

— SUPPORTED HOUSING —

MAIN CHALLENGES FACED BY SERVICE PROVIDERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

A report of the main challenges faced by managers, leaders, and housing officers in the Supported Housing Sector during COVID-19

With:



York Road Project
Defeating Homelessness Together



and others

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INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE CONTEXT

When COVID-19 struck in 2020, it was certainly an unprecedented time.

No one was prepared for a health crisis on such a large scale—not only for the direct tragic loss of lives, but its **chain of effects**, from the loss of jobs to a surge of mental health issues and a weakened economy.

For Service Providers in the Supported Housing sector, this crisis was felt even harder.

Their responsibility was to ensure vulnerable residents continued to receive specialist care—all while managing support teams amidst the threat of infection & stay compliant with ever-changing policies.

In this report, our aim is to investigate the main challenges faced by those in the sector during the height of the pandemic.

With an eagle's eye view of what others experienced, we will be able to uncover the reality of what happened, identify sector weaknesses, and hopefully, find solutions so that everyone can be more **resilient & stronger** for it.

"We felt very alone in the situation.... [but it was] good to speak to other similar services after, to see that they were experiencing similar challenges."

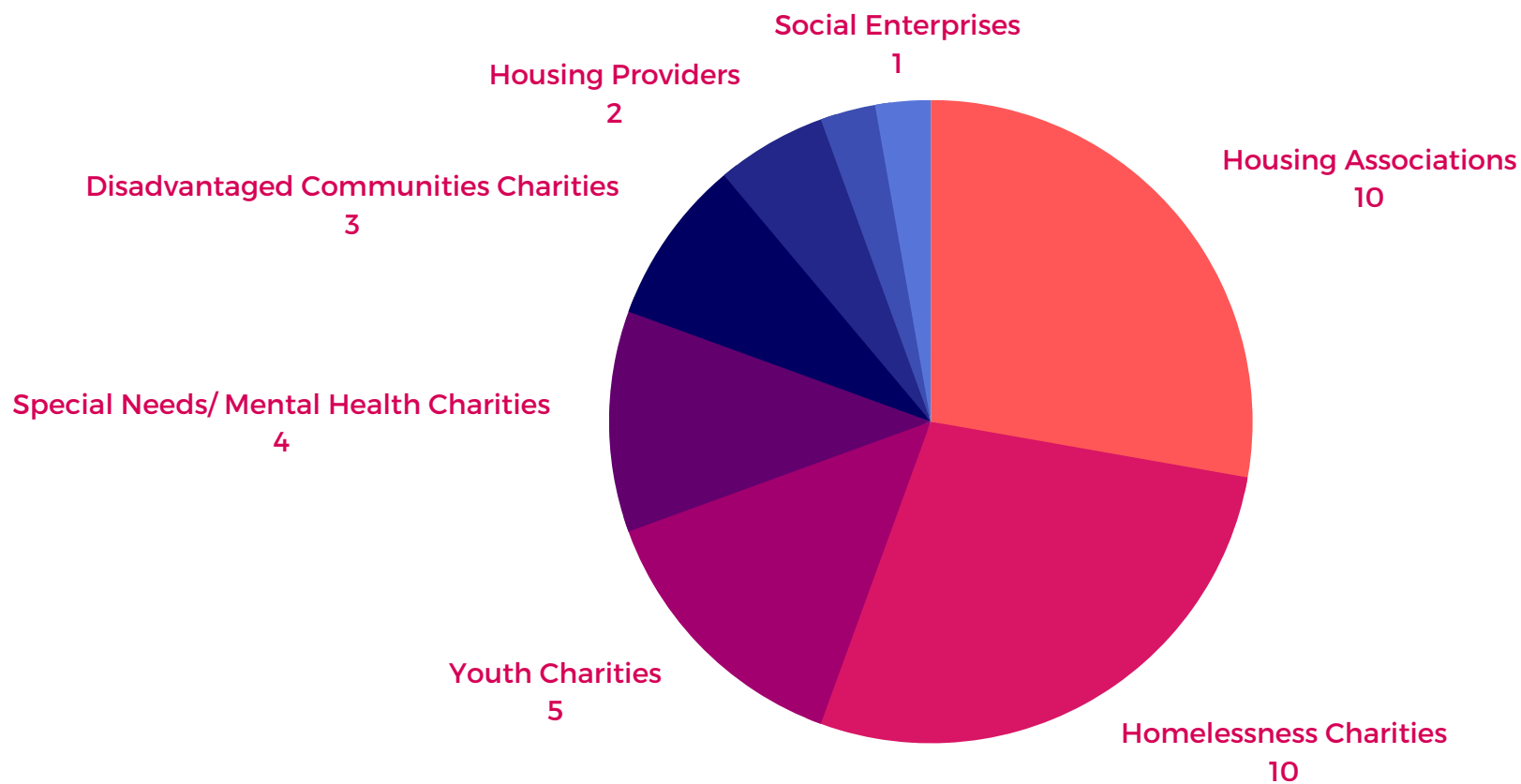


COLLECTING THE DATA

COLLECTING THE DATA

34 RESPONSES

For this report, from July-October, 131 service providers across England (180 individuals) were approached with a qualitative survey. A total of 34 responses was received from 33 providers.



COLLECTING THE DATA

Individual respondents of the survey included:



CEOs

Group CEO, chief exec, and deputy



COOs



Heads

of services, neighbourhoods, care, supported housing, foyer, group, young people service, and people



Directors

of service, support, accommodation, housing and services



Managers

operations, area, and supported housing



Senior Housing Officers

The 3 questions they were asked in the survey:

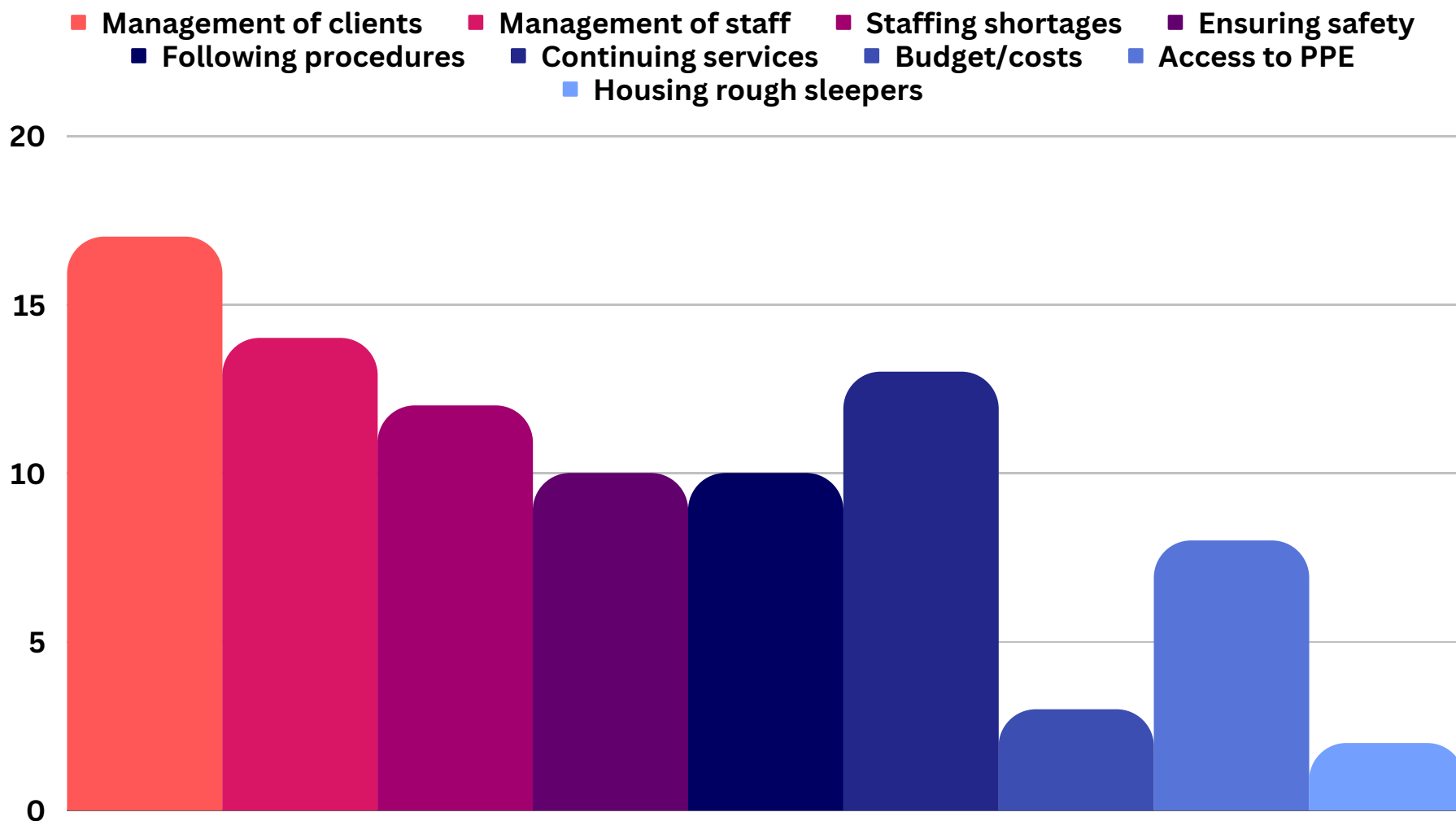
- 1 "During COVID-19, what were the main challenges you faced?"
- 2 "From these, which was the biggest challenge and why?"
- 3 "What would have helped you during such a time? What support did you wish you had?"



UNCOVERING THE DATA

UNCOVERING THE DATA

THE 3 MAIN CHALLENGES



UNCOVERING THE DATA

OVERVIEW

The pandemic was an unprecedented time not just for service providers, but for everyone—for their vulnerable residents, the specialist services they relied on, their staff, recruitment agencies, and those giving them charitable funds.

Dealing with an intersection of all these different groups of people made the pressures of COVID especially more challenging. And adding to its difficulty: having to manage it remotely.

In the following few pages, we'll break down the main challenges faced by the leaders, managers, and senior officers of the sector.

"It was a challenge balancing the various tensions across our properties"

"The biggest challenge was the lack of certainty...it was hard to know whether we were being too cautious or not cautious enough."

"There was a lot of 'learning on the job' across the board"

UNCOVERING THE DATA

1

Management of clients

17 respondents (50%) reported that managing clients was one of their biggest challenges—making it the **most common challenge** faced by service providers.

The difficulty of managing client behaviour when evictions were not possible.

"With our hands tied...residents felt emboldened to misbehave in increasingly excessive ways"

With service providers being unable to evict residents whom they previously would have, managing them became even harder—especially when they knew there would be no serious consequences for their misbehaviour.

Quite a number of reports mentioned the difficulty of managing in-facility drinking, escalating issues with ASB, and the use of new drugs—giving rise to more incidents.

Managing client emotions, feelings, and mental health.

The most mentioned difficulty of managing clients was the effects of the emotional rollercoasters of the lockdowns. Residents felt isolated, restricted, and frustrated. They wanted to visit family & friends but couldn't. Managing the rise of mental health problems—remotely—was a major challenge.

Clients not following rules & COVID guidelines—therefore adding to the risk.

"We had to get people to change their behaviour overnight"

Having to educate clients on changing rules & ensuring their adherence—especially when someone tested positive for COVID—was another big difficulty. The reports on whether most residents complied or not were mixed—the least compliant group being young people (especially when there was a language barrier), who often didn't take social distancing seriously.

UNCOVERING THE DATA

With respondents reporting that either/both **management of staff** (41%) & their **shortages** (35%) were one of their main challenges—staffing stands as **the biggest** combined difficulty for service providers.

2 Management of staff

The difficulty of managing/motivating staff through such an uncertain time.

"Supporting staff through an uncertain period of time where was unsure myself"

From the uncertainties of the pandemic to real anxieties over well-being, managing staff was a major challenge for the sector. Reports mentioned the difficulty of motivating staff remotely, assuring them that all measures on-site were taken to protect their safety, explaining why they had to work in-office as key workers, and balancing their concerns with the needs of residents.

Supporting staff through their mental fatigue

The increased stress, workload, and challenging situations had a big toll on staff. They often had to be put into bubbles and work long hours alone, leading to burnout and people leaving the sector. It was difficult for service managers to juggle this amidst all the other factors.

3 Staffing shortages

Increased staff absences & challenges in recruitment

"[It] added another strain to an already strained sector"

For the supported housing sector, there was certainly a big cost of staff sickness & self-isolating. The challenge was to maintain staffing levels, across all services, amidst higher absences—also due to vaccinations being mandatory & people leaving the sector from burnout. The challenges in recruitment came from an all-around lack of staff—especially local staff—and the inconsistency of support when using a recruitment agency.

UNCOVERING THE DATA

4 Ensuring safety

Making sure no one contracted COVID

Keeping residents & staff safe in a shared housing environment was another big challenge faced by the sector. The double difficulty was in mitigating the risk of infection spreading—while continuing to deliver services. Related difficulties were needing to carry out health & safety checks without entering the properties and ensuring residents were self-isolating when tested positive.

5 Ever-changing policies

Staying on top of constantly changing government guidelines & rules

"This took significant effort, especially as supported housing was not the focus of the government...we had to do lots of interpreting."

Over 30% of respondents found keeping up with often daily-changing government guidelines a major challenge. Information was often conflicting—from government bodies to sector representatives and other providers. The burden was that it made it hard to know which correct procedures to follow & difficult to communicate a clear message to everyone.

6 Continuing services

The combined challenges of staffing, managing clients, and ensuring safety amidst fast-changing policies resulted in the **added challenge of continuing service delivery**. Two providers reported having to close down some of their services, while some said it was difficult overseeing the quality of support of clients during lockdowns.

And other challenges

Other main challenges reported include the struggle to obtain correct PPE (25%), increasing costs/the loss of fundraising income (9%) and finding rough sleepers to shelter/deploying emergency homeless services (6%)

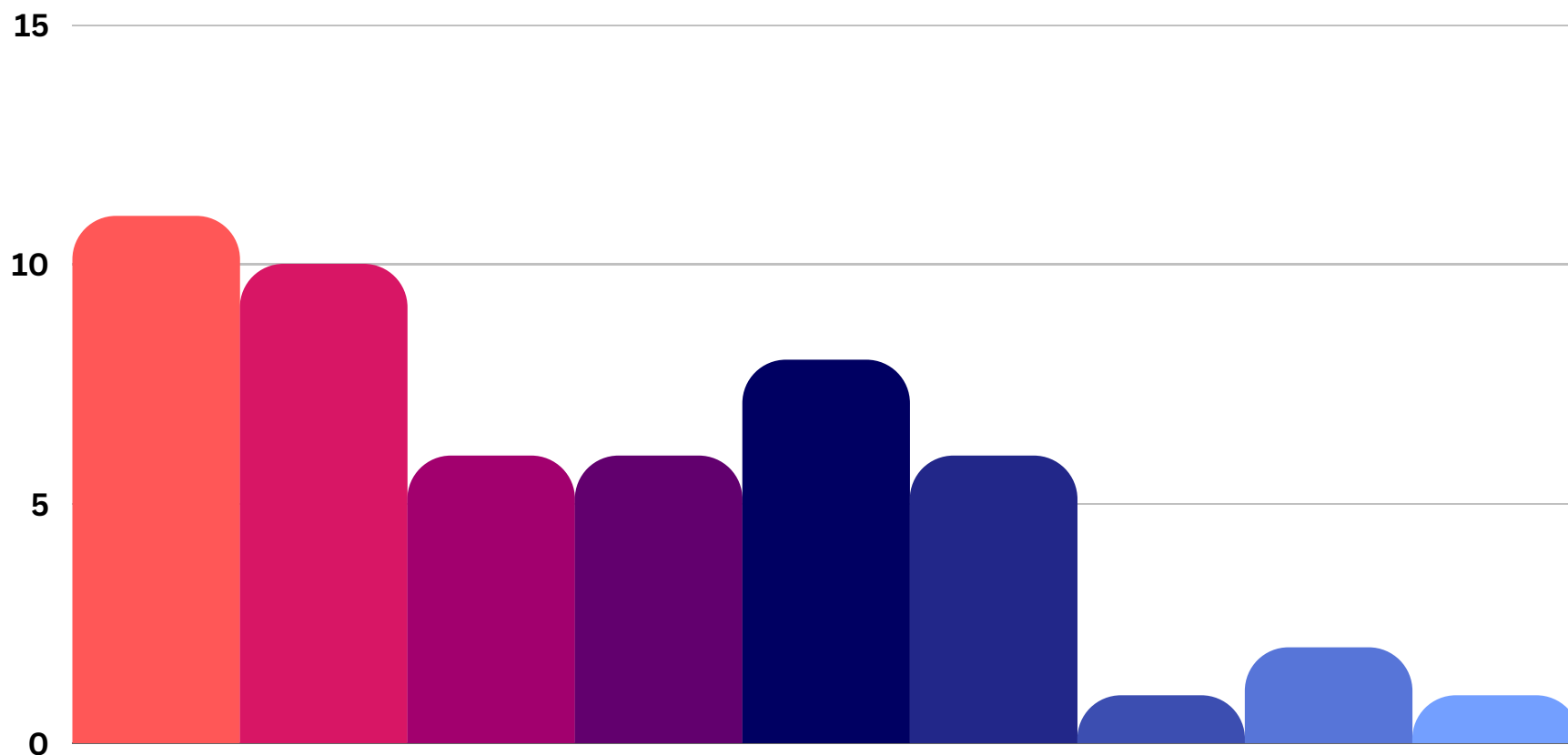


THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE

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- Management of clients
- Management of staff
- Staffing shortages
- Ensuring safety
- Following procedures
- Continuing services
- Budget/costs
- Correct PPE
- Support of frontline workers





SOLUTIONS

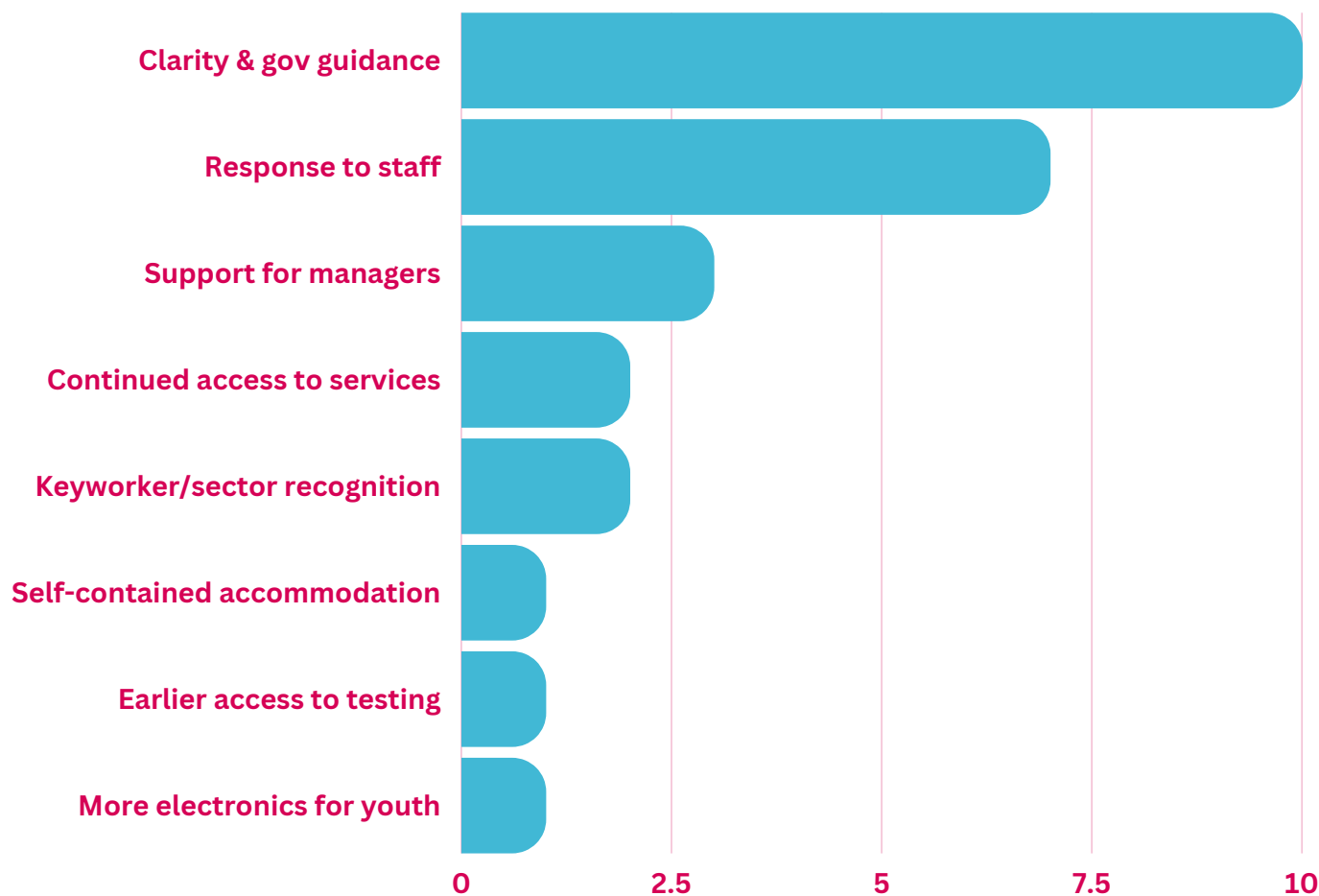
EXPLORING SOLUTIONS

WHAT WAS NEEDED

While this report sought to uncover the main challenges that service providers faced during the pandemic, the main reasoning was to do so in hope that the sector could **learn & be more resilient for it**.

From the outside, it's easy to be presumptuous—and wrong—about the 'solutions' the sector needs.

To understand what **truly could have helped** providers overcome their challenges—and similar challenges in the future—they were asked what support **they wished they had** at the time.



EXPLORING SOLUTIONS

1 Clarity & gov guidance

"Greater clarity from the government or Public Health England"

"Clearer guidance from the government on masks, testing, and policy"

"A central advice line for supported accommodation"

2 Response to staff

"A national response to the staffing crisis"

"More funding to enable us to attract qualified staff at a time of real crisis"

"A better relationship with a provider we could rely on for temp workers on short notice"

"A drive to recruit community volunteers & retirees locally"

3 Support for managers

"I would have benefited from someone with greater experience [in managing of supported housing] to learn from"

"I was putting all my energy into support my team, but wish someone could have done the same for me"

"More of an emphasis on how to help people that were helping vulnerable people"

EXPLORING SOLUTIONS

4 Continued access to services



"Other specialist services remaining open would have gone some way in supporting the young people accessing our services to avoid a crisis"

"External essential support providers to have retained some form of in-person access"

5 Keyworker/sector recognition



"More immediate recognition of support workers as key workers & government not telling everyone to stay at home when we needed staff on site"

"Recognition that while the NHS was struggling, many other organisations were working just as hard"

Self-contained accommodation



Earlier access to testing



More electronics for youth



6



DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

Interestingly, while the biggest challenge was the management of clients, **the biggest solution needed by service providers wasn't a direct response to it.**

The responsibility of keeping clients safe from COVID—while continuing to support their even more complex needs and managing the disruptive behaviour of unevictable residents—demanded a **fast-adapted, unprecedented level of stewardship.**

And it is service providers themselves who are best positioned for this.

Despite the pandemic's challenges, over 10% of respondents mentioned

that their team did a fantastic job.

The report itself shows that **service providers worked through the crisis & should be confident** that if another should arise, **they will be the ones responding, adapting, and leading their people through it all.**

However, the uncertainty & lack of clarity of government guidelines—the biggest solution needed by providers—**lies outside of their direct control.**

Understandably, this was a staggering new crisis for the government too, which they had to rapidly adapt to as COVID evolved.

But while rules & guidance may unavoidably be fast-changing, **how easy it is to access that information**

& how uniform it is to avoid confusion seems rather a system failure.

If there was one central reference for Supported Housing providers—whether a website or call helpline—this would have **saved managers precious time & energy from constantly having to research, cross-check, and operate in the unknown.**

Perhaps too, **this solution could be the impetus** for more sector recognition, which could have a domino effect of key worker recognition and easier access to testing & correct PPE.

The second solution needed—a response to staffing shortages—**is related to the third biggest**

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

challenge experienced by providers.

Government funding to help with staffing shortages & training would help in some capacity—and, to some extent, is already happening.

However, to truly solve a problem that has plagued the sector even before the pandemic, **the challenge of staffing may require doing things a new way.**

To give a revealing anecdote: in 2020, the Greater London Authority (GLA) faced the emergency of rapidly opening fully-staffed COVID homeless hotels to prevent infection from spreading.

Their usual providers, not being able to deliver, recommended them to

AGS Support —England's leading specialist support staff provider—**whose system of always having backups to the backups allowed them to rapidly deploy staff & fully manage the hotel within a few days.**

But even their staff backups wouldn't be enough for the spike in demand foreseen from COVID.

To tackle this staff shortage problem, AGS Support recruited people like cabin crew members & pilots—**people made redundant from the pandemic, but who had great communication skills**—and trained extensively them for the support sector.

The result: 700 new staff recruited, 7 homeless hotels very successfully ran for GLA, and a lesson for us all.

New challenges may demand entirely new, out-of-the-box solutions. And building a relationship with those who have backups for crises and have the enterprise to discover/implement innovative solutions, **can create true resilience for service providers.**

Aside from the discussed solutions, **this report also leaves us with unaddressed, complex problems** that would require the insight of a sector expert to even discuss them.

Problems like **how can support workers get recognition as key workers/ how can service providers get easier access to PPE/ whether some specialist support services can stay open to avoid a bigger crisis/ and where funding can come from**

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

to cover losses in fundraising income
—are critical problems that require
practical solutions.

Part of the aim of this report was to bring to light which were the biggest, **shared challenges** in the sector, **so that any effort to solve one would bring great benefit to many.**

A few respondents also brought up a very important, post-pandemic challenge: a great boon of the pandemic that was even more homeless people were taken in. But with that extra support being withdrawn, **how can service providers avoid regressing to previous levels?**

CONCLUSION

In light of this report, perhaps it's important to ask: why does addressing these challenges faced by service providers even matter?

And in answer to that: because no one else can do the critical job they do.

Service providers are truly the guardians to the youth without a safe place, to the domestically abused women & families, to those with special needs and complex needs.

They are the ones who know their vulnerable residents &

their needs best—and who can steward them best through any crisis.

As austerity looms and the number of people needing support services increases—helping leaders & managers in the sector **becomes more important than ever.**

Removing the big challenges faced by service providers will create a system that can **support even more people, even better.**

For as we empower managers, so we empower all the vulnerable people that they care for ceaselessly.

ABOUT

A big thank you to **all the report's participants**, including York Road Project and David Devoy from Depaul UK, who took the time to share their personal experiences & made this research even possible.

About AGS Support

AGS Support is England's leading provider of **flexible support staffing solutions**.

For over 25, they've passionately served the sector by providing extensively trained, highly competent support staff on all levels—in a **unique, fully-managed service** that makes sure you're covered **24/7, 365 days a year**.

Whether you need permanent support staff, night shift covers, or emergency support staff—their senior team is ready to listen to your needs & provide and manage the **quality cover your residents deserve**.

*"We're all about long-term relationships," says **Founder Richard Odendaal**, "It doesn't matter if they're a rural charity or a big, city housing association—we always say just give us one property, and we'll show you how we work."*

To find out more or to contact the team on their 24/7 call line, visit:

<https://agssupport.co.uk/>



Richard Odendaal, Founder & CEO