De Montfort University and partners\(^1\) were commissioned by CIH and Wheatley Housing Group to investigate the future of frontline housing roles. Data was collected between October 2013 and February 2014.

A total of 1,054 housing providers and tenant-customers responded to the online surveys. Responses came from across the UK\(^2\), from different types of housing organisation, from urban and rural locations, with differing stock sizes, including non stock-holding. There were no discernible differences in responses according to country of origin from the interim findings. Indeed, it seems that across the UK, as a sector, housing staff are agreed in terms of where change is heading. Focus groups, interviews and appreciative inquiry events allowed a range of housing professionals and tenants to contribute to the research and envisage the frontline role of the future.

A full report is to be published in June 2014.
Key Interim Findings

The full report will provide critical detail, but here are the key interim findings:

- The nature of frontline housing roles is changing. The top external drivers of change are welfare reform, followed by lack of housing supply and the increasing gap between income and housing costs.
- Some tenant-customers’ needs are increasingly complex, and frontline housing officers are expected to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of other local services. They are starting to provide additional support and signposting to other agencies.
- Tenancy sustainment is an increasingly important function.
- In future, frontline housing workers need to be more ‘commercially minded’. In the survey, of 397 respondents who selected this characteristic as one of the six most important, 61 said it was important now and 336 said it would be important in the future. This should not be at the expense of organisations’ social mission, but respondents suggested that operating in a more businesslike fashion can deliver better social outcomes and save money at the same time – frontline officers need commercial heads and social hearts.
- Housing providers are increasingly recruiting for attitude and behaviours, and then training for knowledge and skills.
- 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.
- Tenant-customers want to see more of their housing officers, with some suggesting there may be a case for tenants to have a stronger role, utilizing their knowledge of their own neighbourhoods, working alongside frontline staff.
- Housing providers feel there is a social ‘added value’ created by the role of housing frontline workers.

Influencing factors and changing nature of the frontline housing role

Several external factors place pressure on housing organisations and tenant-customers, which in turn impacts on the role of the frontline housing worker. Welfare reform was cited as the highest ranked issue affecting the sector. This is borne out in the testimony of frontline workers who are seeing customers with increasingly complex and compounding needs, which require a number of responses in order to sustain tenancies and ensure their well-being. Tenancy sustainment is a key priority and time is being spent in the early stages of tenancies to reduce demand on services in the long term.

Although ‘housing officer’ was the job title cited most often by survey respondents (181), the breadth of titles shows the diversity of jobs involved in housing. 596 different job titles were given. Whilst many are similar, roles covered management, rents, repairs, support, neighbourhoods, governance, tenant involvement, and organisation leadership.

Networks and partnerships: in it together

Frontline housing workers could work more closely with other agencies to meet their customers’ needs. In consultations, both housing workers and tenant-customers stressed the need for different organisations to work together from a customer focus. Words like ‘signposting’, ‘translating’ and ‘blending services’ were used.

One example, from Wheatley Housing Group, means that housing officers have named contacts in other agencies, bring different services together and have a ‘Think Yes’ approach, which allows them to do the right thing for customers using their professional judgement.

Housing workers = commercial heads and social hearts

Being ‘commercially minded’ whilst delivering frontline housing services is seen, in the survey, to increase in importance over fivefold for the future. Evidence shows clearly that this is ‘business for a purpose’. Income maximisation through rental income is vital for housing organisations if they are to continue to deliver services and invest in existing and new homes.

The appreciative inquiries showed that tenants want officers to be business-like to treat them as ‘customers’, to respond to their enquiries, to be knowledgeable and accountable. Equally, tenant-customers need to understand both their rights and responsibilities. At the same time, frontline officers need to understand people and the difficulties they sometimes face, and to be able to work with them constructively and professionally to overcome those difficulties. ‘Business for a purpose’ incorporates commercial and social elements in the frontline role, and it is important that education and training reflect both of these.

Important competencies: recruiting and supporting frontline housing workers

Respondents were asked to choose the six most important characteristics for a frontline worker. Out of a list of 20 characteristics, 10 each had over 500 respondents saying they were important either now or in the future. The list below shows these ‘top 10’. Further examination of the shift in perceived importance of competencies will be included in the full report.

1 Ability to problem solve
2 = Customer focused
2 = Good communicator
4 Understands the needs of vulnerable groups
5 Ability to negotiate and liaise
6 Ability to manage change
7 Professional
8 Ability to be creative and respond according to the situation
9 Able to work with minimal supervision
10 ‘Can Do’ improvement-focused

However, analysis of 43 different job descriptions shows that the characteristics above are not consistently echoed. Interviews with recruitment agencies reinforce this finding; what housing organisations say they want in terms of competences for the future is not systematically followed through in the recruitment process.

Current frontline workers have clearly voiced their need for support from their organisations to enable them to cope in their roles. As well as education and training in technical matters, there is a need for well-being support to help frontline workers cope with aggression, fear, distress and suicidal threats from tenant-customers under increasing pressure. Professional networks and support from inter-agency partners such as the police, social services, health, community mental health and education is essential if housing workers are to trust that customers’ needs are being met when they are referred.

Footnotes:
1 This research has been undertaken by Jo Richardson at De Montfort University, Lisa Barker, Jac Furness and Merron Simpson.
2 72% respondents from England, 18% Scotland, 7% Wales and 2% Northern Ireland (1% reported ‘other’ where they were based in multiple countries and included stock in countries outside the UK 500.
3 Commercially minded’ had one of the highest ranks for ‘Future’ (136) but because only 67 respondents felt this was a characteristic of frontline housing workers now it did not score 500 or over in total and so has not made it onto this cumulative top 10 list.
Will technology and process change set them free?

The automation of some processes, and the delivery of some services through contact centres, means officers are increasingly freed from the office. Those enabled with linked mobile technologies can be out working with other agencies and taking services into tenants’ homes. This is seen as an efficient use of time and resources, as well as fulfilling tenant-customers’ wishes to see more of their housing officers.

A variety of technology is being adopted and created, and the extent of use depends on the size of organisations. Some smaller and very locally-based housing providers have not had the same need to develop their remote working capabilities. One small housing provider specialising in student accommodation, Ducane Housing in London, does, however, have a specially designed app for reporting repairs.

Tenant-customers wanted to see more of the frontline housing workers on the estates and in their homes, and there was support for technology that aided this increased visibility. They did not, however, want automated systems that acted as a further barrier to service delivery, and some suggested there was scope to work in partnership between tenants and housing providers.

The value of the frontline housing role

While this is difficult to quantify, it is overwhelmingly seen as an important issue; the housing professional is often the one constant in some tenant-customers’ lives. Where other public services respond in a crisis, housing is already there and can observe and act quickly when intervention is needed. One housing officer’s story in Scotland was about responding to a tenant who said he would commit suicide. In that instance, a swift and compassionate response linking police, health and family members literally saved a life – what higher social value than that?