



Communities that Work

The impact of Covid-19 on housing sector led employment support

Members survey 2021

Impact of Covid-19 on sector employment support revealed through the first annual survey to social housing providers in England and Wales

It is well documented that housing providers and social landlords play a vital role in helping their tenants and communities access meaningful employment opportunities, and progress in work.

During the global Covid-19 crisis, this supportive and two-way relationship has been more vital than ever for thousands of households across the country, as families in social housing are more likely to face economic hardship than their counterparts in private tenures.

The first annual membership insight report from Communities that Work explores the economic impact that Covid-19 has had on social housing providers' ability to maintain delivery of employment support services, and the challenges faced by their residents.

Communities that Work's membership represents more than 1.3 million social housing homes in England and Wales, and features some of the largest housing associations, as well as the very smallest local providers. This survey was completed in late 2020 and received contributions from 32 housing providers that own nearly one million homes.

The report finds:

- 1. Social Housing's investment in employment support stays strong**, despite the national challenges. In 2019-20, an estimated £76 million was invested by Housing Associations, providing employment support services for their residents and communities, up £6 million since 2018.
- 2. The pressures of Covid-19 created unprecedented levels of demand for employment support services from residents and the community.** 94% of housing associations reported an increase in residents suffering from economic hardship as a result of Covid-19, and 66% of housing associations saw an increase in their residents receiving housing benefit in 2020.
- 3. Covid-19 impacted the ability of housing providers to deliver employment related services.** All respondents to the survey were forced to suspend face-to-face employment support services for residents, but over time 94% were able to adapt to provide online support.
- 4. Support and uptake of Kickstart is high within the UK housing sector.** The survey found that nearly all respondents are participating in the Kickstart Scheme, with 78% actively engaged with the Government's flagship employment support scheme for young people.

1. Social housing sector's financial contribution

In 2019-20, an estimated £76 million was invested by housing providers, providing much needed employment support services for their residents and communities, an increase of £6 million since 2018.

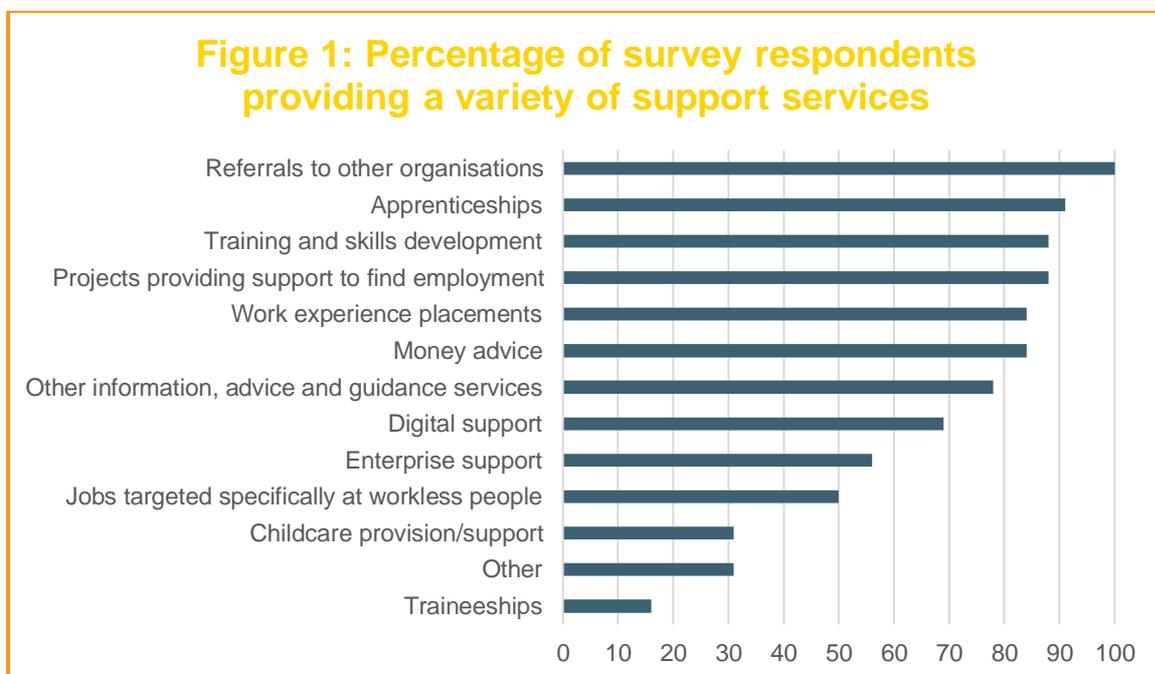
Social Housing's investment in employment support stays strong, despite the national challenges.

The survey reveals that housing associations invested around £76 million in community investment in the last financial year, of which nearly £26.5 million was dedicated to employment support.

This figure marks a £6 million increase since 2018, when the sector was estimated to invest a total of £70 million.¹

These contributions demonstrate the sector's significant and sustained investment in partnerships and programmes focused on helping people into meaningful employment and career progression, and in creating employment and training opportunities through a broad range of service offerings.

The survey highlighted the broad depth of support services provided by housing associations, detailed in the figure below:



¹ *Building communities that work: The role of housing associations in supporting employment. (IPPR, 2018)*

2. Impact of Covid-19 on support delivery

Covid-19 impacted on the ability for housing providers to deliver employment related services. All respondents to the survey were forced to suspend face-to-face employment support services for residents, but over time, **94%** were able to adapt to provide online support.

Housing associations are recognised for their ability to provide bespoke, person-centred support and build long-term, trusted relationships with customers.² Staff can utilise these personal insights and combine them with their knowledge of local labour markets and partnerships to connect customers with the support they need and put them on the path to employment. This tailored, one-to-one support is evidenced as a highly successful strategy in helping people into long term, sustainable employment.³

However, the nationwide Covid-19 restrictions that came into effect on March 23, 2020 forced a widespread cancellation of face-to-face employment services, and eliminated housing associations' established and proven method of connecting people with employment and training opportunities.

The survey results showed that:

- **97%** of respondents said that prior to Covid-19, employment support services were provided to residents and communities face-to-face with employment workers and trainers delivering support in person.
- When the first national lockdown hit in March 2020, **100%** of respondents providing face-to-face employment support had to cancel these services.
- **94%** of respondents were able to use technology to continue to provide residents with remote support sessions, virtual training or e-learning, whilst just **6%** were unable to do so.

Whilst housing associations have been able to adapt services and move face-to-face contact to digital and telephone-based support, respondents noted that community based, face-to-face support really matters when reaching out to more vulnerable and disadvantaged households.

Several respondents noted that customers frequently face challenges in accessing digital support - such as lack of digital access and low understanding of digital tools, highlighting the pervasiveness of digital exclusion.

Moreover, the fact that some respondents were not able to use technology to continue providing services further emphasises the exclusion risks that arise from heavy reliance on digital delivery.

In-person support must return as soon as possible, operating within covid-safe guidelines.

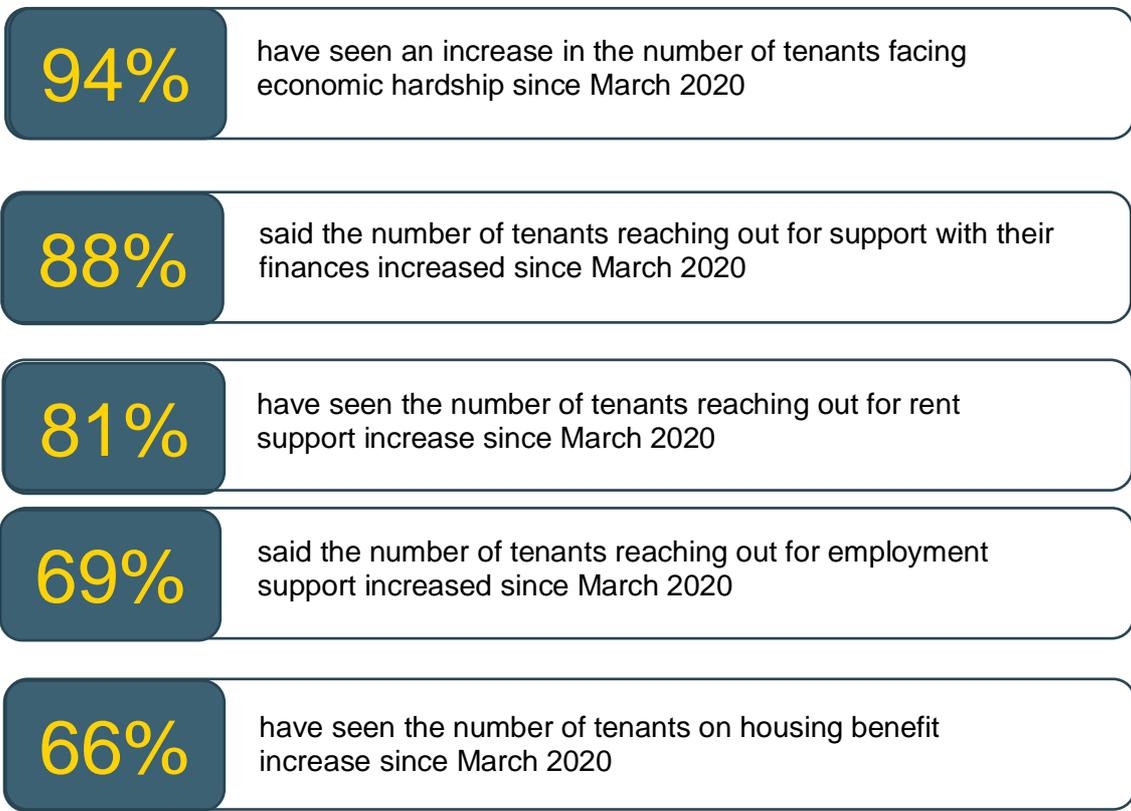
² *Improving Opportunities: How to support social housing tenants into sustainable employment. Report to the APPG on Housing and Social Mobility, (CaCHE, 2020).*

³ Ibid

3. Impact of Covid-19 on support demand

The demand for a wide range of employment related support services is up, largely due to Covid-19.

Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding changes to tenants' economic status and demand for support services since the start of the pandemic. The survey revealed the following:



The fact that nearly all respondents reported an increase in the number of tenants facing economic hardship since the start of the pandemic is deeply troubling, indicating that those who are already financially vulnerable are falling further behind.

This widespread increase in economic hardship combined with increased demand for a range of key support services also suggests that the support schemes the Government has put in place in response to the pandemic are not enough to protect all those who need them most.

These numbers also show that the demand for employment services is high at a time when most housing associations had to cancel their main vehicle for delivering this support: face-to-face meetings where staff can deliver services in person.

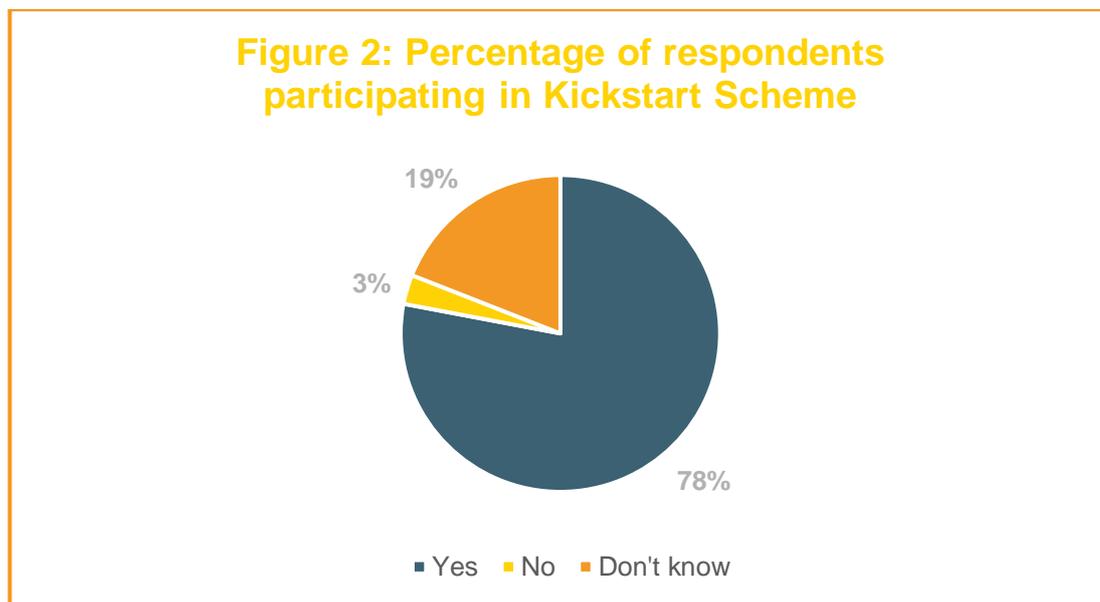
4. Widespread uptake of Kickstart

The survey found that nearly all respondents are participating in the Kickstart Scheme, with **78%** actively engaged with the Government's flagship employment support scheme for young people.

The UK's housing sector has helped lead the way in the uptake of the UK's national Kickstart Scheme – a £2 billion fund to create hundreds of thousands of high quality six-month work placements aimed at those aged 16-24 who are on Universal Credit and are deemed to be at risk of long-term unemployment.

The sector's Kickstart Housing Network, which is being co-ordinated by Clarion Housing Group and supported by sector bodies including the National Housing Federation, Communities that Work and ERSA, has helped to galvanise the interest of housing providers to apply to the Government's new employment scheme, and is expected to support more than 800 jobs in the coming year.

The survey showed that 78% of housing associations are actively engaged in the kickstart scheme, and are planning to take on new staff through the scheme in the coming months. The participation breakdown of respondents is detailed in the figure below:



This active support for Kickstart, and the early uptake of it by housing providers demonstrates the social housing sector's commitment to investing in local economies and creating employment and training opportunities.

It's worth noting too that the UK's housing sector was a driving force behind the creation of the Kickstart Scheme, in helping shape a cross sector campaign that brought together the housing and employment sectors to call on Government to commit to a new Opportunity Guarantee and ensure that Government action is taken to prevent a future unemployment crisis.

5. Policy recommendations

The survey results shine a light on the need to create funding certainty by leveraging ESF reserves, and placing housing at the heart of the UKSPF pilots. Additionally, increasing digital inclusion needs to be a core focus in order to facilitate improved employment outcomes for those most in need.

a) Ensure funding certainty: Leverage ESF reserves in full and place housing at the heart of the UKSPF pilots

When asked what practical support can be provided to their organisation to help support tenants into employment during the economic recession, the most common response – from nearly one-third of respondents – was related to funding security or additional funding.

The issue of funding certainty has been a major concern for the social housing sector, as many housing associations relied on ESF monies to deliver vital programmes and services. While ESF support to the UK has ended due to Brexit, millions of pounds in ESF reserve funds is sitting in UK government coffers and going unused because it needs to be match-funded.

The housing sector's significant financial contributions to tenants and communities through employment support services and community investment give it the ability to match fund. Working with the DWP to leverage ESF reserve funds would provide additional funding for the sector to deliver critical employment support services. It would also provide much needed funding certainty as the sector navigates transitioning from ESF reliance to utilising the UKSPF.

b) Irradicate digital exclusion to improve employment outcomes

When asked what practical support can be provided to their organisation to help support tenants into employment during the economic recession, the second most common response – from roughly a quarter of respondents – was related to digital exclusion. These responses ranged from lack of access to affordable equipment and broadband to help customers get online, to the need for digital skills training.

Digital access and skills are imperative for customers to obtain the services they need, secure employment and progress in work. The ability to function as an adult in society now

requires digital access and skills in order to engage, get support, job search and meet employment requirements.

The need to close the digital gap was also emphasised in an October 2020 report to the APPG on Housing and Social Mobility, examining the barriers to employment faced by working age people in social housing. The report echoes calls for access to quality, affordable broadband for all and to support the development of digital skills.⁴

The need to eradicate digital exclusion is becoming increasingly critical as we continue to shift to remote working due to behavioural changes sparked by the pandemic.

The Government recently addressed digital exclusion in relation to young people and the ability to continue education online through the national lockdown. In order to reduce inequities and build a workforce for the future, the Government needs to address digital exclusion in relation to adults. Eradicating this digital divide is fundamental to our economic recovery.

⁴ *Improving Opportunities: How to support social housing tenants into sustainable employment. Report to the APPG on Housing and Social Mobility, (CaCHE, 2020).*

Note to editors

About Communities that Work

Communities that Work is the voice of housing providers who deliver employment support and services to communities across England & Wales. Together our members own and manage over 1.3 million homes. We aim to transform lives for good, by enabling housing providers to support people into rewarding, sustainable employment.

<https://www.communitiesthatwork.co.uk/>

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