such as online self-service.

> "A face-to-face transaction cost £s, but online was only a matter of pence." (Board member, English Housing Association)

All of the organisations we spoke to had developed websites which provide information and enable customers to complete basic transactions such as reporting a repair or incident of antisocial behaviour online. Customers are in the first instance encouraged to 'self-help' by using online facilities. We found that fewer organisations were yet at the stage where customers could 'track' all service requests, although a number were working towards this.

> "In terms of contact with customers, we're making a big push to move away from low maintenance inquiries, face-to-face, letters etc to online interaction, to make more time for the cases that need more time."(interview, Local Authority Housing Policy Officer)

We also found that organisations are providing online facilities for customers to view their rent accounts and make electronic payments; this is becoming a more common occurrence. Many organisations have a texting service operating in some services. However, these are mainly restricted to service or appointment reminders.

Some of the 'democratisation' of data collection and use will be achieved through very standard 'self-serve' transactions online – for example, reporting repairs and paying rent. There are some innovative ideas within these standard areas of service to make best use of technology, whilst also thinking about new areas. For example, a London student founded a technology business that works with a number of housing associations on various apps which can allow reporting of repairs through upload of a photo from a resident's phone, as well as an app to facilitate rent payment. This organisation is working with a housing provider to develop a facility that will allow a contractor, who has seen something in a tenant's home that has made them worry about their welfare, to click on a tab that goes straight through to the housing association as an alert. A bit like 'snapchat', however, this will not stay on the frontline worker's tablet or computer, so there is less concern regarding data confidentiality and security.

What innovative housing organisations are trying to do with technology is to utilise the preferred (social) media channels already used by customers and to appeal to a sense of fun too.

> "Some ideas we're just starting to play with – eg gameification. We'd love to have photos of lots of our houses, to have for our records. We're planning on incentivising customers to do this for us through gameification. It's not really about the frontline officer doing this – a bit like getting aeroplane passengers to

print off their own boarding passes at home, but a bit different." (participant, technology webinar)

Digital divide – helping tenant-customers get online

Although not one of the top drivers that are changing the frontline housing role, survey respondents saw technological advances as important and ranked it as the fifth most important external influencer on the frontline housing role (see Chapter 3). This was also borne out in our interviews where almost all organisations had or were using technological advances as an enabler to support service transformation. However, also in our survey, 325 respondents said that 'digital divide' was also a driver for change in the housing sector. Clearly, although the technology is available and increasingly affordable, there are issues of access that may be related either to skills deficit or lack of broadband connection.

> "In North Wales, Snowdonia gets in the way of most connections." (Welsh focus group)

In terms of the need to support and skill tenant-customers to make best use of technology and to help them self-serve where appropriate, there is a need for training. Tenant-customers in the appreciative inquiries did not refer to barriers in accessing digital technology, but it has been shown that there is less connectivity in the social housing sector. In Scotland, the government found:

> "Scottish Household Survey 2012 data suggests that rates of digital exclusion amongst those in social rented accommodation are around 45% and this is known to vary considerably across the country with, for example, the Glasgow Housing Association estimating that around 62% of its tenants are currently offline." (Scottish Government, 2014)

The picture in England is slightly improved but still shows there are barriers for tenant-customers in physically connecting online. Inside Housing reported on an Ipsos Mori poll undertaken in November 2012:

> "...only 68 per cent of local authority tenants and 64 per cent of housing association tenants had internet access. This is up from 60 per cent and 54 per cent respectively two years earlier, but significantly lower than mortgage holders, on 94 per cent, and private renters, on 88 per cent... The data also shows social tenants are less likely to have smartphones, with only 29 per cent of housing association tenants and 33 per cent of council tenants owning an internet enabled phone." (Lloyd, 2013)

The UK government's Digital by Default strategy (2013) and the Scottish government's Scotland's Digital Future strategy (2011) set out the importance of closing the digital divide and outline key aims. The social housing sector, meanwhile, has a number of practical strategies it is employing to get tenant-customers connected.

Wheatley Housing Group's digital strategy
The first phase of our strategy was to carry out two feasibility studies, the first within 12 properties in Glasgow and the second within a multi-storey block (the biggest study in Europe). In partnership with the Scottish government and BT we were able to provide internet access to 72 customers. This has allowed us to assess:

- A cost model for our customers which will be a maximum of £1 per week
- Training needs of customers
- Type of usage (what our customers will use the internet for)
- Suitability of wi-fi internet access for all Wheatley Group customers.

Wheatley Group have also developed and launched a digital learning centre, with a further five centres to be launched during 2014.

Case Study: Leeds Federated Housing

Leeds Federated Housing Association developed HUGO (Helping U Get On-line), a digital inclusion programme to find the right hook for each digitally excluded individual and motivate them to recognise the benefits of being online.

HUGO provides internet access and support in social housing communities across Leeds. Two buses, loaded with IT equipment, bring an internet style cafe direct to tenants' doorsteps and free wi-fi across every neighbourhood they visit. Digital champions, both staff and volunteers, deliver training and signpost people to further support to remove individual barriers to getting online. Leeds Federated work with housing partners and service providers to maximise reach into communities and have set an ambitious target to engage up to 10,000 people during the pilot project, which runs until summer 2014.

Social media and conversations with the tenant-customer: "YouTube if you want to"

As Hazel Blears (Helm and Hinsliff, 2009) said about a social media presentation given by Gordon Brown: "YouTube if you want to... but there is no substitute for knocking on doors...". This quote speaks to two different aspects of the impact of technology on frontline roles. The first is the use of social media, and the growing encouragement for staff to utilise this as an alternative channel for delivering housing services. The second is the hesitancy to embrace technology where to do so might erode the human and social element of the frontline housing role. There is clearly a need to balance the types of service that can be delivered through new technology and the types that require old-fashioned face-to-face conversations.

"Increasing Poverty leads to a need to deploy resources into different areas, for example, utilisation of mobile technology in our drive for efficiency to reduce costs and improve services. We have a drive to 'channel shift' to use more digital interactions for very routine tasks and focus our people resources on the harder to access tenants, the complex issues and actions to support customers in the current economic climate."
(Director, English housing association)

Most organisations are making some use of social media with applications such as Facebook and Twitter to engage with customers. Frontline staff are also being encouraged to use social media in their day-to-day work which represents a major shift in communication methods. Technology such as intranets and social media are opening up organisations, enabling the chief (and other senior) officers to communicate directly with both staff and customers.

"Big push to get staff on Twitter (based on usage). Have done a lot with social media in the last year." (interview, North West England housing association)

"[Facebook] was an evil then but now it's encouraged. For example, a question was raised as to why an estate was looking old and tired – we now have to go on and respond (on Facebook)." (interview Welsh housing association)

There are issues for frontline staff and their organisations when moving to use social media. Frontline staff and mangers need to be trained not just in how to operate the application, but also in how to construct effective messages or responses.

"Staff can't keep referring to a senior to ask if a Tweet/Facebook write is OK." (interview, English local authority Housing Policy Officer)

Summary

The increased use of technology as an alternative channel for the provision of housing services is not an option; it is now part of the context driven by providers and consumers. Technology can be seen as a barrier if systems don't work correctly, broadband isn't available to facilitate online connectivity, or if it is used to entirely replace human interaction. However, for the most part, technology is being embraced by the social housing sector – by housing providers attempting to shift to more efficient channels of delivering routine services, and by tenant-customers who would like technology to free frontline workers and to enable them to get 'out on the patch'. In the future, as shown my responses from senior and frontline staff, there is an expectation that those delivering housing services direct to tenant-customers will need to have skills in accessing and analysing data (largely online), communicating online and encouraging service users to access some services online too.

Chapter 7

Managing frontline roles and managing people

Introduction

Management styles and performance management systems that will support the emergence and development of the right characteristics in individuals and of a culture in which staff can grow and develop themselves are needed. This chapter draws on findings from detailed discussions during interviews and focus groups. It presents some emerging styles and systems, which should be useful for managers of frontline housing workers.

The shape of the future frontline housing role

The research has helped to identify some core characteristics of frontline roles and of the qualities and competencies that people assuming those roles need to possess. Here we summarise what the shape of that role is. We will then go on to debate how those roles and the people in them might be managed.

Future frontline roles will be:
- Differentiated – using data intelligence to guide how officer time is used, rather than providing a blanket service for all residents
- Relational – doing things with residents, rather than doing things to or for them
- Interactive – working alongside professionals from other disciplines to achieve a broader range of outcomes for residents
- Varied and creative – finding solutions, even if they lie outside of 'normal activity'
- Engaged and impactful – doing things with the intention of having a positive impact on people's lives and the organisation's bottom line
- Novel and anticipatory – doing something now to avoid negative consequences later on.

The key qualities and competencies that frontline officers will need to possess are:
- Ability to be effective in a quickly changing environment
- Commercial awareness – how the way they do their job supports company finances
- Ability to solve problems – to be flexible and adaptable and able to respond to situations creatively, in the moment
- Good listening and communication (people) skills – to interact, liaise and negotiate effectively with sometimes vulnerable residents as well as technical staff and local partners
- Resilience and emotional intelligence – to be able to cope with difficult situations and handle them well
- A 'can do' improvement-focused attitude – not precious about rank or job boundaries, but prepared to take responsibility and get things done
- Ability to analyse and interpret customer insight intelligence and to allow that to drive their actions
- Ability to be self-aware and critically reflective and a desire to keep learning
- Confidence to assess and take calculated risks
- Ability to connect their experience on the ground with the bigger picture and to inform policy
- Ability and willingness to make a positive contribution to team culture and to inspire and gain the confidence of others
- Ability to self-manage.

It is also worth noting that there is a high level of consensus that effective frontline workers will not be following procedures or processes in a big way in the future. A downgrading of 'process' as an effective way of doing business is one of the most consistent pieces of evidence coming through all strands of the research. As one contributor said: "We have been very good at training people to deliver on Key Lines of Enquiries… but now we need people who see the big picture. They are dealing with a lot of unknowns and we need people who can deal with change."

Emerging management styles

Below are some of the features of frontline housing staff management that survey respondents and interviewees felt would be important in the future.

Clarity of vision:
Frontline staff should know what their managers expect of them and what the plan is for supporting them to work differently. For example, if they know their manager expects them to make decisions, it helps to release them from the fear of making the wrong decision.

Coaching and mentoring:
Opportunities are needed to learn to operate in a different way for personal growth and better service delivery. Several organisations are putting managers through coaching and mentoring training. At least one is also equipping frontline staff with this training to enable them to have better conversations with managers and customers.

Learning opportunities:
Putting in place mechanisms for staff to work through and learn from mistakes in a safe environment will help to give them confidence to think through things and take actions for themselves.

Network development:
Frontline officers will be more effective if they are better connected with other local services and organisations. Managers should encourage frontline staff to develop contacts and networks through facilitated events, in the same way that more senior staff are encouraged to do.

Opportunities to shape the job:
Encouraging frontline staff to contribute ideas about how they might do their job well and helping people to develop ideas they've come up with.

A challenge for managers – back to the floor?

Changing to an environment in which staff are encouraged to self-manage and take greater levels of responsibility can lead to difficulties with staff members who resist or who feel threatened by the changes in addition to regular difficulties. Managers need to be prepared to and able to address difficulties that arise in ways that achieve a positive end result.

"I took the area manager out on the patch so he could see the sort of queries raised and therefore give the backing for how housing officers deal with things. We need to have managers' support. We took him round teams so he could see what was happening on the ground. It was a good opportunity because otherwise they can dwell too much and become risk averse. It boils down to intuition and experience a bit." (interview, Tenancy Enforcement Officer, English housing association)

Staff need to learn to make decisions to help tenant-customers in complex scenarios, sometimes in need of an urgent response. Inherent in this decision-making process (accelerated with the increasing use of real-time technology) is the need to learn to take calculated risks. As shown in the quotation above, this isn't limited to frontline workers; managers need to be less risk averse too and to understand what is happening right there and then on the ground.

"One of the key skills is for people to make a judgement and not blindly follow policy = decision making." (Managing Director, English housing association)

This will clearly require a cultural shift in management practice in some organisations, in addition to training being made available to frontline housing workers so that they feel empowered to do their job, rather than at risk of blame if a situation becomes more complex.

Performance management relating to frontline housing workers

Most contributors said that performance management at both organisation and individual levels needs to be more sophisticated, but few were able to say very much about what they meant and how to go about this. "It's harder" and "We're not there yet" were common responses.

Measurement of organisations' performance against some of the more tangible, long-standing KPIs, such as arrears levels and repairs response rates, will continue to be important but most see them as inadequate by themselves for the future. Without exception, those survey respondents and interviewees who had quite clear ideas about how organisational performance management might be done see 'performance management' as a mechanism for organisational and individual learning.

Case Study: Specialist audit and improvement team
Shepherd's Bush Housing has a specialised Service Improvement Team that carries out audits on work, including spot checks. Team members look at functions in the round to see how well the function is being carried out. They check that staff are properly equipped with the right tools and that they have the right capabilities to carry out the function well. They are encouraged to think 'outside the box', to identify issues that might be holding back performance, and to work with teams to improve performance. Where individual staff performance issues are uncovered, these are passed onto managers to deal with. Overall, it is a very positive experience.

Feedback from residents

Several people said that community feedback is an important part of performance management. One research participant suggested that organisational

performance could be at least partly rated through social media feedback. She felt that managers and boards need to know what people are saying about the organisation. This might involve, for example, 'likes' (and 'not likes') on Facebook or the number of positive comments as the result of a Twitter discussion. This might be more appropriate for organisations that already use social media as part of their communications with residents.

Another organisation holds an actual conversation with a large proportion of their residents every year. Every staff member, including the CEO, visits four to five tenant-customers and has a conversation with them, including asking some set questions, for example about how responsive frontline staff are.

Staff recognition

Many contributors said they were finding ways of recognising staff efforts. Some felt that rewards should only be given to staff who regularly go above and beyond the job description and for displaying important characteristics as well as for quality of work. Rewards don't need to be financial. One person suggested that giving high performers more leeway is a form of reward, but it's also important to get the management processes right for those who 'know how to play the game'. Several organisations hold annual staff awards where the judges are a mix of staff, tenant-customers and board members.

"There are loads of ways you can celebrate success."
(former Fire Service manager)

Summary

This brief chapter has taken a step back to reflect on the findings of the research and to offer a framework for thinking about performance management of the frontline housing role.

Chapter 8

Equipping the housing sector to deliver: recruitment, training and education

Introduction

Like the previous chapter, this is about supporting the development of people who have the right kind of characteristics and competencies to be effective on the front line in the future. It takes as its starting point the summary of the future frontline role and the key qualities and competencies that frontline officers will need to possess set out at the start of Chapter 7. It then takes a sector-wide look at ways in which organisations concerned with housing education, training and development might help people to start their housing career and develop professionally throughout.

Choosing housing as a career – the role and process of recruitment

Professionals who attended one of the appreciative inquiry sessions felt that most people "just fall into housing" and there was some frustration attached to this not uncommon claim.

"If people knew what housing is, more would seek a career in it – many don't understand it."
"Housing offers an amazing career path, but doesn't have the kudos… must be a branding issue!"

In their view, a "huge PR campaign" is needed to make it understandable and more attractive as a career option. They felt that housing is now so broad that it should be setting people up for "bigger, better things". For example, one participant said she would like the next head of the NHS to be from a housing background.

Some suggestions were put forward for attracting people into housing, including school leavers, new graduates and people entering their second or third careers, along the lines of schemes being run by Charityworks and The Gem: Centre for Partnerships. These included offering to cover university tuition fees on the grounds they work in housing for a number of years following graduation and offering year placements after graduation, supported financially. It was felt that the current insecurity in the job market and poor access for young people to many jobs could make now a good time to promote housing as a satisfying career.

"More emphasis needs to be given to drive up professionalism in the role and make it into a career with a clear progression path to attract more people to housing."
(Housing Officer, rural English local authority)

"The role of housing assistants is very important. It is the best way to learn the job of Housing Officer. Keeping a roof over your head is a very basic need. Helping people fulfil this need will always be a satisfying job, however managing people's expectations, especially when they are stressed, in a fair and professional manner needs training and experience. This will be the same in the future."
(Housing Officer, Scottish housing association)

Recruiting from a greater range of backgrounds

In fact, steps are starting to be taken to attract people with a greater range of backgrounds into the housing sector. This is often led by the drive to become more commercially focused.

Several organisations said they are increasingly recruiting people who they believe have the right attitude and behavioural competencies, such as good judgement, rather than choosing someone who already has a technical knowledge of housing. They believe the job of training people up in functional/technical skills is relatively straightforward compared to trying to instil the right 'attitudes'. For them, the question is: "If we bring someone in with the right behaviours, could CIH offer a fast-track course/programme to upskill them?"

The process of recruitment is important. It was also pointed out by recruitment specialists attending an appreciative inquiry event that the process needs to be designed around the job role.

"… use a different recruitment process depending on the sort of person you want."

"… if you have the wrong process, you'll get the wrong people."

Sophisticated recruitment processes would go well beyond competency-based assessment. For example, they may include assessment days to understand candidate strengths and weaknesses. This can help organisations to understand people's weaknesses, to assess the risk and put in place development plans before they are taken on.

Adverts and job descriptions

We analysed 43 job descriptions and job adverts and found them to be out of sync with what organisations say they want, from the survey and the other research evidence.

The job descriptions were initially grouped into three key areas to show an analysis of the key requirements of the job roles. These areas were:
• Housing roles
• Antisocial behaviour roles
• Income roles.

The analysis showed that when it came to the most cited competency by job role, there was no real difference between the competencies requested. They were more or less the same.

We also compared the top competencies identified through the job adverts and descriptions to those identified as important by survey respondents (see the table below). We found that organisations are currently recruiting in line with those competencies they perceive are needed now, and less closely to those identified in the study. To a degree, this 'lag phase' is to be expected. However, the interviewees and focus group participants were clear that they actually need people with the 'future competencies' now. In addition, 'resilience', which has been widely cited as an important characteristic for people in frontline roles to possess, does not feature in the job descriptions.
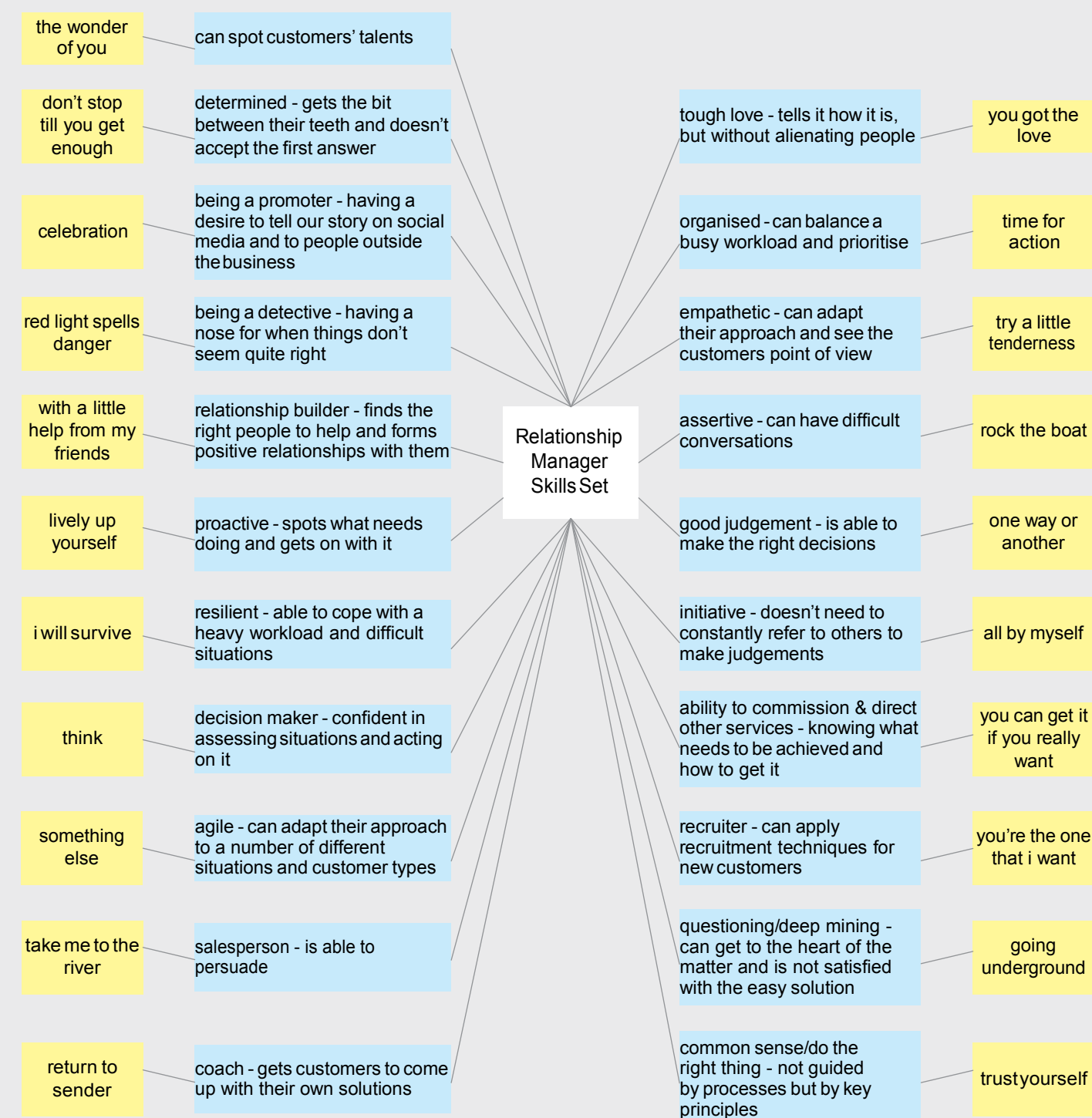
Selection of competencies identified from job descriptions	Most cited competencies from job descriptions	Competencies from survey NOW	Competencies from survey FUTURE
• Written/verbal communication • Partnership working internal and external • Customer focused • Working with vulnerable people • Continuous improvements • Team work • Personal organisational skills • Numeracy • Conflict resolution • IT skills • Financial planning/ awareness • Marketing skills • Developing relationships • Able to work independently • Manage a complex work load • Responsive to change • Problem solving • Presenting in court • Team work • Equality and diversity • Assertive • Diplomatic	• Written/verbal communication • Partnership working internal and external • Customer focused • Working with vulnerable people • Personal organisational skills • IT skills	• Ability to problem solve • Good communicator • Customer focused • Understand the needs of vulnerable groups • Ability to negotiate and liaise	• Ability to manage change • Commercially minded • Ability to problem solve • Ability to be creative and respond according to the situation • Ability to negotiate and liaise

Our findings on this incongruity between what is required and what is advertised is backed up by recruitment agencies. They said that they talk to housing professionals about the sorts of people they want in the roles, but that this was not backed up sufficiently robustly with job descriptions. The job descriptions typically reflected the housing role of the past, rather than of the future.

Case Study: Bromford skills set diagram

It is necessary to map the skills that frontline housing workers have in order to see where they need to be developed to meet the changing requirements of the role. There are a number of ways of auditing or mapping skills, but one example which shows the linkages between skills is seen here from Bromford.

the wonder of you — can spot customers' talents

don't stop till you get enough — determined - gets the bit between their teeth and doesn't accept the first answer

celebration — being a promoter - having a desire to tell our story on social media and to people outside the business

red light spells danger — being a detective - having a nose for when things don't seem quite right

with a little help from my friends — relationship builder - finds the right people to help and forms positive relationships with them

lively up yourself — proactive - spots what needs doing and gets on with it

i will survive — resilient - able to cope with a heavy workload and difficult situations

think — decision maker - confident in assessing situations and acting on it

something else — agile - can adapt their approach to a number of different situations and customer types

take me to the river — salesperson - is able to persuade

return to sender — coach - gets customers to come up with their own solutions

Relationship Manager Skills Set

tough love - tells it how it is, but without alienating people — you got the love

organised - can balance a busy workload and prioritise — time for action

empathetic - can adapt their approach and see the customers point of view — try a little tenderness

assertive - can have difficult conversations — rock the boat

good judgement - is able to make the right decisions — one way or another

initiative - doesn't need to constantly refer to others to make judgements — all by myself

ability to commission & direct other services - knowing what needs to be achieved and how to get it — you can get it if you really want

recruiter - can apply recruitment techniques for new customers — you're the one that i want

questioning/deep mining - can get to the heart of the matter and is not satisfied with the easy solution — going underground

common sense/do the right thing - not guided by processes but by key principles — trust yourself

Organisation needs for equipping the front line

What frontline housing staff are saying

In line with the shift to greater self-awareness and self-management in frontline roles, some organisations like Raglan and New Charter have undertaken their own research to find out what their frontline staff believe they need in terms of support and development. The Frontline Futures research outlined in this report suggests a broad framework of support is needed to help frontline workers to do their jobs, including technical skills training, support for independent decision-making, coaching for resilience and recognition of the complexity of needs that tenant-customers are facing.

What organisations are saying

Some of the skills and competencies required to carry out the frontline role of the future are difficult to acquire solely through an educational programme to achieve a professional qualification. People skills and resilience – two things that are coming to the fore – fit this category and some organisations have taken steps to support their staff directly.

Case Study: New Charter – Shield of Support (SOS)

New Charter commissioned a training company to develop a one-day resilience training programme to support their frontline staff. New Charter had been shocked by the increase in number of suicide threats from tenants following the introduction of welfare reform. The training programme was part of their 'Shield of Support' programme which encompasses everything to do with the health and well-being of staff. The training covered the key elements of natural resilience, supporting difficult customers, looking at the customer's state of mind and the impact of this, looking at own preferences/style/approach, how to manage those interactions, dealing with threats of suicide and sympathy versus empathy. The training was very well received and staff now feel much more able to cope with the challenges faced on a day-to-day basis. Following the training, it was also identified that there was a need for more robust protocols to be put in place for dealing with suicide threats and these were promptly implemented. New Charter has made an ongoing commitment to support its staff in this critical area.

A frontline housing worker might like to work through a series of questions to critically reflect on how 'resilient' they are, and use this to inform their development in order to enhance their resilience. This checklist has been developed using some of the key words that emerged from discussions in interviews and at appreciative inquiries.

Frontline resilience checklist:
- Have I got the technical knowledge and ability to do the job?
- Do I have the confidence to employ the right set of skills at the right time to do the job?
- Have I got confidence in my own ability to do the job?
- Do I have trust in my line manager and the broader support network in place in my organisation to enable me to do the job?
- Do I have ability to stay calm when under pressure? (And if not, can I access training and counselling to help me learn?)
- Am I responding to, rather than reacting to, situations?
- Have I got the ability and willingness to adapt to stress and adversity?

The qualities of resilience, self and time management are increasingly important in a context of such large-scale changes impacting on organisations and tenant-customers. Frontline housing workers need a strong sense that they can manage a role with such varied tasks.

Careers are more diverse:

Some organisations are seeing less commitment to housing as a long-term career or vocation among young people. Even in small housing organisations there are different roles and the younger generations seem to like to move between them, and into and out of the sector, with greater frequency than in the past. They require broad, rather than specialist, skills and don't want to commit to a long-term professional qualification programme. However, there are also very strong declarations of loyalty to the social housing sector from those who have been working in it and there is a tendency not to leave the sector, but there may be scope for moving between roles within it. Therefore, housing education with some core professional knowledge is still very important, so that someone moving from a back office role to one delivering services direct to the tenant-

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customer has the relevant competencies. There is also a suggestion that the choice of a career in housing in the future may be more purposeful than the traditional route of 'falling into it':

"I think we're going to see more people choosing this field rather than falling into it in terms of a career."
(Senior Housing Officer, English housing association)

Technical skills and knowledge are still important

The increasing tendency for housing organisations to recruit for attitudes and behaviours is actually increasing the need for education and training in 'technical mastery'.

"Extensive recruitment of people with the 'right behaviours and attitudes' without a programme in place to develop their technical knowledge will compound the problem."
(Adrienne Reid, in Thornhill 2013)

Some organisations are using the formal qualifications route, via NVQs and others, to develop their staff with the basic housing knowledge. There also seems to be an increase in the number of organisations using housing apprenticeships, although this is mostly in areas other than housing (such as business administration) since housing is not often a career of choice. However, there is work being undertaken by the professional body and other agencies to work on housing management apprenticeships for phase two of the English government's Trailblazers project, so there may be more prominence of housing apprenticeships in the future.

Many rely on 'picking up technical knowledge from colleagues' while there is a perception that some internal learning departments are biased towards senior management and leadership development, and then compliance learning. This is leading to concerns about what will

happen in the future. One organisation said that "succession plans are not looking particularly healthy" and that "managers of the future are going to need housing qualifications".

If the industry wants to ensure that it retains professional status and attracts the right people with the rights skills, it needs to put greater emphasis on developing the core housing knowledge as well as competencies required within the job role. To keep existing staff equipped with the skills they require, there needs to be a mixed approach through formal continuing professional development training, support and resilience training, coaching for personal development as well as encouragement to develop informal networks with frontline peers to share experiences and good practice.

New data interpretation skills are required
The future frontline officer needs to become 'intelligence-led'. They need to understand the existing data held by their organisations, add to databases through the collection and interpretation of tenant-customer information and act as navigators and interpreters of information for customers who may not be able to make sense of data systems and processes.

"Frontline housing workers also need to have skills to manage data (emails and social networking just one part of that). Need better data intelligence, ability within the wider organisation to research areas and have better data on customers and their needs."
(English housing association)

The ability to analyse and interpret complex data information from a variety of sources, and to allow this to inform how they spend their time, is a new area for frontline workers to gain competency in. Whilst there is not an expectation that frontline housing workers will become computer data analysts, the changes in technology and the expectations by organisations and tenant-customers that

they will make decisions promptly, means that frontline workers need to continuously improve their own data intelligence – to recognise what is important and to act on it.

IT skills are business-critical
Frontline roles are increasingly reliant on the use of technology to carry out the process elements of the job. The requirement to have IT skills was prevalent in many job descriptions, but in reality most organisations make the assumption that people will have the necessary IT skills in order to do the job and if not they can be developed. The extent to which staff members are comfortable, for example having online conversations with customers or collecting, storing and using data through organisation-wide systems, is not often assessed.

We don't recruit on the basis of needing a professional housing qualification any more
The requirement for people to be professionally qualified in order to be successful at securing a job in housing is dwindling. The proportion of job advertisements in the housing trade press stipulating CIH membership or a professional housing qualification as an essential is low, but CIH is working to reverse this view in the sector.

What housing educators are saying

The Frontline Futures research engaged with housing educators through a small focus group and a number of interviews. A number of themes emerged around the ongoing review of education and membership of the housing professional body in the discussions with housing educators, demonstrating the tension in having a housing professional qualification that is accessible and appealing enough to both students and their employers (who in many cases pay fees) and which meets ever-expanding tasks and roles expected of frontline housing professionals.

"Organisations are contradictory though in what they want – they want those transferable skills, problem solving etc, but then they also say they want tailored specific training programmes... We're trying to have to steer this course and appeal to employers and produce well-tailored programmes of studies, but also enable [students] to think critically."
(Housing Lecturer, England)

In the housing educators focus group, the scale of change was discussed in housing education. Many providers have seen a decline in student numbers and in recent years a number of housing courses have closed. There was a sense that employers did not place such a high value on their employees having a professional housing qualification as they once did. Participants in the focus group also reflected on the prominence of housing in other spheres – economic and political. It is this ability to look across different disciplines and ideas that housing educators we spoke to valued:

"... we need critical thinking people who understand the links between individual agency and structure – not just business. There should be real variety [in housing education] including social policy. I'm scared that housing education is moving away from a robust model to a one-dimensional model. There are very good reasons for the current programme and the way we teach it. Students see the connections between housing and everything. It is so fantastic to see students look around them in a critical way and to see what affects them and their tenants."
(Housing Lecturer, Scotland)

This is not an isolated debate about education. It reflects the tension between head and heart – commercial and social. Business and transferable skills are part of the offer in housing education and they speak to the commercial aspect that housing providers suggest is increasingly important in the future. However, tenant-

customers and frontline officers themselves continue to see the value in the social heart as a vital and distinguishing feature of organisations providing affordable homes.

There has also been debate among housing educators on the curriculum content of the professional qualification. It is important, they felt, that core knowledge, for example detailed understanding of housing law where that is required, is not lost in any review of education.

Ways in which education and training might be delivered in the future

Just as frontline housing workers themselves will need to differentiate, channel shift and be flexible, so must the training and education frameworks if they are to help support the future frontline role. One of the tensions that has emerged in the research is the one between (1) need for generic skills of empathy, negotiation and critical reflection and (2) core technical knowledge in housing management, including the law and housing finance for example. As Reid (2013) said, there must be 'technical mastery' for a good quality service and organisations should map the skills that their staff have and establish which areas need developing, training or recruiting.

In terms of education and training, there need to be multiple and flexible routes to obtaining 'technical mastery' balanced with the more social skills required. There will continue to be the traditional academic programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level, which will increasingly be offered via distance learning and blended learning, or bespoke for organisations, in order to meet the demands of the market. There will also need to be offers for senior or specialist staff needing to 'top up' their knowledge or skills set. In addition, there is a need for apprenticeship type approaches for those wanting to join the profession from school, with no prior experience. It is imperative that social and critical reflective

skills are not sacrificed for an arbitrary list of core technical competencies, but neither should technical housing knowledge be pushed out of curricula or there will be a skills deficit for the future. There could be a mixed approach of technical modules in specific areas taken alongside a training programme in-house, along with coaching and mentoring from leaders in the sector, for example.

Of course, the larger housing organisations are taking training into their own hands with their own tailored training for staff, either delivered in-house or in partnership with an education provider. Some organisations in the sector are grouping together to form academies to train staff and tenant-customers.

An example is a community enterprise founded in 2012 with Thames Valley, Shepherds Bush, Sentinel and Gateway Housing Associations as joint partners. They offer housing focused training for staff and also for tenant-customers.

Some education institutions are also working in partnership with organisations to deliver bespoke training and education.

One English university developed and ran a bespoke postgraduate programme to meet the needs of a specific large housing provider. The MSc Business for Housing programme ran for a number of years combining a critically reflective framework with organisational examples and processes. The course is soon to be replaced by the MBA Housing, which will be offered across the sector.

Summary

The survey, interviews and focus groups have shown the sheer scale of change that social housing has to cope with in the future and it has examined the competencies that the housing sector has told us it needs on the front line to deliver services. This chapter has started the debate on how we can equip staff to deliver through better recruitment, training and education. The research has noted that the recruitment process does not keep pace with the competencies the sector says it wants for the future. It has highlighted two of the most common skills areas that need enhancing for the future – IT skills and resilience – and these match well the changing context and the external influencers found.

Chapter 9

Recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has shown that there is significant change in the context within which housing organisations work and that there are a number of competing external influencers that will drive the service of the future. Nevertheless, the research also found, particularly from tenant-customers, that traditional methods of communication and service delivery, such as face-to-face conversations from frontline workers 'out on the patch', are highly prized. New technology and data insight tools can assist greatly in delivering the housing services of tomorrow, but tenant-customers and frontline housing workers have said clearly that being out in neighbourhoods is valuable and important to the business with a social purpose. So, are we embarking on a journey 'back to the future' for frontline housing services in some ways?

There are a number of recommendations coming out of the research and these are listed below:

Whole housing sector

- There needs to be an urgent national debate about what is expected from the front line. It is recommended that CIH facilitates a continued discussion as part of the debate on this research.
- Continue to campaign for more positive profile of the sector and tenant-customers – for example, #councilhomeschat and #ukhousing allow the positive stories to be seen by a wider audience. This needs translating into a campaign around careers in housing.

Frontline housing staff

- Frontline workers need support and resilience training to help them deal with the challenges and stress of the role in today's context of the impact of welfare reform, as well as to equip them to manage change.
- Frontline staff could consider working with tenant-customers in neighbourhoods and from a strengths-based approach see what services could be delivered through co-production.
- Within thencreasing financial constraints facing the social housing sector, and where organisational policies and procedures allow, think yes and try to establish a 'can do' approach to service delivery.
- Examine ways to evidence the social value of what you do – through a Social Return on Investment or similar approach. Housing helps with myriad social problems related to health, well-being, isolation and there is a value which needs demonstrating to other agencies and government.
- Be democratic with data, share information with tenant-customers and allow them to personalise their data where technology will allow (eg through digital log books).
- Ensure your organisation supports you through proper health and safety procedures which allow you to do your job to the best of your ability, whilst protecting yourself from unnecessary dangers.
- Frontline workers also need to prepare themselves for working in an increasingly connected and technologically enhanced environment – for example, new communications channels with tenant-customers via social media.

Housing leaders

- Housing leaders would strongly benefit from greater exposure to day-to-day practice ('back to the floor') that will assist them to better understand the risks and challenges on the ground of delivering frontline services.
- Many frontline staff feel that housing managers could be more facilitative, empowering and supportive.
- Organisations that encourage a culture of 'co-creation/production' with tenant-customers appear to be more effective. Frontline workers want to support communities to develop services in their neighbourhoods.
- Promote online services and 'self-serve' for greater efficiency where appropriate, but remember the value of frontline workers being 'out on the patch' and meeting tenant-customers face-to-face.
- Tenancy sustainment is vital for the future of the 'business for a purpose', but there is concern that it may 'lock out' those who cannot afford rents or who may be vulnerable in the future.

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- Tenant-customers requested more access to reports and benchmarking data online so they can be aware of policy and good practice by which they can hold their landlords to account. The professional body, along with a range of other organisations working in the sector, could help to facilitate this.
- Take a facilitative lead and work with influencers in the sector to raise the positive profile of a housing frontline career and market this widely (similar to initiatives in the army and the police services).
- Help frontline housing professionals to further build and maintain networks with health and social services professionals, particularly in their regional areas so that transdisciplinary area-based solutions can be developed on the front line.

Housing educators and trainers

- The 'technical knowledge' needed to operate effectively in housing is as important as the emotional intelligence and resilience areas. There should be a balance (for example, participants saw the importance of housing law and housing finance in the curriculum).
- Housing employers are increasingly demanding flexible and bespoke courses to suit a range of different experience and expertise and educators should respond to the market.
- More needs to be done to sell the value of housing education so that housing employers recognise what a qualified housing frontline worker will bring to their organisation.
- There are opportunities to link to apprenticeship programmes and work with the sector skills council to ensure the ongoing links between education institutions and housing employers.

Commissioners of systems and technology

- Don't buy expensive off-the-shelf customer relationship management systems. There is expertise within the housing sector and IT systems should be built around the needs of social housing organisations.
- The benefits of technology need to be 'sold' more to staff and customers. iPads are more than a 'snazzy perk'; they improve efficiency of service delivery.
- Employ technology for a strategic purpose, to vary channels of delivery, or create efficiencies and the ability to self-serve.

And finally

The above recommendations draw together themes and ideas for particular stakeholders to take forward. One of the key recommendations is to continue to build our understanding of the sector, how it is changing and the skills that those working in housing will need in the future. We hope this report provides a solid evidence base and thoughtful contribution to that understanding.

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The Frontline Futures research provides new evidence to feed into an ongoing debate. Whilst, as is evident from the high response rate to the survey, the project has been timely and captured the imagination of the sector, it is not a new topic for debate but part of a wider professional and academic conversation. To inform the project, we read a number of key pieces of work on whose shoulders this report stands. A detailed critical literature review goes beyond the scope of this project, but some of the key themes and titles are outlined briefly here in the Appendix.

Learning today, leading tomorrow (Thornhill, 2013), published by CIH, is an anthology of ideas from a number of leading housing practitioners and thinkers and there are some themes coming out of this publication which help analysis of some of our findings. For example, in the survey and in focus groups we heard that employers were recruiting for attitudes and behaviours as new recruits could be trained or educated in the technical knowledge, but could not be trained in 'attitude'. Adrienne Reid's chapter in Thornhill (2013) on how Incommunities assesses and then provides a learning framework for 'technical mastery' underlines that a core understanding and technical expertise is still very important when we think about skilling up the future frontline housing professionals of tomorrow. In the same volume, Chan Kataria underlines the importance of talent management and Chris Amyes discusses lifelong learning which links well to the theme of 'whole person' learning as debated by Trevor Smith. Some of these themes from Thornhill (2013) are echoed at various points across this report. Our research also interviewed a number of the contributors to this anthology.

Vision of the future for housing Tomorrow's World Today (Sinn, 2011), published by CIH, suggested that housing and welfare reform were nothing less than a 'fundamental shakeup' for the sector and this message certainly comes across loud and clear in the findings on key influencing factors in our Frontline Futures research. In Housing 2020 (Smith, 2012), published by Orbit, there are a number of think pieces visioning housing for the future. One particular chapter, written by Alex Marsh, discusses technological advances and new services co-produced with users. Marsh refers to the fact that for young people access to smart technology may be more highly prized than personal mobility. Such embrace of technology was not a key finding in our research, although there is a recognition that Generation Z who are much more reliant on online communications and for whom "it doesn't occur to them to pick up the 'phone", will soon be making itself felt. The importance of technology and the utilisation of it to free up frontline housing roles to deliver a better, more accountable and more personalised service is very much in evidence in our research from our discussions with housing workers and tenants; and there are those in the vanguard who talked to us in the technology webinar. McCrossan (2013) produced the 2013 Connected Housing Index and found it is still 'early days for digital engagement' in the housing sector with lessons to learn from charities on how to engage with tenant-customers online. However, the index shows there has been an increase in engagement through social media (most prominently through Twitter) over the last two years.

On co-production, as Marsh (2012) points out, if viewed positively it means that housing providers can help to unlock the potential of residents and communities, treating them as partners in how services are run, and in doing so improving community stability and sustainability. Certainly, when speaking to tenant-customers as part of our research we found an appetite from them to work in partnership with housing providers and to utilise their knowledge of the neighbourhoods they live in. Co-production

is a useful approach to consider in research too (Durose et al, 2012), so that the 'important' questions are considered rather than top-down pre-set notions.

The social housing world is changing
In an article from nearly a decade ago and prior to the financial crisis and welfare reform changes, Allen (2006) discussed the changes in housing officers' roles. At that point, the people interviewed for the article were talking about 'rebuilding estates', acting as a 'one stop shop' and thinking of tenants as customers. The article talked about transferable skills as an asset as well as 'networking'. In the responses to our research, there was also a focus on the multitude of different tasks to be undertaken and the ability to liaise with other agencies, but in a number of conversations this was couched as 'signposting' customers through the maze of public services and welfare reform. There was also a focus in the Allen article in 2006 on turning estates around and dealing with antisocial behaviour, as can be seen from an illustration for the article, shown below. Antisocial behaviour was still a focus, mainly from the responses from tenant-customers in our research, but not so much attention was given to this topic from frontline workers themselves who saw the impact of welfare reform as the big issue affecting their interaction with the customer. A more recent article for Inside Housing (Stockdale, 2013) reported on results from a survey of 500 on housing careers suggesting that respondents were positive about their role, had a 'can-do' attitude and were working within rapidly changing organisations.

CIH Scotland (Reid, 2009) commissioned research in the same era as the Allen article. Echoing the more positive economic environment at that time, area regeneration was seen as key in terms of skills development. Due to the financial constraints and the shrinking of state-led building of homes and neighbourhoods since the crisis, the importance of this type of skill is much less evident in our

research which includes responses much more focused on managing with limited resources and helping tenant-customers through times of crisis as well as trying to sustain tenancies and maintain income. Charityworks (2014), in their report, look at new challenges and new skills in housing. Graduates in their scheme who were interviewed for their research had little or no awareness of the affordable housing sector prior to their commencement and the report recommends that we all have a role to play in promoting housing as a career.

Who are frontline housing workers?
Defining 'frontline workers' is something that Durose attempted in her (2009) article which examined networked community governance: "Front-line workers are defined as public sector staff with some responsibility for delivering policy and services together with engaging with communities as part of their everyday work" (pg 35). Our research project did not set out to define frontline workers as such. Originally, the invitation to tender for the research referred to the 'housing officer' but it became quickly apparent there were many more roles on the 'front line' than the housing officer role. Indeed, we did not pre-select job titles that we considered were 'frontline' but let people self-select. The importance of self-identity amongst housing 'managers' is outlined by Casey (2008) who refers to the lack of clear collective identity as leading to invisibility and so individual identities become increasingly important in career trajectories. Casey quotes one of her respondents in the study (pg 766): "Most people don't know what a housing manager does. We're so low profile we're almost invisible". Whilst television programmes such as Benefits Street and How to Get a Council House have raised the profile of the sector, its customers and the frontline workers and provided some sort of picture of what housing workers do, the diversity of the role and the labels given to roles within the profession are so wide as to still mean self-identification is important, as shown in our research.

Tenant/Customer: What's in a name?
In a book published by CIH (Housing and the Customer, Richardson, 2010) there was a debate in the opening chapter called 'Tenant, Consumer, Citizen: Customer?' This challenged the reluctance by some still to use the term 'customer' instead of tenant. During the research for this Frontline Futures report, the term 'customer' was used quite readily by a broad cross-section of the people we spoke to. Nevertheless, there was a squeamishness around the phrase 'commercially minded' used in the survey questions, but also in the broader debates during interviews and focus groups. There is a need for balance between the 'commercial' and the 'social', both in terms of what tenants say they want ('compassion/sympathy' as well as 'faster service'), but also in the housing education curriculum, in the support and procedures set out by housing organisations and in terms of what the professional body requires too.

Commercially minded social housing sector
In Thornhill (2013) there is discussion of a 'growing commercial focus' (pg 20) and this is certainly seen in the findings of our research too. There is debate on this in Chapter 4 of our research report which sees a more nuanced view than traditional binary debates in the public sector on 'commercial – bad/social – good'. In our research, people were keen to find ways of expressing 'commercial' as 'business for a purpose' and certainly tenants who spoke to us saw themselves as customers and wanted better accountability as 'customers'. Le Grand (2013) tackles this challenge head on in an epilogue chapter to the paperback edition of his book Motivation, Agency and Public Policy: of Knights and Knaves, Pawns & Queens. He considers that public policy should empower people (turn pawns into queens) but acknowledges the 'discomfort' that some of those sympathetic to this intention have with the use of quasi-markets in public service as a tool to achieve this. Le Grand responds to this squeamishness in the use of markets/commerciality

through the discussion of anthropological experiments showing that participants are more disposed to sharing resources in a market-based system compared with non-market societies. He attempts to show the need for a market system to allow people working in public services to act as knights (working for the public good) rather than knaves. In other words, the presence of a market (of commerciality per se) does not drive us all to be knaves motivated only by self-interest. So, in terms of social housing, the notion of a commercial approach need not be at the expense of maintaining our social heart. Indeed, our social heart may be better maintained with a commercial head.

Professionalism in the social housing sector
There has also been recent work looking at what it means to be a 'housing professional'. Stephens (2013) found that education, training and professional standards needed to keep up with current day expectations of the housing professional role and that "..more attention needs to be paid to continuous professional development and the implementation of compulsory standards within housing education" (pg 3) – a prescient point in light of the CIH review of education and professional membership in the early part of 2014. Certainly, in our responses from housing educators as part of the research we found this idea echoed: that although the frontline role seems to continue to expand, there is a core of housing knowledge (or as Adrienne Reid put it, 'technical mastery') required and that professional and educational standards should be strengthened to reflect that, not diluted.

Social value and impact
Impact and value are often discussed in terms of what social housing can contribute to society. In recent years, there has been an attempt to measure what this value might be. Dayson et al (2013) examined the economic impact of housing organisations on the North and they looked at three sets of 'day to day activities': managing social

housing, house-building and community investment work. As the title of their study implies, the focus was on quantifying economic impact so the direct and indirect value added to the economy in the North was calculated through Gross Value Added (GVA). Fujiwara (2013), in his report The social impact of housing providers, used a Wellbeing Value (WV) approach (also a quantitative measuring approach) in his report to assess the different values people attach to different housing conditions. Interestingly, he found 'well-being' not just to be an outcome but also an input, so those with higher levels of well-being are more productive, altruistic and healthy. The Homes and Communities Agency's value for money (VFM) standard is driving a new imperative for housing organisations to deliver services efficiently and to understand the value of the activities they are undertaking. This is made clear in a report for the National Housing Federation and HouseMark (Smedley et al, 2013). Our research project did not employ GVA, WV or Social Return on Investment (SROI) approaches to quantitatively assess the social value of the frontline housing role, but it did ask housing workers and tenant-customers what value they felt the role added and this is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Impact of welfare reform – need for resilience
The findings of this Frontline Futures project, as reported in Chapter 2, show that the biggest impact on frontline housing roles, and indeed on the sector and its customers, is welfare reform. Whilst this is important evidence based on a robust number of responses, this was not a surprise to us. A number of reports and television programmes are showing this to be the case. Indeed, the series on Channel 4 shown in April and May 2014 How to Get a Council House demonstrated the impact of the benefits cap on the socio-demographic profile of Tower Hamlets with examples of those on low or no income having to move hundreds of miles away before

they could find an affordable home. An important project which started in 2013 and working through to 2015 is Real Life Reform. Undertaken by the Northern Housing Consortium and partner organisations, this research shows just how much welfare reforms are impacting through reporting on individual case study examples.

The factors offered for selection in the survey for the question on external issues influencing the housing sector were determined by the research team's knowledge of the sector and through reading key literature, such as Sinn (2011) as outlined in Chapter 1 of this report. The fact that welfare reform is the number one factor affecting change in the sector was not a surprising finding. Ongoing projects such as Real Life Reform provide detailed case studies of households' experiences in the North of England. Also, in a piece of work looking from the providers' perspective in the South East, Moat demonstrated in their report The Housing Cliff (Somariva and Patel, 2013) how quickly rents become unaffordable under the 'affordable rents' model if the overall benefits cap element of welfare reform is held constant. These two separate studies show that, in two different parts of the country and from both tenant-customers' and housing providers' points of view, welfare reform is a huge influencing factor for the future. This is reflected very strongly in our Frontline Futures survey too. The Moat report also showed the negative impact of welfare reform on their ability to supply new homes year on year. This too is reflected in our survey. Lack of housing supply is shown as the second ranked influencing factor for change, selected by 625 respondents.

New Charter Housing Trust Group and partners, through their Straightforward project, assessed the impact of welfare reform on housing employees – for example, out of 707 respondents they found that "45% have experienced customers making suicide threats, with only 25% feeling well equipped to deal with this" (pg

5). Stockdale (2014), in her article Breaking Point for Inside Housing, also noted that "Aggression, desperation and even suicide threats have become a grim part of daily life for frontline housing professionals since the introduction of welfare reform" (pg 25). Whilst some organisations do provide support and training in this area of work, it is by no means universal and there is scope for more guidance and training in the sector to help frontline workers. Our research certainly uncovered examples from frontline staff facing emotionally challenging situations that they had to deal with to help their tenant-customers. Keats et al (2012) provide guidance on Psychologically informed services for homeless people and in discussing a psychologically informed environment they make clear that this isn't a singular expert approach: "In that sense, "psychology" is an aspect of emotional intelligence and empathy, and should not be seen as the preserve of any one discipline or school of thought" (pg 5). In the Frontline Futures research some organisations did talk about 'resilience' training needs in specific response to customer crises, but more broadly respondents did talk about the importance still of the 'social heart', of appropriate attitudes and empathetic approaches to customer needs. Frontline workers also need to work within an organisational framework of service delivery that enables and empowers them to help tenant-customers. Since 2012 there has been roll out at The Wheatley Group of a Think Yes initiative to allow staff to provide 'personalised solutions' for tenant-customers (EFQM/Wheatley Group, 2013) and the outcomes of this new way of working were evident from people we spoke to for our research, particularly so in the appreciative inquiry in Glasgow where both officers and staff talked about the impact it was having on service delivery.

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Wheatley Group spans 12 local authority areas across Central Scotland, providing
homes and award-winning services to over 100,000 people. The Group currently
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•   Glasgow Housing Association, Scotland's largest social landlord
•   Cube Housing Association
•   West Lothian Housing Partnership
•   Loretto Housing Association and its care subsidiary Loretto Care
•   Your Place Property Management
•   Lowther Homes

All parts of the Group are firmly rooted in local communities. By joining forces,
we can deliver more for our customers and contribute to housing, care and
regeneration outcomes both locally and nationally.

For further information please contact the project manager for the commissioning
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