Executive Summary

Staffing Challenges within the Northern Ireland Homelessness Sector

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Aims and Objectives

Homeless Connect commissioned this independent research project to explore staffing issues in the homelessness sector in Northern Ireland. The overarching research aims were to inform understanding of the current staffing situation and identify key recommendations moving forward to support staffing in the sector.

Methodology

The research took a four-stage mixed methods approach. This included a desk-based review; stakeholder engagement; analysis and interpretation; and reporting of recommendations. All stages were supported and guided by the research advisory group.

The desk-based review began with a review of all relevant documentation held by Homeless Connect. This was used to map the current structure of homelessness provision in Northern Ireland, staff roles and organisations. In addition, a literature review on staffing in the homelessness sector (internationally) and a brief (local) policy review was undertaken.

Stakeholder engagement was conducted via qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Firstly, a frontline staff survey was distributed via the Homeless Connect network. This survey explored: background information on staff employed in front line positions; their job role and perceptions of that role; job satisfaction; the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and recommendations for staffing in the sector. In addition, an organisational survey was distributed to management and human resources (HR) across the sector to explore: an overview of service size; staff demographics; employment characteristics; the Coronavirus pandemic; and reflections and recommendations for staffing in the sector. Survey data was complimented with qualitative focus group data collected online

with both frontline staff and organisational managers. The fieldwork for the research was conducted between April and June 2022.

Literature Review

A total of 28 papers were deemed suitable for inclusion in the literature review, based on defined criteria. A broad spectrum of information was gleaned on staffing in the homelessness sector on a local, national and international level. Evidence indicated that the number of individuals experiencing homelessness has increased considerably over the years in almost all countries in Europe (FEANTSA, 2018). Despite this, the literature suggests that the resources available to manage the services working in this sector have not increased accordingly. The impact of this has had inevitable and negative consequences on the experiences of those frontline staff working in the homelessness sector. Staffing challenges were highlighted and discussed under the remit of staff's (poor) wellbeing, resulting in staff stress and burnout (in part due to the challenging working environment); limited resources and comparably low salaries; the need for improved training and professional development; and the exacerbating impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Further, the evidence shed some light on why people choose to work in the homelessness sector, motivations and rewards.

Policy Review

The context of homelessness in Northern Ireland was reviewed and indicated 15,758 homelessness presentations in Northern Ireland for 2021/2022 and 10,135 homelessness acceptances. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) are responsible for responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland and they are also charged with administering the Supporting People Programme on behalf of the Department for Communities. The Supporting People annual budget of £72.8m (2021/2022) funds approximately 85 delivery partners that provide more than 850

housing support services for approximately 19,000 service users in Northern Ireland (NIHE, 2022).

NIHE are also obligated to publish a new homelessness strategy every five years, with the most recent released to cover the period from 2022-2027 (NIHE, 2022-2027). The main aim of this strategy is: *'Wherever possible homelessness should be prevented, if homelessness cannot be prevented it should be rare, brief and nonrecurring.'* The three main strategic objectives are: (1) prioritise homelessness prevention; (2) address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support; and (3) support customers to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation.

Findings: Surveys

In total, 205 people responded to the frontline staff survey from 27 organisations across Northern Ireland. The majority of the sample (68%) were female, white (98%) and aged between 26-55 years (72%). Just over half the sample reported that they come from a Catholic background (57%), whilst a quarter (25%) were from a Protestant background. The majority of the respondents were somewhat experienced in terms of their tenure at their current organisation. Most of the workforce sampled hold some level of formal qualification, most commonly cited was a degree (35%), followed by Level 5 qualifications (20%).

When asked why participants want to work in this sector, the most commonly cited response was that they wanted to make a difference in people's lives (84%). Indeed, for many, it is the nature of the work that they value about working in this sector. With regards to what they don't like about working in the sector, pay was the most cited factor (78%), followed next by stress (52%). The majority of respondents (75%) reported that the Coronavirus pandemic has made their work more challenging. Sources of job dissatisfaction include pay (73%) and promotion opportunities (52%).

However, the majority of staff (91%) reported being satisfied with supervision, co-workers (87%), the nature of the work (85%), and communication (71%). The majority of staff also reported that they intended to continue to work in the sector (72%).

Fourteen organisations completed the organisational survey. These organisations varied in size. For example, three organisations were small with 0-10 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services while four organisations employed more than 90 staff working in any capacity in homelessness services. Half of the organisations stated their service had between 20-40% male staff and 60-80% female staff. There were lower percentages of under 18 year olds and the 18-30 year olds across the board compared to those in the older age categories. Two organisations stated that 80-100% of their staff were aged 31-50 years old. The majority of organisations (71%) reported that their organisation was facing challenges due to staff sickness. When asked about remuneration packages, 43% of organisations felt they were average. All organisations felt the nature of the work was a challenge to staff. In addition, twelve organisations felt competitive pay and funding uncertainties were also a challenge. Shift work and limited progression to promotion were also deemed challenging by eleven of the organisations while eight organisations also felt competitive terms and conditions were a challenge to staff. The majority (71%) of organisations felt the Coronavirus pandemic enhanced staff challenges 'a lot'.

Findings: Focus Groups

Six frontline staff focus groups were conducted and one for senior management. A total of twenty eight staff took part in the staff focus groups, twelve were male and sixteen were female. All had worked in the sector for varying lengths of time ranging from 5-25 years. The senior management group was comprised of five females representing five organisations across Northern Ireland.

The focus groups provided rich insights into a range of factors related to working in the homelessness sector. Factors that encouraged people to work in the sector revolved around: a sense of vocation; intrinsic rewards; variation in the role; loyalty and camaraderie; and feeling valued. A plethora of issues and challenges of working in the sector were presented to include: issues with pay and funding; terms and conditions; recruitment challenges and staff retention; training development and career progression; the challenging, complex and volatile nature of the work and clientele; the impact of burnout on staff; formal and informal support; relationships with statutory agencies; and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Nonetheless, 'willingness,' staff passion and commitment were strongly evident and so too was the potential to harness this commitment for the benefit of those working in the sector and those availing of the services delivered.

Conclusions

The findings from this research resonate strongly with the global evidence base (e.g., Olivet, McGraw, Grandin, Bassuk, 2010; Osborn, Every, & Richardson, 2018; FEANTSA, 2020), and highlight several core staffing challenges experienced by those working in the homelessness sector. These challenges can be categorised across four core areas, each of which poses considerable threat to the sustainability of the service delivery currently offered by the homelessness sector in NI: (1) Policy - the lack of funding and investment in the sector and the need for improved support infrastructures; (2) Practice - particularly staffing levels, recruitment, and terms and conditions of employment; (3) Societal issues - external factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the work; (4) Psychological issues- staff satisfaction and wellbeing. Discussed also is the effect of a 'buffer' to these challenges, that is a sense of vocation and the commitment and dedication of staff who work in the sector.

Recommendations

Recommendations for action have been identified across all four core areas, as presented below.

Policy Recommendations

- Improved communication networks (or more responsive systems) between the sector and policy makers to facilitate greater recognition of the vital work undertaken under extremely tight resources and challenging circumstances.

- The provision of enhanced support afforded to the homelessness sector, in terms of financial support as well as interdepartmental policy-level support frameworks and legislative infrastructure.

- Further research is also recommended in order to explore the perspectives of commissioners and policy makers in response to this report.

Practice Recommendations

- Terms and Conditions (Ts & Cs) and remuneration packages of staff employed in the homelessness sector should be reviewed. Research should be undertaken to benchmark against other skilled services, as well as to statutory services.

- Whilst some variability in Ts & Cs across the sector and between different organisations should be expected, the implementation of a standardised baseline remuneration package is recommended, which organisations can further supplement or enhance.

- The current financial and operating model should be revised with investment focussed on current staff and the reliance on agency staff reduced.

- Professionalise the sector, and consider the training pathways and professional development of staff employed.

- Dedicate activity to enhance staffing levels across the sector, with targeted recruitment activity (facilitated with improved Ts & Cs).

- Improve public relations and communication to better explain to future employees (and to broader society more generally) what a role in the homeless sector actually entails.

Social Recommendations

- Additional research aimed at exploring service users' responses to the staffing challenges within the sector. Their voice (whilst not the remit of this research) is notably absent from this report. The authors suggest that it is imperative that further research is conducted to explore their perspectives and experiences of availing of homelessness services in light of all the challenges highlighted in this report.
- Greater investment, enhanced funding, subsequent improved staffing levels, and further professionalisation and enhanced bespoke training of sector staff would better equip the sector to adequately support the service users presenting with these ever increasing complex and challenging needs.

Staff Wellbeing Recommendations

Whilst further research into support packages afforded to staff in other sectors would be beneficial, in the immediate term, staff wellbeing could be improved with additional funding and investment, e.g., by providing:

- Adequate sick leave so that staff can properly recuperate from any illness encountered whilst working in the sector.
- Enhanced holiday entitlement to allow staff to better look after their own mental health and wellbeing with much needed downtime and rest.
- Freely available and professional mental health support for all staff who require such services.
- Opportunities to further strengthen the existing strong staff relationships and support networks, e.g., via funded staff away days and wellbeing events.

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