



Understanding staff wellbeing in homelessness services

Insights from frontline practitioners



Centre for
Homelessness Impact

About the Centre for Homelessness Impact

The Centre for Homelessness Impact champions the creation and use of better evidence for a world without homelessness. Our mission is to improve the lives of those experiencing homelessness by ensuring that policy, practice and funding decisions are underpinned by reliable evidence.

Person-first language

This report uses person-first language, putting a person before their circumstances. This is to avoid defining an individual by homelessness, which should be a temporary experience.

Centre for Homelessness Impact

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“A healthy support system for people experiencing homelessness requires a healthy workforce”



01



Introduction

When we talk about wellbeing and safety in the homelessness sector, we are often referring to the wellbeing and safety of people experiencing homelessness themselves. This makes sense – any experience of homelessness has the potential to be harmful, and it's essential that we do whatever we can to protect people from this harm. Something that's less commonly discussed is the need to look after the wellbeing of staff at the front line of homelessness services. The evidence of the challenges to employee wellbeing in these jobs is stark: almost a quarter of staff working in homelessness services meet the diagnostic threshold for PTSD¹, and almost half of frontline staff working in homelessness services reported that their organisation did not have enough staff members in post to deliver services.²

A healthy support system for people experiencing homelessness requires a healthy workforce. Over the last three years, the wellbeing of staff working directly with those accessing homelessness services has become an increasing priority for the sector, with additional pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis highlighting the complexity and workload of these roles, and the impact on individuals' levels of stress and burnout.

Wellbeing project rationale

This is a critical issue, and in need of robust, evidence-based interventions. As part of a wider programme of work to better understand what works to improve wellbeing amongst people working in homelessness, the CHI collaborated with Changing Futures Bristol to share evidence-based information and collaborate to understand and discuss the factors that affect frontline staff wellbeing.

This work helped us understand more deeply the challenges facing frontline staff, hear perspectives on the evidence, and identify what issues are most important to wellbeing, and surface potential promising practice. This will feed into our future research programme aimed at generating more robust evidence of what interventions are most effective to improve frontline wellbeing.

02



The Workshops

In July 2023, Changing Futures Bristol and the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) ran two collaborative workshops to share evidence-based information on workforce wellbeing, promote self care and compassion-focused practice, and collectively discuss the factors that most significantly impact frontline staff wellbeing.



80

participants



17

Bristol based organisations



2

Workshops (client facing staff + managing staff)



All

staff worked in services that work with those who are homeless



All

but one participant worked in the voluntary sector

While the workshops offered a space for staff to reflect on their own experiences and needs around their wellbeing, they also provided an opportunity for Changing Futures Bristol and CHI to explore staff's views on a number of potential interventions designed to support workforce wellbeing. These conversations will inform CHI's ongoing work to build the evidence base for the effectiveness of interventions targeting staff wellbeing.

During the first portion of the workshops, CHI shared a summary of the findings from three reports focused on staff wellbeing in the homelessness sector. These reports were chosen as they provide clear information from three different perspectives, on the links between stress and the impact on individuals, teams and organisations. As they are all recent they provided parts of a picture of a post-pandemic work experience. They show that wellbeing is a crucial issue for a variety of reasons, across multiple levels. These reports included:

- + Dr Lili Lemieux-Cumberlege's doctoral research into work-related distress in frontline workers in homelessness services. This included an empirical study on the risks and protective factors for staff wellbeing, and a systematic review into the implementation of Psychologically Informed Environments interventions with frontline staff; highlighting the extent and nature of the impact of these roles on individuals, and exploring the implications for practice and policy (2022).¹
- + St Martin in the Fields' Annual Frontline Worker Survey (2022), which focused on the impact of the rising cost of living on staff wellbeing, as well as issues in workplace culture, processes and pay.²
- + Pro Bono Economics' 'Running Hot, Burning Out' report (2023), which focused on the challenges to recruitment and retention in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector; and the subsequent impact on employee wellbeing.³

The remainder of the workshop focused on participants' own experiences in their jobs. Changing Futures Bristol ran a compassion-focused self care exercise to encourage participants to reflect on their own needs around their wellbeing, and to practise compassion for themselves and their colleagues. Finally, the workshop was opened up to a group discussion around the specific issues that affect them through their work. This included a card sorting exercise, where participants were given 12 cards with themes related to workplace wellbeing, and asked to sort them according to their relative importance. These cards drew on the issues raised by the papers discussed in the first part of the workshop, and included:



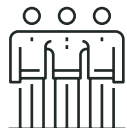
01 Feeling Valued



02 Traumatic events



03 Pay and cost of living



04 Peer support



05 Workplace culture



06 Caseload



07 Service Procedure



08 Skills gap



09 Increased client needs



10 Feeling the job makes a difference



11 Working with other services



12 Access to support from your organisation

It should be noted that this exercise was not intended to create an empirically rigorous prioritised list of influencing factors, but rather to encourage discussion among the groups. Some groups created multiple lists based on different scenarios or work environments – for example where attendees in the same group worked in different types of services – or they spent time reflecting on how the different issues listed on the cards were interconnected.

03



What we heard through the discussions

Each of the two workshops was hosted for a different group: one for client-facing staff, and one for line managers. While there was some variation in the conversations due to the differences in day to day responsibilities between the groups, many of the themes that were discussed were common to both, and the observations from the sessions are presented below in aggregate.

An overarching theme from both workshops was that, despite challenging and changing external circumstances (e.g. speculation that due to rising numbers of people experiencing homelessness, issues with staff recruitment and retention, and increasing complexity of client cases, caseloads had consistently increased) many of the most frequently discussed issues were somewhat controllable by the participants' organisations and teams (e.g. workplace culture, management support, feeling valued etc.) Many participants felt committed to their jobs because of the satisfaction they gain from supporting people, and their belief in the importance of what they do for their clients, and society more broadly. This might explain a greater level of tolerance for the factors external to their organisations, and a more critical focus on the things that management teams within their organisations could be doing to support their wellbeing.

04



Observations from the group discussions

- + The issues that were most commonly said to have the greatest impact on staff wellbeing and burnout were: **Feeling Valued, Pay and the Cost of Living, Feeling the Work Makes a Difference and Experiencing Traumatic Events.**
- + Peer Support was a particularly important protective factor for client-facing staff. They valued having the space to unpack the more difficult parts of their work with colleagues, who are more likely to understand and empathise with their experiences. Being able to have these conversations without managers present generally felt safer and non-judgemental.

...there was also some discussion around abusive behaviour from clients towards staff, which they felt was not always adequately addressed by management, and organisational policies being properly enforced in practice.

- + Workplace Culture was mentioned frequently as an important factor in both the frontline staff and manager workshops, and many participants acknowledged that workplace culture has an influence on the impact on many of the other factors that were discussed (i.e. a supportive workplace culture can have a protective impact on other factors, whereas a negative culture can exacerbate them.) While the term 'Workplace Culture' was open to interpretation by participants, some qualities that were discussed included humour, non-judgemental attitudes, peer support, feelings of safety and teams that didn't allow the experience of traumatic events to be normalised as 'part of the job.'
- + Most organisations have some form of policy to support staff wellbeing, but many participants felt that they would need to proactively ask for help. At best this was seen as a practical barrier in a busy job; at worst, staff felt there was a cultural stigma attached to asking for support. This issue was raised by both the frontline group and the managers group, with some managers raising the concern that their teams might wait too long before asking for help, further exacerbating their burnout.
- + Both groups felt that exposure to traumatic events was too often normalised as a part of the job, and that there was insufficient acknowledgement of the build up of harm that can be caused by repeated exposure to traumatic events. While this theme was commonly understood to represent supporting their clients through the traumatic events they might be experiencing, there was also some discussion around abusive behaviour from clients towards staff, which they felt was not always adequately addressed by management, and organisational policies being properly enforced in practice. Through these discussions, many of the frontline staff who had these experiences expected management to be more proactive in supporting and protecting their teams by offering wellbeing debriefs, clinical support and counselling, and time off.
- + Many client-facing staff didn't feel sufficiently valued by management, and suggested that feeling more valued would have a protective effect against the stresses of the job. Again, the term 'Feeling Valued' was open to interpretation but was generally agreed to encompass: verbal recognition and credit for good work, feeling listened to, and pay that reflected the challenges of the job.

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- + The manager group in particular discussed the notion of 'compassion fatigue,' which they felt had a knock-on negative effect on their wider teams. In some cases, certain procedures – such as the requirement to write up reports on traumatic events immediately after they had happened – eroded their capacity to show compassion for clients and other members of staff.

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- + Both groups highlighted the importance of having autonomy over their work as a protective factor. This extended to time management and how they managed their caseloads. The experience of being micromanaged (whether this came from line managers for frontline staff or senior leadership for line managers) was raised as having a negative impact on staff wellbeing.
- + Both groups valued effective partnership working between different agencies, organisations and services as supportive of their individual wellbeing. Ineffective partnership working created additional stress, and often led to poorer outcomes for their clients, which impacted participants' feeling that they were making a difference through their work.

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- + Pay, and the rising cost of living ranked highly in many discussions. While there was a broad acknowledgement that this was not always entirely within the control of the organisations they worked for, many felt that their pay didn't adequately reflect the difficulty of their jobs. Some full time members of staff also expressed frustration at higher pay rates for agency staff even though full time staff typically had higher caseloads and better understanding of the services or organisations they were working for.
- + Managers felt a duty of responsibility to the staff they manage, which led to a lack of boundaries and poor work / life balance in many cases. Some managers felt highly stressed by this level of responsibility, and didn't feel adequately supported by their own managers and leadership to navigate this responsibility in a healthy way.
- + Skills gaps, caseloads and increased client needs were generally placed lower in the card sort exercise, or less frequently discussed as themes of significant importance to staff wellbeing.

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05



Promising Practice

These (examples) merit further exploration as part of CHI's ongoing work to identify effective interventions to support staff wellbeing in the sector.

While the purpose of these workshops was not explicitly to gather examples of promising practices to support staff wellbeing, some examples of good practice emerged from the discussions. These merit further exploration as part of CHI's ongoing work to identify effective interventions to support staff wellbeing in the sector.

- + One attendee working in a hostel described how a recent change to the work environment had resulted in a positive impact on the wellbeing of the team: the hostel managers had previously worked in a separate building, but after moving into the same building as the client facing staff, the team felt that managers were more accessible for ad hoc support.
- + During the managers workshop, one attendee mentioned that a client-facing member of their team had attended the frontline workshop the previous week, and told them about an intervention that had been discussed. This intervention consisted of a regular email out to all staff that celebrates positive stories and good practice with the aim of boosting staff morale and helping staff to feel valued. Following the workshop, the manager decided to start a similar regular email in their organisation.

...receiving positive feedback about particular tasks helped staff feel valued, and that their work made a difference.

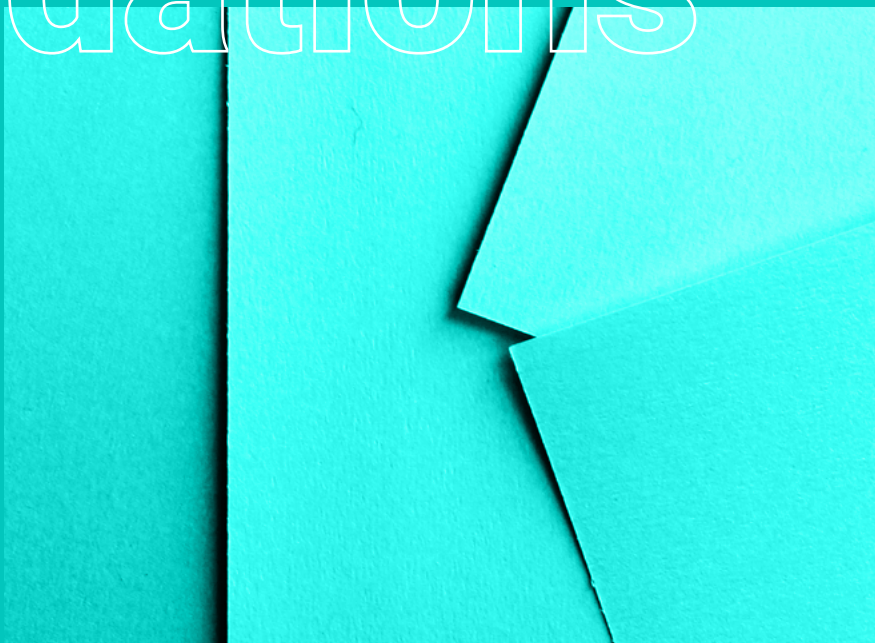
- + Some providers have good processes for offering support following an incident. This included formal and informal processes, and how much organisations were consistent in their use of supportive policies.
- + Several attendees across both workshops discussed how receiving positive feedback about particular tasks helped staff feel valued, and that their work made a difference. While there was a feeling that staff are generally providing a good quality service, recognition of that work isn't regularly passed back to staff. This feedback could either be ad hoc, or given as part of regular supervision or appraisals. One attendee suggested building this feedback mechanism into supervision or team meeting agendas.

This intervention consisted of a regular email out to all staff that celebrates positive stories and good practice with the aim of boosting staff morale and helping staff to feel valued.

06



Recommen- dations



For providers:

- + **Establish clear organisational wellbeing strategies, and ensure they are followed.** Organisational Wellbeing Strategies have become more commonplace over the last few years. These often include provisions for reflective support, standards of supervision, access to additional healthcare and counselling, and processes to assess stress at work. It is our view that strategies like these should be mainstream, they should set out staff centred values, and should reflect a commitment to wellbeing throughout operations and other policies.

... a more structured process of debriefing and access to support when incidents occur would be helpful, and that organisations needed to be more consistent when following them.

- + **Review practice around handling incidents, including policy and procedure, to ensure that staff are given space to process traumatic events.** Staff commented that some procedures can increase feelings of stress and decrease potential for post-traumatic growth. For example, the requirement to complete paperwork immediately after an incident by staff members involved can add to stress, and/or contribute to feelings of desensitisation or blame. Others said that a more structured process of debriefing and access to support when incidents occur would be helpful, and that organisations needed to be more consistent when following them.

“Identifying burnout earlier would be preventative, and would take some of the responsibility from individuals.”

- + **Review the mechanisms for identifying where extra support is needed without staff having to ask for it, or linking it to sickness procedures.** Staff mentioned that they often didn't ask for help until it was too late, or they were already feeling unwell. Identifying burnout earlier would be preventative, and would take some of the responsibility from individuals. Managers in particular expressed feelings of being indispensable, and that taking time off would cause their colleagues to suffer.
- + **Review the implementation of hate crime policies.** Some staff felt that their organisations and services left them feeling undervalued and unprotected through their attempts to be compassionate and non-judgemental towards clients when they had been abusive towards staff. Staff told us that they would feel more supported if their organisations promoted safe environments with clear and consistent enforcement of policies around hate crime (although this should not be at the expense of trauma-informed management of abusive behaviour.)

Reflective practice can be helpful in surfacing unhealthy feelings of being indispensable, and promoting more healthy work / life balance.

- + **Promote safe workload boundaries.** The manager group in particular expressed fears that their teams would suffer if they took time off to manage their wellbeing. During the card sort exercise, many in the managers group kept returning to discussions around their teams' wellbeing, despite being encouraged to reflect on their own. These participants discussed the pressure they felt to remain at work — although it wasn't clear whether this pressure was coming from their employer, or if it was self motivated. Reflective practice can be helpful in surfacing unhealthy feelings of being indispensable, and promoting more healthy work / life balance.

For further research:

- + **Build a deeper understanding of how staff can feel valued, and what constitutes a positive workplace culture.** Factors that contribute to 'feeling valued' for our work are potentially multiple and personal to each of us. They are also influenced by the motivation for doing the role, and the people around us. When participants described feeling valued and workplace culture they mention a wide variety of informal and formal variables. It would be helpful to better understand what common elements are included, and how much each of them make a difference.
- + **Build a greater understanding of personal protective and risk factors, including the voice of those with lived experience who work in the sector.** Dr Lili Lemieux-Cumberlege's research described individual characteristics as being a risk factor for burnout, though she has been keen to state that we shouldn't view preventing stress as the sole responsibility of the staff member. Reflective practice (among other measures) gives the opportunity for growth and to build up resilience, but it would be helpful to understand more about what parts of our personalities and experiences offer protection from burnout, and the potential effect of having previous life experiences of trauma and social disadvantage.

References:

- 1 Lemieux-Cumberlege, A. H. (2022). 'There's psychological masonry everywhere': a systematic review on the implementation of the Psychologically Informed Environments framework through staff interventions and an empirical study of organisational and individual predictors of work-related distress for frontline workers in homelessness services. Edinburgh Research Archive. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7488/era/2569>
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- 3 Larkham, J., & Mansoor, M. (2023). 'Running Hot, Burning Out': An analysis of the VCSE Sector Barometer. <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b172f27c-f0a9-492b-ac53-60a8cc9a373f>



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