

# Research into professionalism among housing staff: final report

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October 2022

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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1. Introduction

### Background

1. Social landlords in England manage 4.2 million units of housing. Nearly all of these are managed by 373 larger landlords, each of whom have 1,000 or more units under management. Most of these landlords are Private Registered Providers (such as Housing Associations). In some areas Local Authorities retain significant stock, either managed directly or via an Arms' Length Management Organisation (ALMO).
2. In November 2020, the government published [The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper](#). The Social Housing White Paper (SHWP) committed DLUHC to undertake a review of professional training and development for social housing staff.
3. The [Social Housing White Paper Professionalisation Review](#) was formally launched in January 2022. This aimed to review staff training and qualifications to improve social housing services and ensure residents' complaints are dealt with effectively. The review was overseen by a Working Group, including resident representatives, academics, Grenfell United, landlord representatives, sector bodies and DLUHC. As part of this, DLUHC commissioned IFF Research to provide the information and insight required by the Working Group for the review, which covers social housing landlords and tenants in England. This report summarises the findings of that research.

## 1.2. What is a professional service?

4. As detailed in [Chapter 4](#), tenants, tenant-facing staff and management shared a range of views on what constitutes a professional service.
5. Currently, professionalism in the social housing sector is not usually defined with reference to formal accredited professional status, or to qualifications generally. The focus among tenants, tenant-facing staff, and management was found to be much more on core staff skills and behaviours and consistency of outcomes.
6. Resident perceptions of professionalism were influenced by the channel of communication, the perceived motivation of staff, and the time staff had to help. Among tenant-facing staff, delivering a professional service was understood as having two core elements: staff needed certain characteristics to respond well to residents, and the team needed systems and resources to deliver a consistent quality service.

7. For management-level staff, a professional service was defined by residents receiving a positive customer service experience. They believed this could be made possible by the knowledge and characteristics of tenant-facing staff and supported by having effective procedures and systems in place. Overall, management-level staff recognised a professional service was driven by the culture of the organisation.

### **1.3. Who delivers the service?**

#### **Number and profile of tenant-facing staff**

8. The report draws on survey data and secondary data to produce an estimate that there are approximately 160,000 people working in the social housing sector in England, as detailed in [Chapter 5](#). Of these, around 100,800 are estimated to be tenant-facing staff, dealing directly with residents on a day-to-day basis. There is some inevitable uncertainty around this estimate because many staff (an estimated 43,000) work in Local Authorities. Their individual roles will, in some cases, cover both housing and other local authority functions which do not relate to housing.

### **1.4. Where is the sector now?**

#### **Commitment to professionalisation**

9. As explored in [Chapter 6](#), providers who participated in the research were strongly committed to ensuring professional behaviour among their workforces. Some stated that this had, at least in part, resulted from the Professionalisation Review; for others it was a longer-term commitment.

#### **Recruiting staff**

10. Providers were typically much more focused on the attributes and values of potential staff than their existing qualifications, and to some extent their prior experience. In recruitment, ethos was seen as more important than qualifications for providing a professional service. Transferable skills were seen as important, and even for senior roles providers highly rated their ability to recruit from outside the sector. They felt a focus on qualifications might impede this.
11. Providers had varying experiences of recruiting skilled tenant-facing staff. Smaller providers, particularly those based away from major cities, tended to find recruitment most challenging. Local Authorities felt they had particular difficulties due to being constrained in the salaries and benefits they could offer. Providers often relied on training and promotions of existing staff for more specialist or advanced roles due to difficulties in recruiting already skilled staff.

#### **Training delivery**

12. The survey showed that most social housing providers offered their tenant-facing staff training in a range of areas. However, it also showed some weaknesses. Staff outside

the 'core' housing roles tended to have lesser levels of training, especially in areas such as mental health awareness. Staff in Rent Collection and Sales and Lettings services were least likely to have received training specifically relevant to working with residents.

13. Overall, social housing providers tended to be quite reliant on external providers for the delivery of training. All providers surveyed used external providers to some extent. Consultancies were the most popular source of training, followed by Further Education colleges, charities, and regulatory bodies.

### **Prevalence of training**

14. Training leading to a qualification or certificate was widely available in all core areas across services. However, the proportion of staff offered training of different types varied substantially. Around two thirds were provided with training in equality and diversity (66%) or safeguarding (62%) in the last 18 months. Fewer were provided with mental health awareness training (42%) or in treating tenants with courtesy and respect (34%), and a minority were provided with professional qualifications (15%).

### **Spending**

15. The amount that social housing providers spent each year on training their tenant-facing staff in skills related to working with residents ranged from less than £50 to just under £750 per employee. On average, providers spent around £200 per employee per year on training related to working with residents out of an average overall learning and development budget of £400.

### **Listening to residents**

16. Residents had mixed feelings about whether they were listened to. When they did not feel listened to, some felt the problem was with management and the systems in place, rather than the tenant-facing staff. Often automated feedback mechanisms were organised around feedback on specific issues with a specific dwelling, but issues residents had might relate to wider issues or policies.
17. Social landlords had monitoring processes in place to ensure that residents were receiving a professional service. Some were introducing new immediate feedback systems, based around live scoring of interactions immediately after they were completed. Providers varied in the extent to which they thought resident feedback could be used to influence staff training.

### **Listening to staff**

18. Providers often had a range of staff feedback channels, the most popular being regular staff satisfaction surveys. This allowed them to monitor stress levels, staff well-being, and more. However, while this pro-active approach was widespread, it was not universal. While some providers extensively analysed the gathered data, some others struggled to describe their feedback process during the interview.

19. Some providers remained reliant on just annual reviews with line managers for feedback from tenant-facing staff, and staff interviewed did not always feel listened to in these organisations.

### **1.5. What are the barriers to delivering a professional service?**

20. As detailed in [Chapter 7](#), this research identified several key barriers to training and delivering a professional service, and the reasons behind those. These were:

- Staff time to train was identified in the survey as by far the most common issue for providers seeking to deliver training. Finding time was reportedly challenging in the light of reductions in budgets resulting in staffing cuts in recent years.
- Cost of training and qualifications was another widespread issue, most often raised by management and linked to budgetary constraints. Some drew connections between cost of training and issues with residents' cost of living. They felt they would need to transfer funding toward assistance to residents going forward.
- Some identified a need for shorter, simpler professional qualifications, rather than full Apprenticeships or existing housing-wide chartered status qualifications. The concept of qualifications targeted at particular services within housing was suggested by one respondent, for example qualifications covering only those working in supported housing, only customer service, or only rents and revenues.
- Working with sub-contractors presents challenges for achieving consistent levels of training and ensuring residents experience a consistent service. In resident focus groups, issues of poor service from sub-contractors were frequently raised. Some providers said that they had little control over the training and qualifications of staff at sub-contractors.
- Residents reported that staff did not seem empowered to resolve their problems, and this was most commonly attributed to issues with administrative systems which blocked action being taken. Both residents and staff were frustrated by the broader shortcomings of the systems which passed on information from customer contact centres to sub-contractors.
- Residents often noted that turnover of staff was a barrier to building relationships with their housing provider. Providers also reported that high turnover in roles made training more difficult and expensive, since greater volumes then had to be delivered relative to the size of the workforce. Providers differed in the extent to which they had a formal staff retention strategy in place.

## 1.6. Delivering professionalisation

21. Residents, staff, and management, in both case studies and in the survey, identified a range of ideas for how to overcome the barriers mentioned above. These are outlined in [Chapter 8](#).
22. While many providers were confident in their approach to their training and skills programme, the vast majority still felt they could make improvements. However, there was no strong consensus on the direction of those improvements.
23. In the survey, the most common suggestion was standardised or accredited training programmes, also supported strongly in case studies.
24. In the case studies, wider issues beyond training and skills were considered. These were:
  - Providers highlighted the importance of promoting an ethos of professional behaviour and respect for residents, although there was no consensus on the best way of achieving this.
  - Systems that tenant-facing staff used could often be improved. Some highlighted the poor technical standard of these systems; but some suggested tenant-facing staff needed to be empowered to make decisions at a human level, avoiding the need for the complex referral and decision pathways which create the need for complex systems.
  - Some providers did not take full advantage of the possibilities of recruiting tenants or other staff with lived experience of social housing.
  - Supporting staff retention through offering progression opportunities and the possibility of sideways moves within the organisational structure.
  - Some tenant-facing staff in particular felt that professional qualifications would assist in their roles being viewed with greater respect within and outside of their organisations.
  - Sub-contractor management could be improved; some organisations did not struggle with this while others faced great difficulty. This was partly an issue of an unbalanced relationship between provider and sub-contractor, but there were also opportunities for learning in contract management and procurement.
  - Providers highlighted the need for salaries and benefits to be more competitive with the private sector if they are to continue to attract the talent they need in tenant-facing roles.
  - Management often emphasised that any changes in the requirements for staff qualifications would need to take into account any impact on staffing levels required and be accompanied by appropriate levels of funding.

## 1.7. What could change?

25. This report brings together findings to produce recommendations in [Chapter 10](#) relevant to each of the research questions. The research does show that there has already been some change in response to the Social Housing White Paper, especially among previously less well performing housing providers.

26. There was a strong consensus among providers, tenant-facing staff, and residents that tenant-facing staff need improved training and development. Although there was little support for mandatory qualifications, many felt that they were an important aspect of encouraging professionalisation. A summary of the findings and recommendations for each research question are outlined below.

### **What is the causal link between improved staff training and development, and the provision of excellent customer service?**

27. Improved training and development for tenant-facing staff, as well as ensuring the recruitment of sufficient numbers of high-quality staff, was an important aspect of encouraging professionalisation. While funding was cited as the major factor impeding this, for some providers availability of skilled and motivated recruits is a problem.

Recommendation 1: Any measures taken to encourage professionalisation should clearly take into account any possible impact on recruitment in the sector, either among new staff or transfer of experienced staff from other sectors.

### **Are currently available housing qualifications 'fit for purpose'?**

28. Broadly, new qualifications should not be a priority for professionalisation, with two exceptions. The first of these areas is qualifications specifically relevant to the needs of those working in specific sub-sectors in housing.

Recommendation 2: Government should examine ways to promote the development of additional qualifications for tenant-facing staff who specialise in specific forms of supported housing.

29. There are qualifications shortcomings in technical apprenticeships for maintenance staff, which were flagged in terms of including soft skills and skills relevant for maintenance rather than newbuild construction.

Recommendation 3: Providers should be encouraged by sector bodies or government to come together to create an Apprenticeship Standard which contains the skills required to maintain social housing. This should include content relevant to professional standards when interacting with residents.

### **Is there a common approach to providing qualifications, training, and development across the sector?**

30. Landlords showed significant variation in approach. Some took a system-based approach, which required training on a role-by-role basis and limited ability for individuals to choose training. They also commissioned large scale resident feedback systems.
31. Other landlords, mostly smaller Private Registered Providers, arranged more informal training with a greater priority to individual career development and more flexibility about what training is required for a role. They engaged intensively with fewer residents and used fewer data systems. These organisations were often strongly against mandatory professional qualifications.

Recommendation 4: Any changes to the framework used for skills and training in the sector proposed by government should take into account the diversity of approaches taken by providers, rather than mandating a specific approach to staff development in detail.

### **How effective is the current approach to providing qualifications, training, and development in meeting the sector's needs?**

32. There were some gaps in the existing structure of training and qualifications; notably the survey revealed gaps in training around working with residents outside the core areas of Neighbourhood services and Customer services. Estate services and Rent Collection may be equally likely to encounter residents who have support needs or are in difficult situations, and yet do not currently receive the same level of training.

Recommendation 5: Government should require providers to train all tenant-facing staff who encounter tenants to minimum standards in a specific set of skills, including basic safeguarding and mental health awareness.

33. Small housing providers may see benefits if minimum standards for service delivery for sub-contractors in social housing were set at a higher level. Small providers may not have leverage over large contractors at an individual level, but potentially a level of collective negotiation or intervention by government might be more effective. The existence of such standards might also assist Local Authorities in justifying spending



public funds on a higher quality service. For example, an accreditation scheme setting out minimum standards for common services required by providers might help. This might assist them to collectively influence skills, training, and minimum standards for service delivery.

Recommendation 6: Government should consult providers and sector bodies regarding the best way to set up and enforce minimum standards for sub-contractors across the social housing sector, in particular in property maintenance and contact centre provision.

34. Current approaches to training and development may be hampered by the wider environment in which staff work. Increased numbers of properties to oversee for each member of staff ('patch size') in recent years was cited by many tenant-facing staff and managers as another important factor in the ability to deliver a professional service. This was mentioned both as an obstacle to professional behaviour in itself and an obstacle to delivering training due to shortages of staff time.

Recommendation 7: In order to promote higher professional standards and enable high quality training, government should research the impact of large 'patch sizes' for tenant-facing staff on service, with a view to establishing minimum acceptable 'patch sizes' for specific role types.

### **What factors influence tenants' perceptions of the professionalism of the staff delivering their housing services?**

35. Residents' perceptions of professionalism are influenced by a sense of being treated with respect and being listened to, as well as the effective delivery of services. Residents often had a high opinion of the skills and attitude of tenant-facing staff. Discontent with professional standards tended to focus on the role of provider management, and on sub-contractors who were often seen as unhelpful.
36. An effective approach to professionalisation should go beyond training and skills to consider systems, as these collective professional standards influence outcomes and individual standards. Weaknesses in systems were raised by multiple interviewees in the research, especially those with experience of customer service systems in other sectors.
37. Effective systems are also about allocation of decision-making, as well as technical capabilities. Staff being empowered to make decisions at an appropriate level is also important. The extent to which residents have a negative view of management but not tenant-facing staff at their provider may hint at potential issues here with decisions needing to be referred up to managers who the resident cannot speak to directly. Systems used must also be capable of registering resident concerns which do not fit a list of pre-defined issues and may not relate to their own dwelling.

Recommendation 8: Providers should be required to demonstrate that their Customer Relationship Management system meets minimum standards, allowing staff to record, view and share information in a practical manner. It should allow residents to raise issues not relating to an issue with their own dwelling. This requirement should take into account that for the smallest providers, complex systems may not be necessary to achieve this. For larger providers, government should work with housing providers, sector bodies and providers of IT systems to the housing sector to explore ways of raising standards.

38. Residents often highlighted issues with their housing provider in terms of listening. Although necessary, it is not enough to have a technically effective Customer Relationship Management system; it must be accessible to residents.

Recommendation 9: Providers should be required to evidence that they have taken into account customer needs in the design of their customer services (e.g., residents' digital access, any disability that may affect engagement with specific channels).

### **Is there a case for mandatory qualifications for staff in particular roles or career grades?**

39. Whilst studying for professional qualifications could have significant benefits, the case for mandatory qualifications was weaker. Professional qualifications could help the sector attract and retain staff, but it was unclear whether the absence of the knowledge from a professional qualification was a key barrier to the delivery of good service to tenants.
40. There were also significant practical concerns regarding large-scale study for professional qualifications, such as obstructing recruitment and transfer of skills from other sectors and staff time, especially where resources are already constrained by cost and / or recruitment difficulties.
41. If qualifications were to be made mandatory, they could not reasonably be carried out in the employees' own time, which is currently a constraint on staff choosing to study for professional qualifications. Small providers with a limited workforce, or any provider with a small workforce covering a rural area, might find the time commitments required of staff particularly difficult.

Recommendation 10: Professional qualifications should not be made mandatory for tenant-facing staff at this time. To avoid unintended consequences, mandatory professional qualifications for any role should also not be implemented without considering the practical and funding implications for providers.

42. Disadvantages should not rule out mandatory training to a less intensive level than a professional qualification or accreditation. There were gaps found in mental health and safeguarding training outside core services, and some tenant-facing staff reported that essential training was delivered after they needed it for their role. It is possible that these gaps are understated due to sample biases, and whilst generally tenant-facing staff reported that internal training they received was useful and effective, this was not subject to any external monitoring.
43. In many technical sectors, as well as in social care, mandatory minimum training for safety purposes is required prior to working in various roles. There may be an argument for a similar approach in housing, which could sit alongside professional qualifications, rather than a substitute for these.

Recommendation 11: Research and / or consultation should be carried out to outline the minimum basic training which staff should receive before working directly with tenants in core housing roles. Consideration should be given to making this basic training mandatory.

### **Is there an optimum approach in Continual Professional Development for housing management staff?**

44. Providers took a range of approaches to staff development, and that no one approach could be said to be better than another. Offering a career path to staff was key to retention, whilst regular training, including scheduled refresher training, was useful to maintain skills in the workforce. However, organisations were strongly attached to their individual ethos and approach to training and development. Therefore, we would recommend against taking a prescriptive approach to this.
45. However, one area which did vary is the extent to which staff felt listened to by management, and the extent to which management said they were given the opportunity to talk about these types of issues. Some providers seemed overly reliant on annual reviews. Given tenant-facing staff interviewed were clearly aware of their own training needs, this seems an opportunity for improvement.

Recommendation 12: Larger providers should give tenant-facing staff more frequent opportunities to raise their concerns or request training.

## **What impact does the availability of high-quality training have on landlords to recruit and retain high calibre staff?**

46. Experience in the social work sector suggests that there is significant value in recognising the sector as one with professional standards and recognising tenant-facing staff as professionals. Tenant-facing staff said that this would be valued and would assist recruitment and retention in the sector if implemented in a way which did not impose excessive workload or restrict initial recruitment to the sector. It is unlikely that without substantial additional staffing and funding, mandatory professional qualifications could be rolled out to a large proportion of the housing workforce, however, they could be further encouraged.
47. Housing providers often complained that it was difficult or impossible to spend their apprenticeship levy payment, given the offer to the sector. They also felt that the existing Level 3 apprenticeship required too great a time commitment to be widely used for tenant-facing staff at that level. Currently, apprenticeships are available at Level 3 and Level 4. It may be that a degree or Level 6+ non-degree (i.e., professional) apprenticeship at Level 6 or 7 could provide a route to delivering professional qualifications at senior levels in the sector and allow apprenticeship funding to be better used by the sector.

Recommendation 13: Sector bodies should investigate the feasibility of delivering professional qualifications through the medium of apprenticeships and review the existing apprenticeships available with housing providers to ensure they meet their needs. This approach could potentially go together with a co-ordinated drive by sector bodies and large providers to promote the sector to graduates and school leavers. Many interviewees mentioned that they had fallen into the housing sector by chance or through living in social housing and had not thought of it initially. Few mentioned that they had seen it promoted. This will need to change if providing professional qualifications is to have an impact on recruitment, since potential recruits will need to be made aware of the changes for them to be effective in driving recruitment.

## 2. Introduction

48. This chapter introduces the Social Housing Professionalisation Review policy context and outlines the research aims.

### 2.1. Policy context

#### Background

49. In August 2018, the [Social Housing Green Paper: a 'new deal' for social housing](#) was published by the government. The Green Paper was produced in response to the Grenfell Tower Fire in 2017 and followed extensive engagement and consultation with social housing residents across the country. The resulting paper aimed to rebalance the tenant-landlord relationship. The Green Paper highlighted that for some residents, landlord contact left them feeling that they were not being listened to or treated with courtesy and respect. Residents emphasised that they should receive a professional service from the staff who represent their landlord. The Green Paper recognised the importance of staff holding relevant qualifications, but also the importance of inter-personal skills and 'professional behaviours'.

#### White Paper

50. In response to the Green Paper, in November 2020 the government published [The Charter for Social Housing Residents: Social Housing White Paper](#). The Social Housing White Paper (SHWP) committed DLUHC to undertake a review of professional training and development for social housing staff.

51. The [Social Housing White Paper Professionalisation Review](#) was formally launched in January 2022. This aimed to review staff training and qualifications, to improve social housing services and ensure residents' complaints are dealt with effectively. The review was overseen by a Working Group, including resident representatives, Grenfell United, landlord representatives, sector bodies and DLUHC. As part of this, DLUHC commissioned IFF Research to provide the information and insight required by the Working Group for the review.

### 2.2. Research aims

52. Early in the review process the Working Group identified shortcomings in the existing evidence base in relation to the social housing workforce. In particular, they felt there was little evidence on:

- The range and relevance of qualifications held by social housing staff
- Whether the qualifications available to the sector are 'fit for purpose'
- The approaches landlords take to training their housing services workforce.

53. The research aimed to establish a baseline position of the sector's current approach to professional development and training.

54. This includes exploring, for those staff with direct contact with residents:

- The size and composition of the social housing workforce
- The entry level qualifications sought by employers
- The qualifications available to and held by the workforce
- The training programmes offered by landlords as employers
- The steps taken by landlords to equip staff to support residents with mental health needs
- The overall cost to the sector of the current arrangements.

55. The research also aimed to explore the conceptual basis for professionalisation, including:

- The relationship between qualifications and training and the provision of a high-quality service, as perceived by residents
- What factors influence residents' perceptions of professionalism
- The relationship between qualifications, training, staff recruitment and retention, and whether mandatory qualifications have a role to play
- The optimum approach to CPD (Continual Professional Development) for staff

56. The project also sought to investigate:

- The accessibility of training and qualifications, and their sources
- Barriers to take-up of training and qualifications in the sector
- The extent to which existing practices intended to ensure professionalism in the sector are informed by data and evidence
- How the sector's practices intended to promote professionalism compared to those in other sectors
- The sector's view on these issues and ways forward.

57. The research was carried out across England between February and July 2022 by IFF Research, an independent research company. It sits alongside other research carried out for the Social Housing White Paper on behalf of DLUHC. This includes the 'DLUHC Residents Survey' which explored the experiences of social housing tenants.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research elements

58. This research explored a variety of questions around the situation of the social housing workforce who work directly with residents in mid-2022, and the accessibility of training and qualifications for that workforce. It also explored the conceptual basis for professionalisation of the sector. Given the wide-ranging brief for the research, multiple research methods were used to produce the findings. These were:

- A quantitative online survey with 75 social landlords, including local authorities and Private Registered Providers (March to May 2022)
- Case studies with eight social landlords, including qualitative interviews with management, staff, and resident focus groups (May to July 2022)
- A literature review of practices in other sectors (April to June 2022)

### 3.2. Survey of social landlords

59. Social landlords include Private Registered Providers (such as Housing Associations) and, in some areas, Local Authorities. Some Local Authorities delegate management of social housing they own to Arms' Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), which were included in the survey. The survey was completed by the person with responsibility for the training and development of staff within the organisation.

60. At the time the survey sample was compiled in March 2022, there were 1,429 social landlords in England at a group level. Between them, they managed 4.2 million units of social housing. More information about how this estimate was produced can be found in the accompanying Supporting Report.

61. The survey was limited to social landlords likely to have a significant number of staff working directly with residents. This is because the survey focused on HR and training policies, and at organisations with a very small number of staff, these issues would be dealt with on a more case-by-case basis. Therefore, smaller landlords managing fewer than 1,000 units of social housing were excluded. While only 373 landlords manage 1,000 or more units, they manage 4.1 million units of social housing in England (98% of the total). All of these landlords were invited to take part. A total of 73 completed the survey, a response rate of 20%. These landlords managed a total of 1.5 million units, or 35% of all the social housing in England.

62. The data was weighted to ensure results were representative of the social landlords eligible for the survey. This means that results presented in this report from the survey are estimates for all landlords managing more than 1,000 units of social housing.

More information on survey sampling can be found in the accompanying Supporting Report.

63. The survey asked about:

- The profile of the workforce, in service areas where staff would deal directly with residents
- Sub-contracting arrangements for these service areas
- Methods of ensuring professional standards in each service area, and among staff of sub-contractors
- Prevalence of qualifications / certificates
- Minimum requirements for new recruits at entry level
- Training types provided in the last 18 months
- Self-assessed confidence in skills of staff dealing directly with residents
- Sources of training
- Barriers to training
- Spending on training, at a per employee level, and direction of change

64. A full copy of the survey questions can be found in the Supporting Report.

### **3.3. Case studies**

65. Building on the information gathered through the online survey, eight case studies of social landlords were carried out between May and July 2022. These were designed to provide an in-depth view of an individual organisation's approach to professionalisation, including its impact on residents.

66. Case studies were designed to include interviews with landlord management, interviews with staff with direct contact with residents, and a focus group with residents. They were carried out with social landlords who had completed the survey, allowing survey responses to inform the interview questions.

67. Where possible, case studies were carried out face-to-face at the landlord's offices, although some landlords found it more practical to take part via video conferencing.

68. The questions asked focused on the landlord's detailed approach to staff training, qualifications and professionalisation, and on the challenges they encountered in these areas. Decisions relating to staff training and qualifications, and the impact on recruitment and retention, were also covered. Finally, the case studies also focused on opinion on the best ways to improve residents' experience going forward.

69. In one case study, the provider did not permit a resident focus group to be carried out. This case study comprised interviews with management and tenant-facing staff only.



### **3.4. Literature review**

70. As part of this research, a literature review was undertaken of the social work and care professions to understand best practice and lessons that can be applied to the social housing sector. Social work is not dissimilar to the housing sector, being locally led and complex. The literature review explored what developments have taken place within the field of social work and social care to develop the professionalism and skill sets of their workforce.
71. The full review of the professionalisation of the social work sector can be found in the accompanying Supporting Report.

### **3.5. About this report**

72. This report provides an overview of the findings of all elements of the research and draws inferences where useful for the review. Quantitative findings are based on the survey of landlords, except where specified. They are therefore subject to statistical error, as detailed in the next section. Only differences between subgroups which are statistically significant are included in the report text.
73. Qualitative findings, from the case study interviews, reflect the views of participants rather than the researchers or DLUHC, and may not be representative of the sector as a whole. However, they provide context and detail of potential mechanisms and motivations for landlord and resident behaviour, which a quantitative survey cannot provide alone.
74. Direct quotes from case study participants are used throughout this report to illustrate the views shared by residents, tenant-facing staff, and management staff. Where necessary identifiable information has been removed from the quotes to protect participant anonymity.

### **3.6. Data limitations**

75. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Providers were reassured that taking part in the survey and case study was on an anonymous basis and the findings would not be reported in a way that could identify personally identify them. Despite this, and given the sensitive nature of the research topics, it is possible that some providers that were less committed to professionalism or had less robust practices in their workforce may have chosen not to take part.
76. Like all sample surveys, the survey is subject to statistical error, where it is possible the reported survey values are not a true reflection of all housing providers. This effect is particularly pronounced due to the low number of responses (73). In order to make statements about all social housing providers, it must be assumed that those not responding to the survey are similar to those who did not.

77. To reduce this effect, the resulting data was weighted by size category to make the figures produced more representative of all social housing providers. It is estimated that, due to the small base size, figures derived from the survey have an error margin of approximately  $\pm 10\%$ . Results from the survey closer to 0% and 100% have smaller error margins than this.
78. Despite the low response rate, quantitative data is supported by qualitative findings to understand more of the 'how' and 'why' behind the reported figures. This qualitative data is key to fully understanding professionalisation and how it is viewed in the sector.
79. Due to the small sample size, it is rare that differences between sub-groups of social housing provider can be shown. The absence of a difference between groups reported in the findings does not therefore mean a difference does not exist. For more information on error margins and statistical testing, please refer to the accompanying Supporting Report.

## 4. What is a professional service?

### 4.1. Summary

For residents, tenant-facing staff and managers, there was broad consensus that a professional service is important within the sector and a clear shared understanding of what professionalism means. Across the board, a professional housing service was felt to mean that residents were respected and had a positive experience as residents or customers. Typically, this meant that tenant-facing staff have the soft skills to listen to residents and support them, and the practical skills to deal with issues effectively.

Furthermore, professionalism was felt to mean that a high-quality service is delivered consistently. This had to be underpinned by effective processes and systems, and driven by a shared organisational culture which at root prioritises being a good landlord. Overall, this broad consensus of what professionalism meant in the social housing sector should help in setting standards that will meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

### 4.2. Views from residents

80. Residents described a professional housing service as having two core elements: residents are treated well; and services are delivered consistently to a high standard. Each element is outlined in detail below.

#### **What a professional service means to residents: residents are treated well**

81. Most commonly, a professional service was perceived by residents as a service where they are treated well in interactions with staff. Respondents repeatedly described a professional service as needing staff who showed characteristics of being polite, respectful, kind, empathetic, and caring to residents.

82. Residents felt that the key elements of this respectful treatment were:

- Feeling listened to and heard, which would help to build a trusting and effective working relationship.
- Feeling that staff understood the impact of their actions, for example how a broken paving slab would affect someone with mobility issues, or a broken door would affect security.
- Staff making allowances for individual residents' needs, such as alerting repairs staff if residents were disabled, or offering face-to-face meetings where required.

- Decisions being communicated transparently, with staff being honest and open about what could or could not be done to resolve their issues.

### **What a professional service means to residents: consistent, quality services delivered**

83. The other important element of a professional service for residents was needing services to be delivered consistently to a high quality. Residents felt this required:

- All services to be delivered with attention to detail, consistently across the team and no matter who the resident is.
- Effective communication between the landlord staff and any contractors or sub-contractors to ensure issues were resolved efficiently and met resident needs.
- Knowledgeable tenant-facing staff, with the skills and authority to follow a service request through to its completion.

### **Influences on residents' perceptions of a professional service**

84. Residents' perceptions of professionalism were influenced by several key factors: the channel of communication, the perceived motivation of staff, and the time staff had to help.

85. It was important to residents that they were able to communicate with tenant-facing staff through various channels. During the COVID-19 pandemic, communication had largely been online or over the phone to keep services running. However, some residents felt that reliance on technology was a barrier for them raising and resolving their issues. Many residents valued, and were hoping for a return to, meeting face-to-face with tenant-facing staff, where they felt they could have the time and space to resolve issues. One resident described a particularly successful interaction with tenant-facing staff:

“They asked if [we] preferred to meet inside the home or outside the home. And what time would be best... They weren't in a hurry, no clipboards or anything. They made the time to sit... and made [us] feel really comfortable.”

Resident, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

86. Residents felt that landlords should provide a range of appropriate range of channels through which they can make contact, often including face-to-face meetings.

87. Some residents felt staff were often under time pressure, and this affected the quality of the service. There were some examples given where this did not happen, for example repairs were left half-finished and messy, or residents were not kept up to date throughout their repair request.

88. Residents' perceptions were influenced by how they understood their relationship with their home and their housing provider. All residents stressed the importance of a high standard of professional service from their housing provider, but these were set due to different reasons. Some residents described their relationship with their housing provider as being a customer - they were paying for a service or their rent was paying staff wages and therefore expected good customer service.

“Professionalism is that you care about your customer, and you want to give them the best service”.

Resident, Rural LA

89. Other residents described their relationship as equal to a private renter or homeowner. These residents described their house as their own property, something they were proud of and cared for, and expected high quality services from their landlord to match their own standards.

“I expect tradesmen to do the same job as they do for private dwellings...don't treat the council jobs as secondary.”

Resident, Urban LA

### 4.3. Views from tenant-facing staff

90. For tenant-facing staff, delivering a professional service was understood as having two core elements:

- Staff needed to have certain knowledge, behaviours, and characteristics to respond well to residents.
- The team needed systems and resources to deliver a consistent quality service.

#### **What a professional service means to tenant-facing staff: staff knowledge and characteristics**

91. Tenant-facing staff often described a professional service in terms of the behaviours, characteristics, and knowledge of the staff. Many of the characteristics they mentioned aligned with the expectations of the residents, with staff recognising that they needed to be patient, respectful, empathetic, and caring to residents to deliver a professional service. The key behaviours cited by tenant-facing staff were:

- Resilience
- Calm in conflict
- Passionate about helping people

- Accountable
- Take ownership of their own work
- Ability to draw boundaries
- Ability to balance residents' requests with the provider's remit
- Managing expectations.

92. Tenant-facing staff also described how staff needed to have specialist knowledge on areas such as housing legislation and regulations, GDPR regulations, safeguarding practices, and domestic abuse support.

93. Tenant-facing staff also felt that it was important that learning was ongoing and knowledge was kept up to date, particularly on changing laws and policies.

### **What a professional service means to tenant-facing staff: consistent, effective systems and processes**

94. For tenant-facing staff, a key part of delivering a professional service was having effective systems and processes in place. This included:

- Clear processes to follow for particular issues
- Transparency regarding the remit of the service and technological systems

95. While many housing providers had online customer portals, interviewees did not always find them easy to use, or were not confident in using them. There were a couple of providers who still relied heavily on non-digital methods. For example, a staff member described having to do administrative tasks on paper, so when visiting a resident they would have to call back to the office to dictate their notes, rather than recording the notes during the visit on a portable electronic device. Several tenant-facing staff particularly valued the opportunity of face-to-face meetings as this enabled them to form a connection with residents and offer better, more holistic support.

96. Tenant-facing staff also often emphasised that they needed the time and resource to be able to do their job well. By having sufficient time ring-fenced for supporting residents, staff could give the residents the time and care required, as well as engage in active problem-solving including keeping residents up to date.

97. Lastly, tenant-facing staff described the importance of good communication internally and externally for delivering a professional service. Staff described the importance of effective communication with other teams within their own organisation and external stakeholders, such as social services and the police, in order to join up information and support.

#### 4.4. Views from management

98. For management-level staff, delivering a professional service was understood in terms of residents receiving a positive customer service experience. This was felt to be made possible by the knowledge and characteristics of tenant-facing staff and supported by having effective procedures and systems in place. Overall, management-level staff recognised a professional service was driven by the culture of the organisation.

##### **What a professional service means to management staff: a good experience for residents**

99. Management-level staff tended to define a professional service by the quality of the resident experience. A good resident experience meant they had a safe home, were supported, and felt the service was fair, delivered consistently and on time. Managers described their service fundamentally as providing homes where people are safe.

100. In addition, many managers described the importance of the additional support delivered as part of a professional social housing service. Managers described this support as “customer-centred” or a “tailored service”, where the residents should leave feeling satisfied with their experience.

“It's why we're here. Its why residents pay their rent. It's not just about having a roof over their heads. They need to know that if something goes wrong, they can reach out and talk to somebody about it.”

Management, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

##### **What a professional service means to management staff: staff knowledge and characteristics**

101. Managers often championed the importance of staff knowledge and staff personal attributes in providing a professional service to residents. Both technical and soft skills were felt to be important. It was, however, noticeable that manager-level staff valued technical skills and knowledge more than tenant-facing staff and residents.

102. In addition, managers stressed that tenant-facing staff needed to be confident and assertive, characteristics that were not so clearly highlighted by other groups.

##### **What a professional service means to management staff: consistent, quality systems and organisational culture**

103. For managers, the final important element of a professional service was that it delivers consistently and to a high quality. Managers reported that a professional service must be underpinned by clear and effective procedures, policies, and systems. This provides the foundations from which to support staff in dealing with

cases, bring structure to the service, and ensure consistency in delivery. Standards should also be transparent so that expectations were clear between staff delivering the service and customers.

104. Lastly, managers recognised that the culture of their organisation drives the professionalism of the service. There must be an organisation-wide ethos of being a good social landlord and working towards achieving agreed outcomes.

#### **4.5. Professionalism across the social care and social work sectors**

105. There are some similarities between the definitions of professionalism described above and definitions in the social work and social care sectors. The social work and social care professions are built on a detailed understanding of the needs of individuals, and a quality service is measured by the successful experiences of the service user.

106. The differences between the social housing sector and social care sector were that in social housing:

- Qualifications are not required for entry into the sector and are rarely seen as a measure of professionalism.
- Learning is largely done on the job.
- Core staff skills and behaviours are key to delivering a professional service.
- Knowledge, skills, and behaviour frameworks are less frequent than other professions (such as social work), and when they are in place, they are developed locally by the housing provider. As a result, definitions of professionalism can be vague, and remits can be opaque.

107. The literature review of professionalism in the social care and social work sectors can be found in full in the Supporting Report.



## 5. Who delivers the service?

### 5.1. Summary

The social housing sector in England consists of over 1,400 geographically spread-out registered providers of social housing. Around 4 in 5 providers are non-profit Private Registered Providers (PRP), principally Housing Associations. In some localities, Local Authorities continue to be the main providers of social housing.

Across the sector, over four million homes are managed by social housing providers. The largest provider manages just under 100,000 homes. However, the vast majority of registered providers are small organisations that manage less than 15,000 homes.

There are estimated to be about 100,800 tenant-facing staff working in the sector across various service areas. For a typical provider, just under two thirds (63%) of direct employees were tenant-facing staff. The largest service area in terms of employees in tenant-facing roles is Estate Services, even though there is also significant sub-contracting in this area.

### 5.2. Profile of social housing providers

101. Table 5.1 shows the number of registered providers in England according to the 2021 Statistical Data Return (SDR) and Local Authority Data Return (LADR), updated using registration and deregistration information published by the Housing Regulator. The housing sector in England, as of March 2022, consisted of an estimated 1,428 providers.

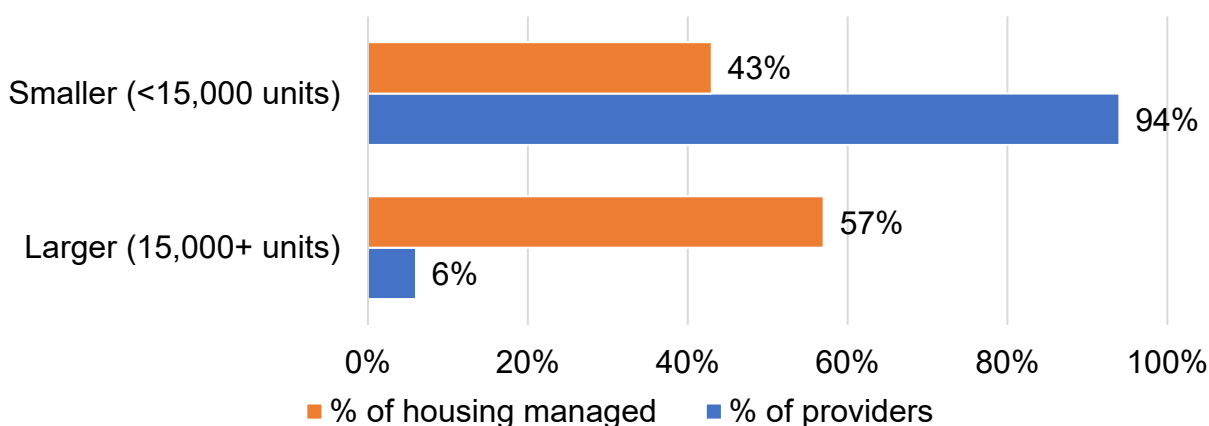
102. These providers vary in size and resources, with a few operating nationally whilst most operate regionally or locally. The majority of providers (79%) are non-profit PRPs, followed by 15% of Local Authority providers. A small proportion of providers are for-profit PRPs (4%) or Arms' Length Management Organisations (ALMO) (2%).

**Table 5.1 The number and profile of providers**

Type	Number	Percent
Private Registered Provider (PRP) (non-profit)	1,124	79%
Private Registered Provider (PRP) (for profit)	63	4%
Local Authority	216	15%
Arms' Length Management Organisation (ALMO)	25	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,428</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources: SDR (2021), LADR (2021), Housing Regulator (2022), National Federation of ALMOs (2022). Data combined and processed by IFF Research (2022).

103. Figure 5.1 highlights the number of managed housing units amongst smaller and larger providers. Across the sector, a total of an estimated 4,187,000 homes are managed by social housing providers. The largest provider manages just under 100,000 homes. The vast majority (94%) are small organisations that manage less than 15,000 homes, although together they manage less than half (43%) of the housing in the sector. More than a fifth (22%) are not currently managing any homes. Many of these organisations own homes which they do not manage themselves. A small group of providers (4%) have subsidiaries that manage a proportion of homes. The remaining 6% of providers are larger, managing at least 15,000 homes. Together these providers manage 57% of the housing in the sector.

**Figure 5.1 Percentage of providers who manage smaller and larger quantities of housing, and the percentage of social housing managed by them**

Sources: SDR (2021), LADR (2021), Housing Regulator (2022), National Federation of ALMOs (2022). Data combined and processed by IFF Research (2022).

### 5.3. Number and profile of tenant-facing staff

104. The estimated number of people employed in social housing is shown in Table 5.2. The ONS [Business Register and Employment Survey](#) shows that there are approximately 117,000 people employed in the “Renting and Operating of Housing Association Real Estate” sector in England (including ALMOs), of whom most (96,000) are direct employees. The remaining 21,000 are self-employed or directors.
105. However, this figure of 117,000 does not include those working in Local Authority housing services. In the ONS statistics, those working in Local Authority housing services are not separately counted to other Local Authority employees. There will also be large numbers of staff who do not work only in housing but across a range of Local Authority services.
106. An allowance has been made for these staff by making the assumption that Local Authorities employ about the same number of direct staff per dwelling managed as Housing Associations and ALMOs. It is assumed that most of the equivalents of the self-employed or director roles in Local Authorities would not be housing specific. This accounts for another 43,000 staff in England, given that they manage 31% of the social housing stock. Therefore, the total number of staff (including back-office roles) at social landlords is estimated at about 160,000 in England.
107. The survey conducted for this research allows this estimate to be built upon to produce estimates of the number of tenant-facing staff with direct interaction with residents. Weighted data from the survey shows that at the typical provider, nearly two thirds (63%) of direct employees were tenant-facing staff.

**Table 5.2 Estimated employment in social housing**

Type	Estimated employment
Private Registered Providers and ALMOs	117,000
Local Authority	43,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>160,000</b>
Of which tenant-facing staff	100,800 (63%)

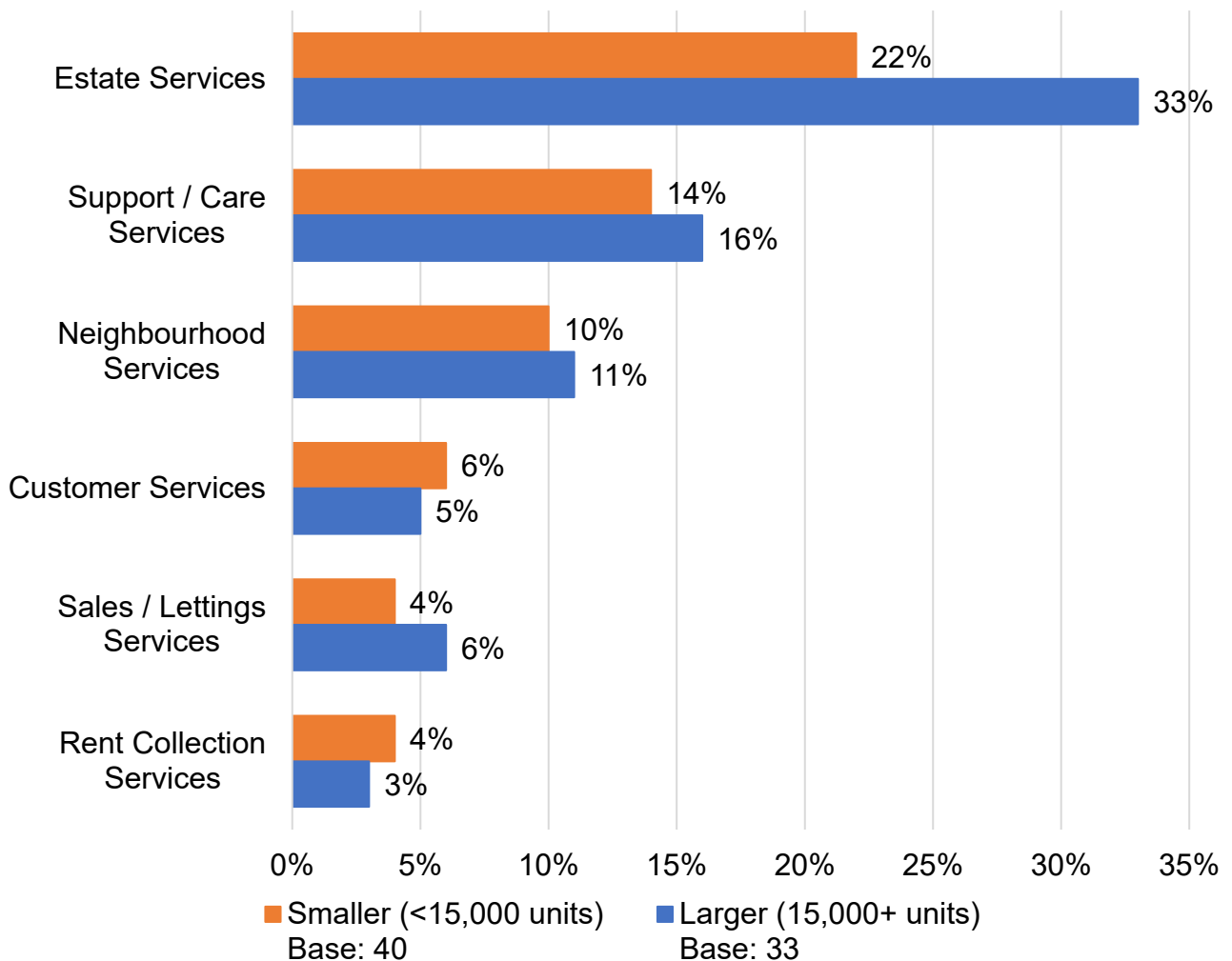
Sources: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey (2020), SDR (2021), LADR (2021), Housing Regulator (2022), National Federation of ALMOs (2022). Data combined and processed by IFF Research (2022).

108. When considering the breakdown of tenant-facing staff in terms of the percentage of all employees of a provider, 24% are tenant-facing staff in Estate Services. This is despite 63% of providers sub-contracting some part of their Estate Services. Figures therefore exclude a substantial number of sub-contractors. Elsewhere, 14% are tenant-facing staff in Support / Care services, 11% are tenant-facing staff in

Neighbourhood Services, 6% are tenant-facing staff in Customer Services, and 4% each are tenant-facing staff in Sales/Lettings Services or Rent Collection Services.

109. Figure 5.3 shows the average percentage of all employees in tenant-facing roles by service area amongst smaller and larger providers. In both smaller and larger providers, the service area with the largest percentage of tenant-facing staff is Estate Services (33% of staff at larger providers and 22% of staff at smaller providers). For smaller providers, the services with the smallest percentage of staff were Sales / Lettings and Rent Collection Services (4% in each service). Rent Collection was also the service with the smallest percentage of staff for larger providers (3%). The survey showed that there is no statistically significant difference in the average percentage of employees across service when comparing smaller and larger providers.

**Figure 5.2 Percentage of staff in the organisation who are tenant-facing staff in each service, by size (in total, 60% for smaller landlords, and 73% for larger landlords)**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review Survey.

## 6. Where is the sector now?

### 6.1. Summary

Providers demonstrated a high level of commitment towards ensuring a professional service is delivered to residents, yet some providers struggled to implement this.

Qualifications were not required by most providers for tenant-facing staff, at the point of entry. Providers often prioritised attitudes and personal qualities when recruiting.

Most providers interviewed experienced at least some difficulty in recruiting tenant-facing staff, particularly for specialist roles. Larger, well-known providers, as well as those in cities, reported less difficulty.

Most social housing providers offered their tenant-facing staff training in a wide range of areas. Training was less widespread in community engagement or stakeholder engagement, and not universal in ‘treating tenants with dignity or respect’.

On average, around £200 per employee was spent on skills related to working with residents, out of an average overall learning and development budget of £400.

### 6.2. Commitment to professionalism

110. Among providers who participated in this research, there was a high level of commitment towards ensuring a professional service is delivered to residents. Some providers explicitly stated they were working to implement the recommendations from the Social Housing White Paper, while others were reviewing their approach to training and qualifications more generally.

111. Due to the limitations outlined in section 3.6, organisations that were less committed to professionalism in their workforce might be less likely to take part in the research.

### 6.3. Recruiting staff

112. Recruitment of tenant-facing staff was generally guided by role profiles, with specified skills, knowledge, and experience for each role. Candidates’ attitudes were also important and assessed at the interview.

113. Providers felt it was important to achieve a balance between recruiting staff with the relevant job-specific experience or housing sector background, as well as their

attitudes and personal qualities – and often this balance was weighted in favour of attitudes and personal qualities. Qualifications were not required by most providers for tenant-facing staff at the point of entry.

“We need people who like people. People who enjoy spending time with people. We need problem solvers. People who are curious and tenacious, and people who understand that we are here for the residents. The organisation exists to provide housing, not for employment. The reason we get paid is because people live in our homes.”

Management, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

### **Assessing candidates’ attitude in recruitment**

114. Providers used a mix of formal and informal methods to assess candidates’ attitudes. Many managers felt they could assess this using the ‘sense’ or ‘feeling’ they got from candidates in interview and were clear on what qualities they were looking for. Providers described the attitudes and personal qualities they looked for during recruitment using words such as integrity, honesty, friendly, supportive, empathetic, flexible, and assertive. They also valued an ability to take ownership of issues.
115. Some providers had taken more formal approaches to assessing candidates’ attitudes and personal qualities, for example using psychometric testing and situation-based competency questions. A few also included group assessments and had used teamworking exercises to assess interpersonal skills.
116. Providers felt that gaps in technical knowledge or prior experience could be filled through on-the-job training for most junior roles.

### **Role of qualifications in recruiting tenant-facing staff**

117. At the time of the research (May to June 2022), most providers interviewed were of the view that qualifications were not essential for entry-level customer-facing roles. For entry-level roles, the onboarding and induction processes, as well as training, were felt to be more important in ensuring candidates develop and can demonstrate the expected skills and competencies to provide an excellent customer-service.
118. Providers acknowledged that professional qualifications were important to some extent for more specialised roles, as well as roles with a level of seniority, for example a service improvement manager. Despite this, there was still the sense expressed by case study interviewees that, even for specialised and senior roles, individuals could be trained within the organisation to acquire the skills, experience, and competencies without having the need to complete a specific qualification. One provider said they would be willing to recruit a candidate on the basis that they would work towards a

professional qualification within a certain period once they had started their employment.

119. In some cases, focusing on qualifications in recruitment was seen as old-fashioned. For example, one mid-sized Private Registered Provider said that at a strategic level they were gradually moving away from using professional qualifications as a criterion for recruitment, and towards a focus on attitudes and competencies. This was with the view towards aiming for a better cultural fit with the organisation's values to ensure service expectations could be delivered well.
120. Across all of the service areas that they were asked to consider, providers were most likely to seek technical skills relevant to the role, as shown in Table 6.1. Employers frequently sought professional qualifications or accreditations, for example in Rent Collection (25%), Estate services (20%), or Neighbourhood services (14%). In some other sectors, customer service qualifications or certificates were more important, for example in Customer services (11%), or Rent Collection (10%). Safeguarding qualifications or certificates were more rarely sought in recruitment, and mental health qualifications or certificates almost never.

**Table 6.1 Qualifications or certificates sought at recruitment (column percentages)**

Type	Customer services	Estate services	Neighbourhood services	Sales / Lettings services	Support / Care services	Rent Collection services
<i>Base size</i>	37	41	41	36	36	27
Technical skills	46%	87%	58%	66%	56%	46%
Professional Qualification or Accreditation	7%	20%	14%	9%	1%	25%
Customer service	11%	5%	8%	8%	5%	10%
Safeguarding	7%	10%	0%	4%	2%	0%
Mental health	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%
None of the above	32%	8%	33%	23%	29%	24%
Don't know	14%	0%	6%	4%	13%	11%

Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.



121. Providers were asked to state the type and level of qualification they would seek for each service area they were asked to consider. The number of service areas asked about in each survey was capped at three, so not every provider was asked this for every service area. While the resulting base sizes were too low (10 or fewer providers were asked the question for each service area) to report on separately for each service area, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) qualifications or certificates were the most commonly mentioned.

122. Providers who reported that they do not seek qualifications or certificates other than in technical or academic skills when recruiting for entry-level staff were asked why they took this approach. The most common reasons were that additional training is provided where needed or required, it is not relevant for the level of the job role, or they prefer to recruit based on personal attributes. Other reasons provided for not seeking qualifications or certificates across the service areas included:

- Induction training being provided for all staff
- Preferring to assess skills or competency as part of the recruitment process
- Preferring to recruit based on work experience
- Seeking a wider or more diverse range of applicants.

123. Table 6.2 shows the proportion of providers who gave each response in relation to why they did not seek qualifications or certificates (other than in technical or academic skills) for each of the service areas.

**Table 6.2 Reasons for not seeking qualifications or certificates at recruitment (column percentages)**

Type	Customer services	Estate services	Neighbourhood services	Sales / Lettings services	Support / Care services	Rent Collection
<i>Base size</i>	28	34	33	26	28	22
Induction training is provided for all staff	16%	13%	11%	11%	24%	2%
Additional training is provided where needed / required	37%	74%	73%	70%	51%	65%
Not relevant for level of job role	25%	23%	12%	15%	10%	26%
Prefer to assess skills / competency	9%	11%	7%	17%	19%	14%
Prefer to recruit based on personal attributes	35%	20%	22%	37%	43%	63%
Prefer to recruit based on work experience	19%	3%	13%	22%	27%	10%
To ensure a wider / more diverse range of applicants	15%	13%	16%	19%	5%	21%
Other	0%	13%	9%	0%	2%	2%
Don't know	17%	12%	13%	7%	12%	7%

Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

## Providers' experiences in recruiting skilled tenant-facing staff

124. Most providers interviewed experienced at least some difficulty in recruiting skilled tenant-facing staff, particularly for more specialised roles. As one provider reflected, roles such as neighbourhood officer or housing patch manager require several skills. A knowledge of housing law and external support service is typically required. Alongside this, a high level of interpersonal skills is needed to effectively support customers who may have a range of support needs. This may include issues such as substance addiction, mental health issues, or ongoing domestic abuse.
125. Larger, well-known providers, as well as those in cities, reported less difficulty with recruiting tenant-facing staff. Some attributed this to having access to a wider talent pool across a broad geographic area.
126. Local Authorities reported that they faced particular barriers due to fixed pay scales. One reflected that the salaries they were able to offer were not very competitive. They believed roles were perceived as being demanding relative to the level of pay.
127. Among providers who had struggled to recruit tenant-facing staff, they felt that looking for relevant housing sector experience or qualifications was unrealistic. There had been a shift toward recruiting candidates based on their attitudes and personal skills and any transferable skills gained from other customer service work:

“People have transferable skills. They may have worked in McDonalds, but it is still customer service at the end of the day. If they come to interview and speak about customer service – give them a chance.”

Management, Urban Local Authority

128. For more specialist roles, providers often had a strategy of recruiting internally and providing training in the competencies required. This sometimes involved using apprenticeships and training as a way to develop entry-level staff through the course of their employment to move onto more specialist roles. One such provider, however, felt that there was a disadvantage to relying on long internal training pathways, in the sense that staff may become ‘institutionalised’ due to limited external influences being brought into the organisation.

## 6.4. Training delivery

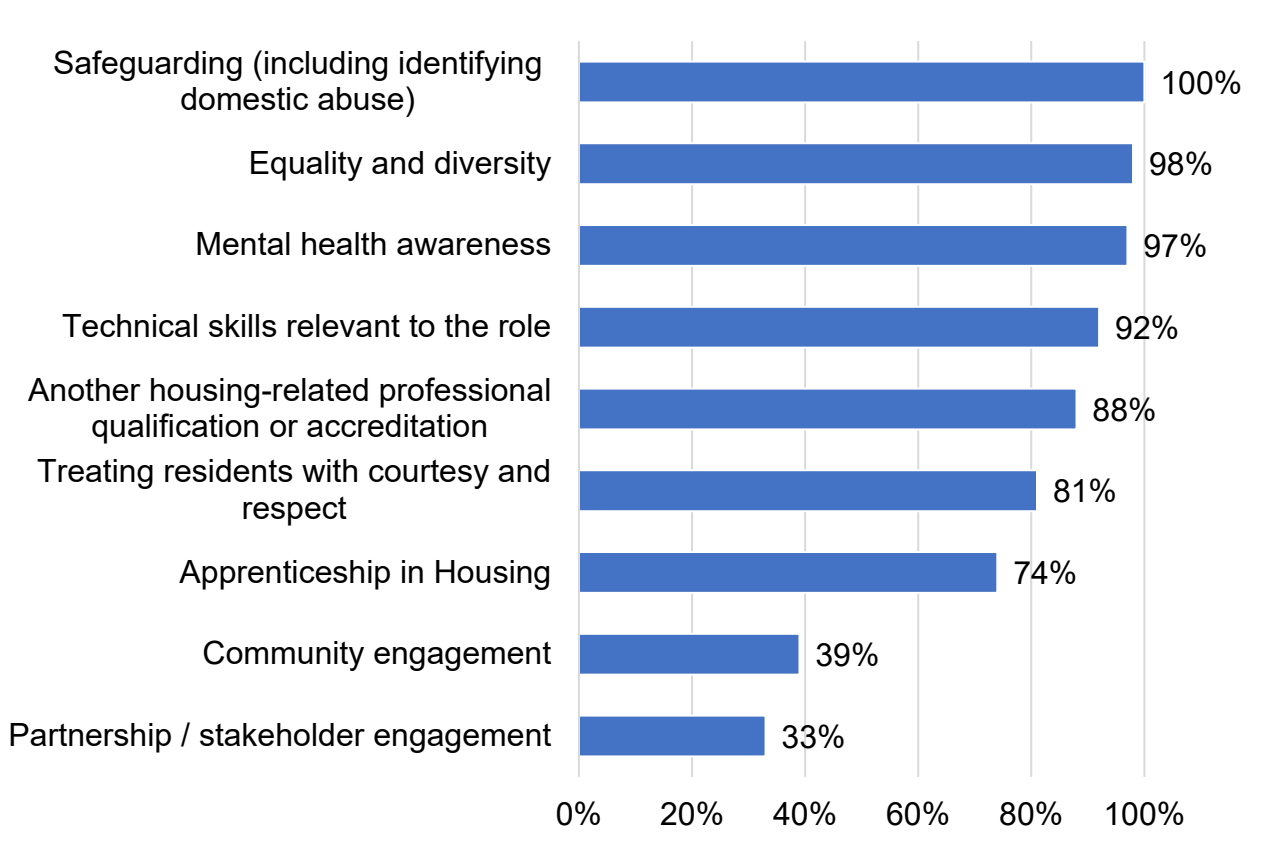
129. The survey showed that most social housing providers offered their tenant-facing staff training in a range of areas over the past 18 months, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. All providers delivered at least some training in safeguarding, although it is important to note that this does not mean all staff received it. In addition, nearly all provided training on the following topics:

- Equality and diversity (98%)
- Mental health awareness (97%)
- Technical skills related to the role (92%)
- Treating residents with courtesy and respect (81%).

130. The provision of professional qualifications was also widespread, with 74% of providers providing an Apprenticeship in Housing, and 88% offering another housing-related professional qualification or accreditation.

131. Training in community engagement and partnership or stakeholder engagement was less common, with 39% and 33% of providers offering these respectively.

**Figure 6.1 Percentage of providers delivering training of each type to tenant-facing staff in the last 18 months**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base size: 73

132. However, training was not equally available to staff in each service area. Table 6.3 shows the proportion of providers making each type of training available to tenant-facing staff in each service area. In general, availability of training was evenly spread across service areas. The exceptions to this were community engagement training, and partnership or stakeholder engagement training, which were both strongly focused on neighbourhood services.

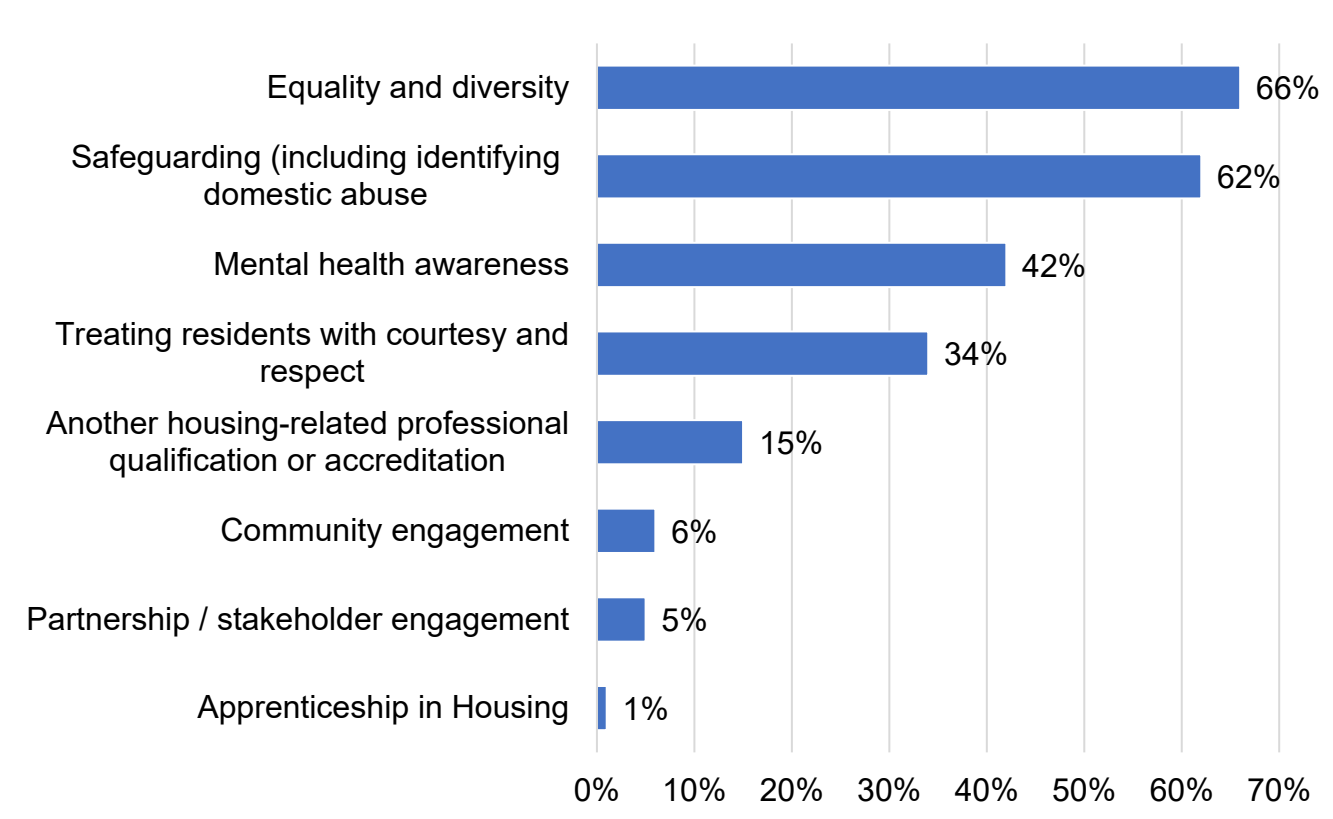
**Table 6.3 Availability of training in service areas (column percentages)**

Type	Customer services	Estate services	Neighbourhood services	Sales / Lettings services	Care / Support services	Rent service	Collection
<i>Base size</i>	37	41	41	36	36	27	
Safeguarding (including identifying Domestic Abuse)	99%	98%	100%	95%	100%	100%	
Equality and diversity	100%	94%	95%	98%	94%	100%	
Mental health awareness	93%	90%	94%	94%	96%	98%	
Housing-related professional qualification or accreditation (except apprenticeships)	65%	71%	73%	70%	78%	82%	
Treating tenants with courtesy and respect	67%	76%	78%	62%	84%	62%	
Apprenticeship in Housing	43%	37%	64%	57%	48%	53%	
Community engagement	19%	32%	42%	28%	24%	43%	
Partnership or stakeholder engagement	10%	25%	35%	15%	19%	28%	

Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

133. While training was widely available, the proportion of tenant-facing staff receiving different types of training differed quite widely. Survey respondents were asked what percentage of tenant-facing staff were provided training in different areas in the last 18 months. As shown in Figure 6.2, while around two-thirds received training in equality and diversity (66%) or safeguarding (62%), only a minority received mental health awareness training (42%). A training reach of about 50% in the last 18 months implies that the average staff member receives training every three to four years.

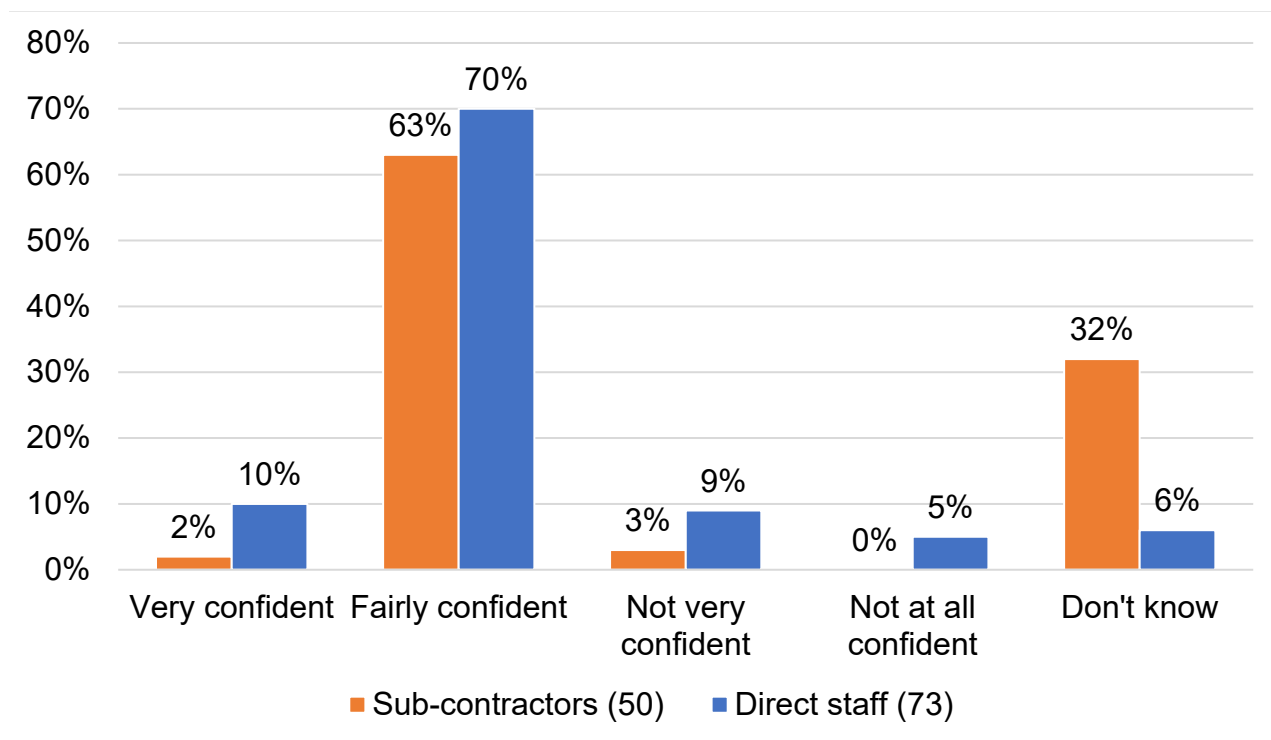
**Figure 6.2 Proportion of tenant-facing staff provided with different types of training in the last 18 months**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base size: 57 (all able to specify numbers of staff on training)

134. As shown in Figure 6.3, most (80%) social housing providers were very (10%) or fairly (70%) confident their approach was equipping their own staff to work effectively with residents. A minority (14%) were not very or not at all confident. In contrast, providers were less confident about the training delivered to sub-contracted staff though still more likely to be confident than not (65% were very or fairly confident, and 3% were not confident). However, results suggest that social housing providers had difficulty assessing the training of their sub-contractors since a third (32%) responded that they did not know if they were confident their sub-contractors were equipping staff to work effectively with residents.

**Figure 6.3 Management confidence in approach to ensuring staff have the skills required to provide a professional service, for sub-contractor staff and direct staff**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

135. Overall, social housing providers tended to be quite reliant on external providers for the delivery of training. All providers surveyed used external providers to some extent. A quarter (25%) delivered most (23%) or all (2%) of their training through external providers, while around half (52%) said training was delivered by a roughly even mix of internal and external trainers. A quarter (24%) of providers said most of their training was delivered by internal trainers.

136. Social housing providers tended to rely on external trainers, with 91% providing training from this source. Within this category, consultancies were the most popular (used by 51% of landlords), followed by further education colleges (44%), charities (41%) and regulatory bodies (39%). Around a third also used other non-profit organisations and universities/higher education providers (35% and 34% respectively).

### 6.5. Qualifications and certificates

137. In the survey, social housing providers were asked if their tenant-facing staff had qualifications or certificates that covered customer service, mental health awareness, safeguarding, stakeholder engagement and community engagement.

138. The results, broken down by different service areas, are detailed in Table 6.4. They show that while mental health awareness qualifications and certificates are widespread, they are not universal. Most organisations had at least some Neighbourhood services staff with a qualification or certificate covering mental health awareness. There were similar levels of coverage in Care / Support services (91%), Sales / Lettings services (89%) and Customer services (87%). However, the levels were lower for Estate services staff (79%) and Rent Collection staff (71%).
139. Qualifications and certificates in safeguarding were also widespread. Nearly all providers had Care / Support services staff (95%) or Neighbourhood services staff (93%) with a qualification or certificate covering safeguarding. However, levels were much lower for staff in Customer services (71%) and Rent Collection (72%).
140. Customer services qualifications and certificates were found in each service other than Rent Collection at between 60% and 70% of landlords.
141. The survey showed qualifications and certificates in stakeholder engagement and community engagement were much less widespread. Across the service areas, between 24% and 51% of providers had staff with qualifications in stakeholder engagement. In only between 30% and 36% of organisations did any staff in each service have a qualification in community engagement, other than in Neighbourhood services (66%).



**Table 6.4 Percentage of providers where any tenant-facing staff have qualifications of the following types, by service area (row percentages)**

<b>Service Area</b>	<i>Base size</i>	<b>Mental Health Awareness</b>	<b>Health Safeguarding</b>	<b>Customer service</b>	<b>Community Engagement</b>	<b>Stakeholder Engagement</b>
Customer services	37	87%	71%	69%	30%	24%
Estate services	41	79%	82%	64%	33%	42%
Neighbourhood services	41	93%	93%	68%	66%	51%
Sales / Lettings services	36	89%	87%	60%	36%	26%
Support / Care services	36	91%	95%	61%	34%	43%
Rent Collection	36	71%	72%	57%	33%	36%

Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

## 6.6 Monitoring staff

142. Both the survey and the case studies showed that social landlords had monitoring processes in place to ensure that residents are receiving a professional service. The survey showed that the most common methods were monitoring of resident complaints and resident satisfaction surveys.
143. As shown in Table 6.5, at least three-quarters of providers said they used resident complaints in each service area, and at least 60% used resident satisfaction surveys in each service area. The case study findings were also in line with this – nearly all mentioned the use of monitoring resident surveys and complaints.
144. Another common method of monitoring staff skills was implementing a programme of training for staff, going beyond the technical skills required for the job. Providers surveyed used this method frequently. In all service areas except Rent Collection, over 75% used a planned programme of training of this type.

**Table 6.5 Percentage of providers using each method of ensuring professional standards, by service area (row percentages)**

<b>Service Area</b>	<i>Base size</i>	<b>Resident satisfaction surveys</b>	<b>Responding to resident complaints</b>	<b>Planned training programmes</b>	<b>Mandatory qualifications</b>	<b>Other resident engagement</b>	<b>Mentoring or other management methods</b>
Customer services	37	70%	80%	80%	66%	58%	74%
Estate services	41	84%	78%	80%	73%	73%	67%
Neighbourhood services	41	99%	94%	87%	46%	89%	82%
Sales / Lettings services	36	69%	84%	82%	57%	69%	90%
Support / Care services	36	83%	85%	78%	30%	74%	81%
Rent Collection services	36	61%	83%	83%	49%	48%	77%

Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

145. Interviewees in the case studies highlighted how results on service performance from resident satisfaction surveys would be analysed and compiled into annual published reports. However, some reflected that such a method would provide delayed feedback as results would likely be published long after an incident had taken place.
146. Therefore, some of the Housing Associations were introducing new immediate feedback systems based around live scoring of interactions immediately after they were completed, reflecting their intention to be more responsive to residents.
147. In contrast, there was variation in the ability of social housing providers to monitor the performance of sub-contracted staff. Sub-contractors tended to be included in monitoring arrangements at many (although not all) providers. However, there is less ability to take action in response to the feedback. Management staff sometimes mentioned having little influence over the training of sub-contracted staff, although complaints would typically have an impact on re-procurement.

## **6.6. Supporting staff**

148. Besides directly monitoring performance, providers often also monitored staff stress levels and offered a variety of support options. This was especially important when tenant-facing staff encountered difficult situations with residents. The support mentioned in interviews included external counselling services, wellbeing services, and resources on the staff intranet. Some also had a mental health first aider programme, where certain members of staff received specialised training to support their colleagues. Less common methods included joining an industry-wide mentoring scheme and organising staff forums to discuss the challenges they face.
149. The tenant-facing staff who were interviewed were well-informed of the support options available to them, but also emphasised the importance of the informal support available. They often learnt on the knowledge and experience of other colleagues around them in the workplace, and this support was also available following a distressing situation.

## **6.7. Listening to residents and staff**

150. Providers usually had channels for gathering feedback from residents, such as through surveys or complaints systems. In some organisations, learning and development teams were heavily involved in collecting feedback from staff and residents, while in others they were not. Some did not see how resident feedback could be used to influence training, while others made a very direct connection between that feedback and training delivered to tenant-facing staff. This was especially the case where instant feedback systems were in use.

151. The use of resident focus groups or tenant panels was also seen as a key mechanism for receiving feedback. This method also received positive feedback from residents in the focus groups, who felt that this allowed landlords to be more responsive. However, not all residents were aware of this channel to provide feedback, highlighting potential issues with ensuring representative and widespread participation.

152. On the whole, however, residents had mixed feelings about whether they were listened to. When they did not feel listened to, some felt the problem was with management-level rather than the tenant-facing staff.

“My personal feeling is the higher up the ladder you’re dealing with, the less they engage with us.”

Resident, Unitary LA

153. Providers interviewed also had a range of channels to gather feedback from staff, the most popular being regular staff satisfaction surveys. However, while this proactive approach was widespread, it was not universal. Some providers remained reliant on annual line manager reviews, and staff interviewed did not always feel listened to in these organisations.

## 6.8. Decision-making and spending

154. Figure 6.4. shows the amount that social housing providers spent each year on training their tenant-facing staff in skills related to working with residents ranged from less than £50 to just under £750 per employee. On average, around £200 per employee was spent on skills related to working with residents, out of an average overall learning and development budget of £400.

155. However, a quarter of providers spent less than £50 (24%) per employee on training in skills related to working with residents, and a third (35%) spent less than £100. Most of these providers spending very small amounts (54%) were Local Authorities, even though Local Authorities make up only a small percentage of providers.

**Figure 6.4 Training budget for tenant-facing staff (per employee per annum), overall and in skills related to working with residents**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base: 73

## 7. What are the barriers to delivering a professional service?

### 7.1. Summary

Time constraints were the main barrier to providing more training to tenant-facing staff, followed by the cost of training. Management and tenant-facing staff also highlighted the effect of high workloads on staff ability to train. A lack of staff willingness to train and the limited role of professional qualifications in the sector were identified less often as barriers to training.

Partly as a result of workload pressures, staff were in practice often expected to carry out some types of training in their own unpaid time outside work, for example at weekends. This applied particularly to professional qualifications due to their optional nature. Staff were often willing to do this if they saw the qualification as worthwhile, but this might be a problem should such qualifications become mandatory.

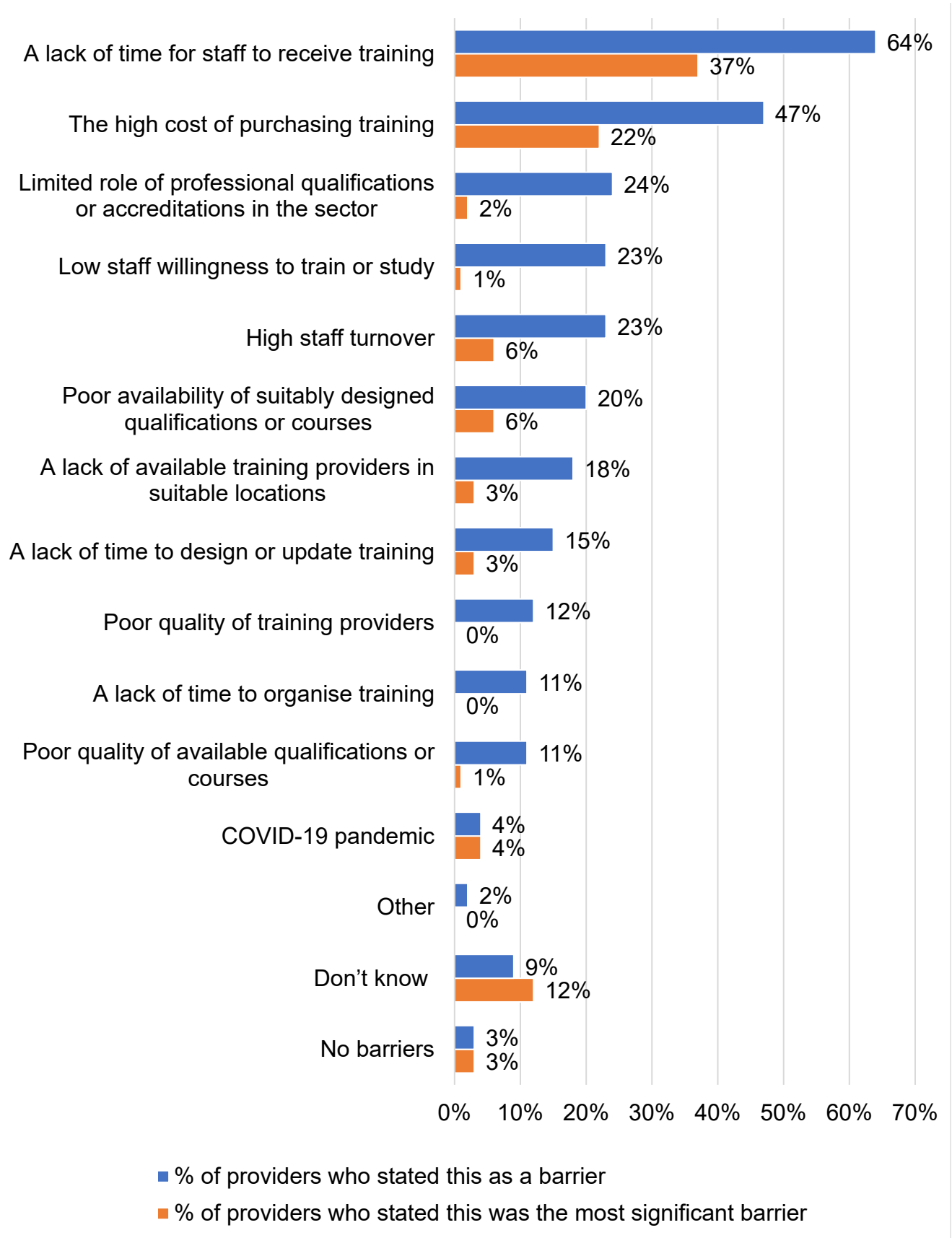
High staff turnover was identified as a barrier to delivering a professional service in that it affected continuity of service for residents. Residents experienced difficulties in knowing who to contact, and found it more difficult to build a trusting relationship with staff. Providers often noted that a high staff turnover made training more difficult and expensive, since greater volumes of training then had to be delivered relative to the size of the workforce.

Providers were generally more limited in the influence they had over the training undertaken and required by sub-contractors, for example those working in maintenance services.

### 7.2. Key barriers to providing staff training

156. Figure 7.1 presents the proportion of providers who indicated that each factor was a barrier to providing more training and skills programme for tenant-facing staff and the significance of these barriers. Survey findings highlighted that time constraint was the key barrier to providing more training (64%), followed by the cost of training (47%). These barriers were also stated as the most significant barriers to training and skills programmes. Around a quarter each felt the following were barriers: the limited role of professional qualifications in the sector (24%) a lack of staff willingness to train (23%), and high staff turnover (23%).

**Figure 7.1 Barriers and most significant barriers to providing more training to tenant-facing staff mentioned by provider management**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base: 60



### 7.3. Barriers to professionalisation

157. In the qualitative phase of the research, barriers to delivering a professional service more generally was explored in case study interviews with management, tenant-facing staff and residents.

#### Staff time to train

158. In interviews, both management and staff working with residents highlighted the effect of high workloads on staff ability to train:

“When you have a 100% caseload, you can’t take a step back to think about developing yourself. When you don’t really have time for it, training and development becomes a stressful thing, not an enjoyable thing.”

Management, Rural LA

159. One tenant-facing staff member said they felt that the problem was management were unwilling to allow tenant-facing staff time to undertake training. However, more commonly, respondents identified funding reductions or (at local authorities) policy changes leading to increased workloads. Many interviewees, including senior management, felt that workload pressures had increased recently:

“There used to be double the number of patch managers to deal with the same number of residents.”

Management, ALMO

160. Partly as a result of workload pressures, staff were in practice often expected to carry out some types of training in their own unpaid time outside work, for example at weekends. This applied particularly to professional qualifications due to their optional nature. Staff were often willing to do this if they saw the qualification as worthwhile, since they expected career benefits in the longer term, but they could still be constrained by personal commitments (e.g., childcare responsibilities).

161. One housing provider noted the importance of allocating enough time to organising training, because this would usually outweigh the time wasted on poorly organised or targeted training. For some there was a tension between delivering training efficiently and affordably to all staff at once, and the risk of understaffing housing services during the training.

“Reducing the patch sizes [would help deliver a more professional service]. Because of the sheer volume, I don’t feel I’m delivering the best service I can... [there are] time constraints, customers are waiting a lot longer for responses.”

Tenant-facing staff, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

### **Cost of training and qualifications**

162. Another widespread issue, most often raised by management, was that of the direct cost of qualifications to housing providers, for example in terms of fees, travel, or hotel costs. Ultimately staff time and the costs of training could be seen as related to budgetary constraints.

163. Issues of training costs were often linked to wider organisational budgetary issues:

“Budgets have been so constrained, historically, the first thing to go is your Learning and Development.”

Management, Rural LA

164. Some housing staff stated that following recent cost of living increases, it might be necessary to devote more resources to directly support residents, and less to a range of staff-directed activities including staff training and welfare.

165. Tenant-facing staff were also well aware of cost as a limiting factor on their training activities; for example, some felt that attending external training events would be a poor use of funds.

### **Availability of training and qualifications**

166. Training and qualifications were seen as high-quality and widely available. None of the respondents mentioned being unable to find a suitable qualification to study in terms of subject matter or content. It was also rare to find problems with training providers in terms of delivery; the only issue mentioned focused on a specific Further Education college.

167. Some did mention a need for shorter, simpler qualifications, rather than full Apprenticeships or chartered status qualifications. The concept of qualifications targeted at particular services within housing was suggested by one respondent, for example qualifications covering only supported housing, only Customer Service, or Rent Collection.

168. However, these types of shorter courses are available at least to some extent, which raises the question of whether this is an issue of awareness or internal decisions elsewhere at that housing provider.

### **Working with contractors**

169. The survey results showed that a majority of housing providers (63%) sub-contracted maintenance services at least to some extent, and around one third (30%) sub-contract part or all of another service area with tenant-facing staff.

170. Many managers at housing providers stated that this presented challenges for achieving consistent levels of training and ensuring residents experience a consistent service. The risks were underscored by findings from some resident focus groups, where residents were very focused on issues of poor service from sub-contractors. They often perceived a difference in service quality and behaviours and attitudes between directly employed housing provider staff and sub-contractors.

“Some [contractors] will bodge a repair if you don’t make sure they do it properly.”

Resident, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

171. In most resident focus groups the actions and attitudes of sub-contractors were a key focus of discontent, much more often than those of tenant-facing staff employed by the housing provider. Some organisations did admit they had little control over the training and qualifications of staff at sub-contractors.

“They are their own company. If we have training, we put on that will benefit them, then we will get in touch with them... [but they] don’t like to be told what to do.”

Management, Unitary LA

172. However, others felt their approach to managing sub-contractors was robust. Influence typically came through the procurement process, or through review meetings.

173. One key difficulty was that housing providers, especially smaller providers, felt that if they made exacting requirements of their sub-contractors, they would not get bids for their contracts. For smaller providers there appeared to be an imbalance in power with management feeling unable to make requirements of sub-contractors, or had limited trust in their self-reported performance. At some Local Authorities, the housing service did not have as much control of sub-contractors as they would like. This was

either due to the use of a centralised procurement department, or in one case due to feeling the sub-contractor was entrenched in the council's services more widely.

174. Even at larger organisations, which usually felt confident handling sub-contractors, there were sometimes issues of control when a sub-contractor themselves sub-contracted work to another company.

### **Systems and policies**

175. In focus groups residents often reported that while tenant-facing staff treated them with respect, and had the knowledge required to deal with their problems, they did not seem empowered to resolve those problems.

176. There were a range of reasons for this mentioned, but most often difficulties with administrative systems which blocked action being taken. For example, at one mid-sized housing association, residents were generally positive about housing provider staff and their skills and professional behaviours. However, poorly designed systems made it impossible for staff dealing with a recurring problem to see what had happened previously, resulting in residents feeling that they were 'going in circles'.

177. An over-reliance on automated systems which focused on individual issues affecting individual residents could also make housing providers seem remote to residents. Even if the system delivers an effective and professional response to queries housing providers were expecting, residents may still not feel listened to about wider issues. Residents at one landlord mentioned that because the online system did not accept these types of queries, it was difficult to contact their housing provider about issues with communal facilities or landlord policies, for example.

"The organisation listens to the people who speak loudest."

Resident, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

178. Some focus group participants challenged the view that professional standards among tenant-facing staff were the key weakness in the system. Some considered the lapses in professional standards to come from decisions made at a management level. For example, residents at a unitary Local Authority felt not listened to as a result of policy requiring staff to tell them to go online to raise issues, rather than being allowed to deal with them there and then.

### **Staff retention and turnover**

179. Residents also mentioned issues relating to high staff turnover and the impact this had on the ability to build relationships. Most often, this amounted to difficulty knowing who to contact, or not building a consistent and trusting relationship with the same staff. In one case a resident stated that had struggled for several years to get an anti-

social behaviour problem addressed because each new member of staff would attempt initial mediation first, but then be replaced.

180. From the management side, Local Authorities more commonly reported challenges in retaining directly employed tenant-facing staff compared to Private Registered Providers and ALMOs. This was mainly attributed to the lower rates of pay that Local Authorities felt they could offer staff compared to Housing Associations, as well as other sectors.

181. Providers differed in the extent to which they had a formal retention strategy in place. A couple of providers interviewed had an active retention plan focussing on both staff benefits and succession planning, justified by having particular difficulty recruiting staff. This included putting in place measures to ensure career progression.

182. Providers that did not have a formal retention strategy in place tended to place emphasis on the following:

- Fostering a positive working environment.
- Fostering good relationships between management and tenant-facing staff.
- Providing opportunities for progression.

183. For example, one provider interviewed did not have a formal strategy in place but they did have guaranteed interview schemes for promotions and benefits that increased with years' service.

## 8. Delivering professionalisation

### 8.1. Summary

Providers shared perspectives as to what could promote delivery of a professional service for residents. Most providers were positive about the value of both training and qualifications for delivering professionalisation, and most recognised that they could make improvements to their current training and skills offer.

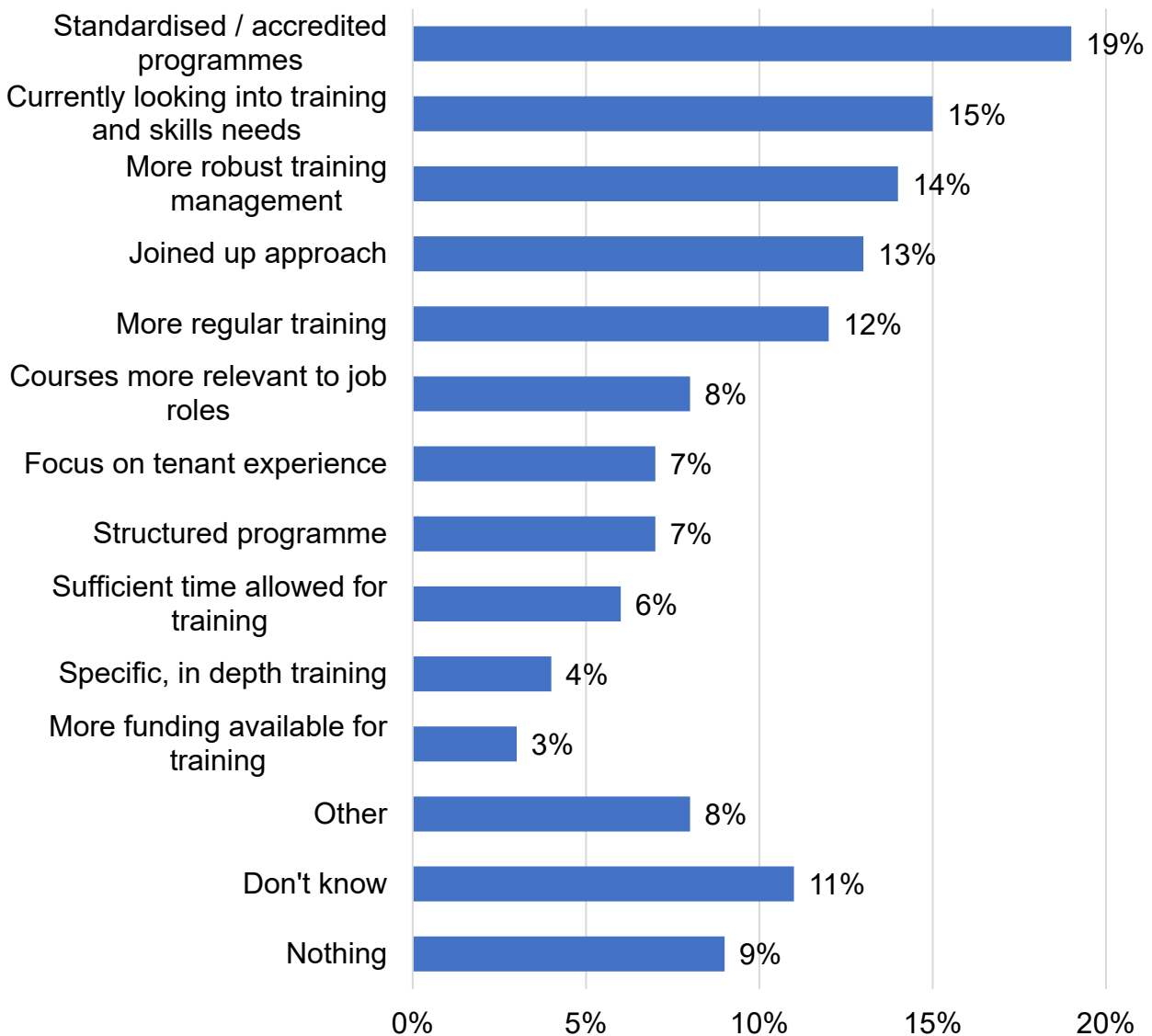
Many providers felt that offering varied development opportunities and clear routes for progression was key to retention, whether or not they had a formal retention strategy in place. This included an emphasis on recruiting staff with lived experience of social housing and ensuring staff benefits and remuneration are competitive.

There was some debate around the best way to use qualifications. Some providers mentioned a desire for standardisation across the sector, in terms of clearly specified behaviours and knowledge. There was appetite for more specialist qualifications and accredited training courses tailored towards staff working in the housing sector, as more awareness for the range of training on offer.

### 8.2. Provider views on improving training and skills

184. While most providers were confident in their approach to their training and skills programme, the vast majority (91%) still felt they could make improvements. Figure 8.1 shows the proportion of providers who suggested specific improvements to their training and skills programme. Results show that of the 91%, nearly one fifth (19%) of providers stated standardised and accredited programmes would be beneficial. Other common ideas included implementing more robust training management (14%) and a joined-up approach (13%). However, some providers were still looking into what their training and skills needs were (15%).

**Figure 8.1 Suggestions from provider management for improvements to the current training and skills programme**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base: 60

### 8.3. Recruitment and retention

#### Ensuring staff benefits and remuneration is competitive

185. There was a general acknowledgement, particularly among smaller housing providers and LAs, that the salary and benefits package currently offered by housing providers is less competitive with the private sector as there are fewer financial benefits. This includes, for example, performance related bonuses as well as higher salaries more generally.

## Emphasis on recruiting staff with lived experience of social housing

186. Providers varied in the extent to which they actively sought to recruit residents as staff in tenant-facing roles. Among the providers interviewed, there were some examples of residents being actively recruited into tenant-facing roles. However, one large provider did say that they deliberately did not take this approach due to a perception of a potential conflict of interest.

187. The benefits of this, cited by providers, is that residents have an intrinsic understanding of the challenges other social housing residents may face. By placing greater emphasis on the recruitment of people with lived experience of social housing, this should lead to improvements in treating residents with respect, empathy, and compassion.

## Supporting staff retention

188. Where staff turnover was high, which was not the case for all providers, this was often recognised by management as an issue:

“[We are planning] a dedicated strategy to recruit and retain...although many stay in the business, this approach would help manage the turnover in a more balanced way.”

Management, Mid-sized Private Registered Provider

189. Many providers felt that offering varied development opportunities and clear routes for progression was key to retention, whether or not they had a formal retention strategy in place. This included opportunities to shadow other service areas or roles of interest and the opportunity and encouragement to pursue professional qualifications.

190. Interviews with tenant-facing staff generally reflected these findings in that where there were clear routes for progression within the organisation, this was a key factor in job satisfaction:

“I know that if I spoke to my managers and said can I ask your advice, this is where I am looking to go [in my career], can you give me some pointers, they would be there.”

Tenant-facing staff, Urban LA

191. A small proportion of tenant-facing staff felt that progression was more staff-led rather than promoted by management and felt that progression options and pathways could be made clearer.



"You sort of have to know yourself and what you want. It would perhaps help to have some knowledge of available options, and different ways forward."

Tenant-facing staff, ALMO

192. It is clear from the research that staffing shortages directly impact on the abilities of tenant-facing staff to be able to provide a professional service to residents. As a result, there needs to be an active focus on recruitment and retention. The following suggestions were made to aid the successful recruitment and retention of tenant-facing staff:

- Creating clear pathways for progression.
- Putting an emphasis on recruiting staff with lived experience of social housing.
- Ensuring staff benefits and remuneration were competitive.

## 8.4. Training and qualifications

### The value of training and qualifications

193. Many providers taking part in interviews were positive about the value of both training and qualifications for delivering professionalisation. The survey showed that almost all providers had a focus on growing and training talent in-house rather than recruiting for qualifications.

194. Despite the consensus among most providers, there was some doubt expressed by some about the specific role of qualifications:

"But do people need a qualification to deliver excellent customer service?"

Management, ALMO

195. Providers adopted various approaches to qualifications and training, including the development of in-house qualifications for tenant-facing staff. Some tenant-facing staff felt that qualifications had intrinsic value to them, in that they were treated with less respect due to not being recognised professionals:

"[At the moment] we do get treated like unqualified social workers."

Tenant-facing staff, Unitary LA

196. All providers interviewed recognised the importance of training as a means to ensure tenant-facing staff develop the competencies and behaviours to deliver a

professional service to residents, regardless of whether the training is accredited or not. While many tenant-facing staff felt they had good training opportunities, a few felt that training could be provided on a more ongoing basis to ensure their knowledge is up to date.

197. Another tenant-facing staff member would like to see more structured methods of sharing knowledge among staff in the team, as opposed to relying on their own experiences.

“More structured knowledge sharing rather than experience based. Everybody working from the same piece of paper. We are all here for the common good and residents or residents instead of working in silos all the time”

Tenant-facing staff, Urban LA

### **Standardised training and qualifications across the sector**

198. Among those taking part, there was some debate around the best way to use qualifications. Some providers mentioned a desire for standardisation across the sector, in terms of clearly specified behaviours and knowledge.

“It would be useful to have a standard framework which we could measure existing staff against and meet the gap(s) with specialist training providers.”

Survey respondent, ALMO

199. Providers were also keen to see more specialist qualifications and accredited training courses tailored towards staff working in the housing sector, including those relevant to particular parts of the sector, such as supported housing, Domestic Abuse services or specific to call centres. Others noted that this requirement might reflect a lack of awareness of existing availability of qualifications.

200. When reflecting on the current apprenticeships on offer for maintenance staff, a common criticism was that the content was felt to be more suited to general construction, rather than working with and supporting people living in social housing properties.

201. Common barriers providers faced, as outlined in 7.3, were the high workloads of tenant-facing staff, along with not having the funds to support staff to work towards a qualification or accredited training. If qualifications were to be more widely used, pricing would need to be set at a level that providers can afford, including small providers who do not have the advantage of economies of scale. There is also a need

for management to prioritise attending activities relating to training and qualifications for tenant-facing staff within their workloads.

“We have a commitment to the development of our staff, but cost and time constraints are genuine barriers. More cost effective or subsidised training opportunities would be welcome.”

Survey respondent, Small Private Registered Provider

202. Almost all providers interviewed felt at a management level that qualifications should not be mandatory as this would have significant disadvantages. This was sometimes expressed in terms of cost or practicality, but more commonly in terms of the difficulty in recruiting staff that this would create. Some did feel that qualifications should be mandatory for senior staff, but these respondents also acknowledged that making qualifications mandatory at the point of entry would make recruitment difficult.

203. There was wide acknowledgement that there are suitable candidates with the right attitudes who have gained transferable skills from equivalent roles in other sectors, which would put them in good stead for joining the housing sector. Even at a senior level, high calibre candidates would be excluded from the workforce by these requirements. Many interviewees felt that the introduction of mandatory qualifications would not address the cultural and behavioural issues experienced by residents as described in the White Paper.

## 8.5. Ethos and motivation

204. Management and tenant-facing staff recognised the importance of staff motivations for instilling the ethos for a professional service. Staff championed their personal motivations for working at a provider – to give back and support people – and felt this was integral to delivering a service-oriented ethos. Many staff across various levels felt their personal motivations and attitude were more important for their role than specialist skills or training.

"I've always had a passion for supporting people, and housing is an important part of that. I have been homeless myself, so... I know what it's like."

Tenant-facing staff, ALMO

205. Many providers interviewed had a set of competencies, values, or standards they used as a reference point for the behaviours tenant-facing staff needed to demonstrate. These professional standards included attitudes such as being patient, respectful, and managing expectations, and placed the resident the centre of the

service. Managers and tenant-facing staff reported that having a defined set of professional service values made their remit clearer and managed resident expectations.

206. Some providers described an important way of delivering this ethos-driven service as recruiting current or past residents. For those providers, this was an important way to ensure the salience of their customer service values and these staff members were better able to connect with residents.

207. There were differences of opinion over the importance of organisational ethos to drive professionalisation and other more concrete levers for driving a professional service, such as: sector knowledge, staff training and support, and staff time and capacity.

“We encourage professionalisation by the development and training opportunities... What we don’t do is walk around banging a drum saying, ‘come on people, be professional!’”

Management, Rural LA

208. Providers also valued more concrete processes for encouraging professional service values. Many management and tenant-facing staff highlighted the value of sector knowledge, housing law, and business processes for delivering a professional service, as technical ability is important in this sector (although they did not directly compare it with the importance of organisational ethos).

## 8.6. Systems and policies

209. Residents and tenant-facing staff reported the need for robust communication systems within providers and with residents. Some providers used a wide array of communication systems with residents including focus groups, resident panels, satisfaction surveys, and surgeries. Other providers relied on more traditional communication channels such as emails, phone calls, face-to-face meetings, and complaints procedures. Some residents reported that although these mechanisms were place, they felt that they were not working for all residents and they did not feel listened to.

210. One resident reported how their provider had shifted towards online-only service provision, but this excluded many residents who were unfamiliar with digital technology or did not own a digital device. Where providers change systems to restrict the ways in which residents can interact with them, it is critical that attention is paid to how this will work where people have limited digital skills, or where their problem does not take the form of an issue with their own property.

211. It was reported that a lack of communication between teams, and especially with sub-contractors, often created inefficiencies, blockages, or repetition of work. For instance, one resident described how a job required multiple repair workers and communication was poor between them. The provider had to send an electrician to do the rewiring and a plasterer to restore their wall after. However, the electrician was delayed, this was not communicated by the provider, resulting in the plasterer arriving early and having to return at a later date.

“Sometimes there might be more than one person the resident has to go through before they get to me, and they get frustrated with that because they have to start their story all over again.”

Tenant-facing staff, Urban LA

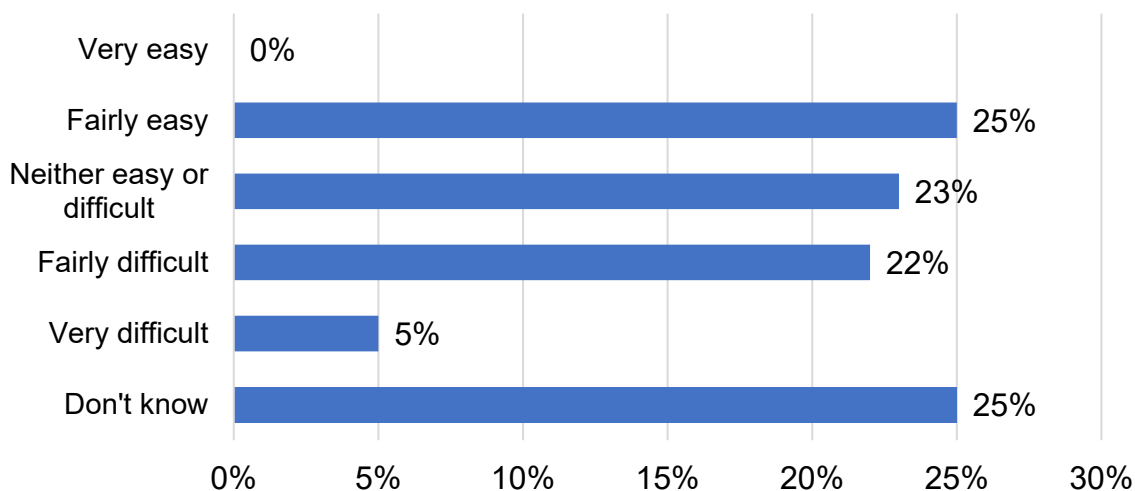
212. Overall, to ensure the delivery of a professional service effective systems need to be in place to open channels of communication between staff and residents, between staff and contractors, and between staff across departments. Improving communications and reducing siloes will help to deliver a more professional service, not only for delivering efficiencies but also for helping residents feel listened to.

## 8.7. Working with contractors

213. Providers expected sub-contractors to deliver the same level of professionalisation as in-house staff. However, they faced issues influencing sub-contractor skills, training, and service delivery.

214. Views were split amongst providers on whether they could ensure sub-contractors had the skills required to carry out their role. As shown in Figure 8.2, 27% of providers in total found it very difficult or fairly difficult. In comparison, 25% found it fairly easy, and none found it very easy. The evidence suggests there are gaps among some providers who wish to influence the skills and training of their sub-contractors, and there is some good practice that could be shared.

**Figure 8.2 Ease for provider management of ensuring tenant-facing sub-contractor staff have the required skills to deliver a professional service**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey. Base: 60.

215. One key reason for the difficulties experienced in training and influencing training of sub-contracted staff is the high turnover rates. Participants reported that training sub-contracted staff often required additional effort and resources for the same result. When trying to ensure quality service delivery, providers often found it hard to monitor sub-contracted work or influence change.

216. Providers tended to be best able to influence sub-contractors at the procurement stage or at review meetings. However, the level of influence over sub-contractors varied with the different types and sizes of housing providers. In general, it was easier for larger housing associations to influence sub-contractor skills, training, and service-delivery, likely a result of their stronger market position. It is also harder for local authority housing services, and in some cases ALMOs, to influence sub-contractors when procurement is handled across multiple local authority departments. This is because other departments may have different requirements, priorities, or monitoring processes:

“The contact centre [covers]... all unitary council services, [which] means we have little control over the training that they deliver to staff.”

Management, ALMO

### 8.8. Additional suggestions to support professionalisation

217. Aside from the themes outlined above, providers put forward additional suggestions to support professionalisation. This is supplemented by a literature review which looked at the professionalisation of the social work and social care sectors.

218. A summary of the main recommendations is presented below:

- Recognise housing as a professional sector, and tenant-facing staff as professionals
- Increase awareness and understanding of the work of tenant-facing staff
- Ensure appropriate and accessible methods of communication are in place for residents

### **Recognise housing as a professional sector, and tenant-facing staff as professionals**

219. 'Social workers' is a protected title, and routes to qualifying as a social work professional are regulated by the UK care regulators. There was a strong sense among all providers interviewed, particularly among tenant-facing staff, that the housing sector should be acknowledged as a profession, and in turn, tenant-facing staff should be seen as professionals. This could help engagement with other services such as police and social services:

“Being recognised as a professional by key players - police, social services - this would really help. Anyone can be a housing officer, you don't need a qualification, and this doesn't help. I'm not saying you should be forced to study, but it does create a disparity with the other professions involved. Qualifications confer legitimacy.”

Tenant-facing staff, Large Private Registered Provider

220. When asked to consider which other professions are similar to their role, many tenant-facing staff responded with 'social worker'. Comparing their own experience to a social worker, some tenant-facing staff reflected that their sector was viewed from outside as less 'professional'. They experienced this as a disadvantage, and they felt it limited the authority they have in linking up with other services to support a resident.

### **Increase awareness and understanding of the work of tenant-facing staff more widely**

221. Social work is not dissimilar to the housing sector, being locally led and complex. It requires working with high levels of risk and uncertainty using the best approaches and interventions that balance to ensure protection. The profession is built on detailed understanding of individuals and their families, communities, and cultures.

222. There was a desire among tenant-facing staff in particular for increased awareness and understanding of the work of specific teams, and at Local Authorities between housing and other departments of their organisation.

223. Another member of tenant-facing staff felt that increased inter-departmental working within the organisation would help other departments understand that their work can have direct consequences for residents, both positively and negatively.

## **Ensure appropriate and accessible methods of communication are in place for residents**

224. Communication is essential to practising high quality social work. Tenant-facing staff felt that it was important to ensure there were suitable communication channels through which residents could contact their housing provider.

225. For tenant-facing staff, this was through the acceleration of digital services, and ensuring a digital-first communications policy. This would help to free up staff time to respond to more complex enquiries, while more simple requests could be handled using digital solutions.

“Covid has pushed us forwards a lot as we've had to get set up for remote working, but we are still quite antiquated - our residents have to contact us using phone calls or even letters as well as email. We spend a lot of time answering very basic questions on the phone or email. If we had a good portal, they could just look the basics up without contacting us. Most of our residents have a smartphone and they're online.”

Tenant-facing staff, Rural LA

226. However, a few of the residents interviewed at one LA felt very strongly that it was important to maintain non-digital communication channels, as there are some residents without digital access. These residents felt that the acceleration of digital services demonstrated a ‘disconnect’ between strategies that providers adopt and residents’ needs.

227. From this, we can learn that it is important for providers to understand the extent to which residents have digital access, and to maintain non-digital means of communication for residents without access in addition to supporting digital inclusion. This will ensure that all residents have the means to contact their housing provider when they need to.



## 9. What could change?

### 9.1. Summary

This chapter summarises the changes that providers have already made in response to the White Paper. It also provides an indication of how providers will take the White Paper recommendations forward, viewed in terms of their direction of change on funding for training and qualifications for tenant-facing staff over the next 12 months.

The White Paper recommendations had the most impact on those providers whose approaches towards ensuring professionalism were less developed, or were informal. Providers varied in the extent to which they expected to make a change to their training budgets for tenant-facing staff, over the next 12 months. Around half of providers (52%) did not expect to make any changes, while nearly 4 in 10 (36%) expected their budgets to increase. A minority (10%) expected to reduce their training budgets for tenant-facing staff.

### 9.2. What has changed already?

228. Opinion was split on the impact of the White Paper so far. In the interviews, some mentioned that the Social Housing White Paper's focus on increasing professionalism had been a push factor for their own increased focus on training and skills. However, others felt the White Paper had changed little for their own organisation, where they had strong existing commitment to professionalisation. They did still, nevertheless, welcome the wider commitment in the sector as a whole:

“We were doing it anyway... we got all the professional standards from CIH, and each team and individual have to answer questions [around it].”

Management, Large Private Registered Provider

229. Some landlords, in contrast, had made substantial changes and had decided to increase their focus on improving professional standards among staff. Some had restructured their service as a result, including two of the case study providers.

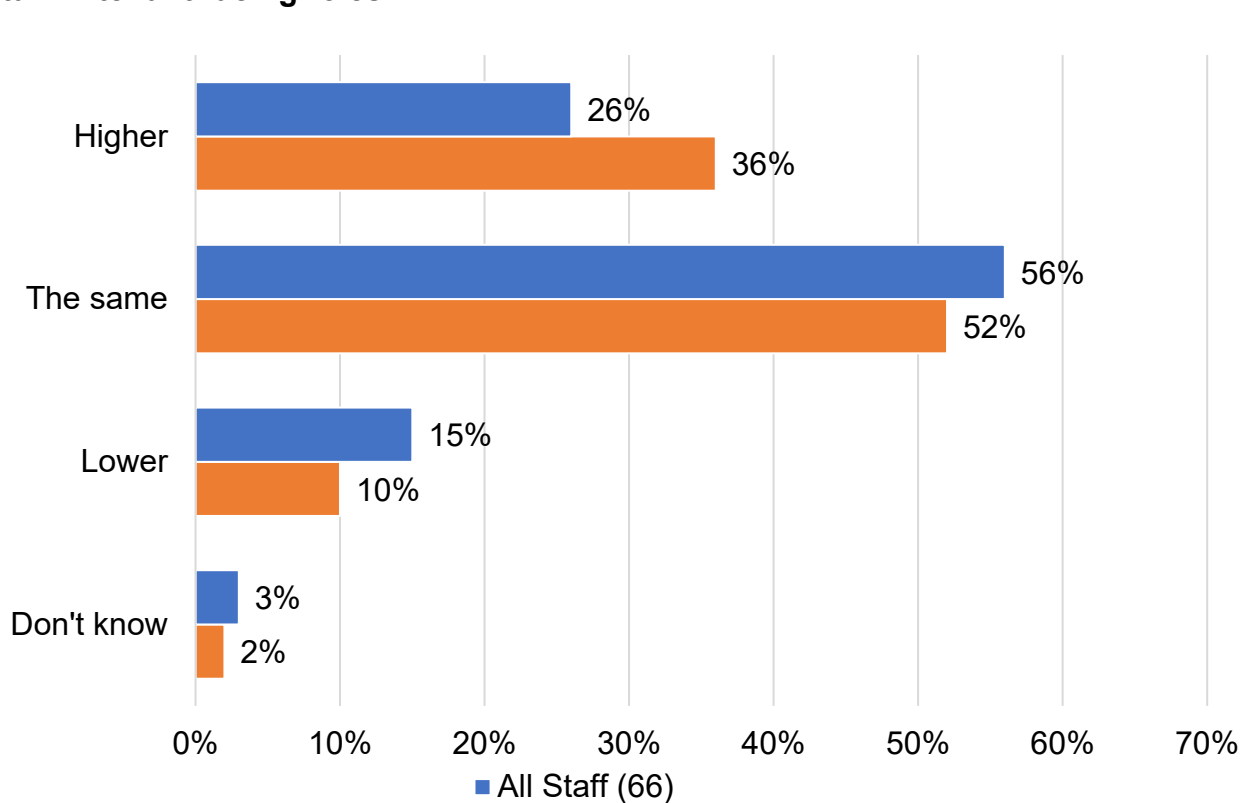
### 9.3. Direction of future change in spending

230. Looking forward, there was no clear consensus from the survey on the direction of funding for training and qualifications for tenant-facing staff over the next 12 months: around a third (36%) intended to increase the training budget for these staff over the

next 12 months; half expected it to be remain the same (52%) and one in ten expected it to fall (10%). However, a larger proportion expected to increase the budget for training tenant-facing staff (36%) than expected it to increase overall (26%), as shown in Figure 9.1.

231. Reasons for spending more tended to focus on the White Paper or an organisation’s own determination to improve services independently of the White Paper. Reasons for spending less in the next year were varied. However, many interviewees mentioned the general pressure on funding arising from increased material support needed by residents and general efficiency savings. Some mentioned the pandemic’s impact of a switch towards more online learning, which had reduced the cost of training, thus allowing a reduction in budgets.

**Figure 9.1 Change in spending on training in the next 12 months, for all staff and for staff in tenant-facing roles**



Source: 2022 Social Housing Professionalisation Review survey.

## 10. Conclusions and recommendations

### 10.1. Summary

This chapter summarises the findings of the research in relation to each research question. It also presents a series of recommendations as to how changes could be made to further professionalisation in the sector.

The research highlights that providing a professional service does not just require staff with sufficient skills and knowledge. It also requires staff being empowered to make decisions, and effective systems and policies. It also requires a positive ethos and commitment to professionalisation.

### 10.2. What is the causal link between improved staff training and development, and the provision of excellent customer service?

232. There was a strong consensus among providers, tenant-facing staff, and residents that tenant-facing staff needed improved training and development. Few did not feel that this was an important aspect of encouraging professionalisation.

233. Having said that, a key element of providing excellent customer service is also ensuring the recruitment of sufficient numbers of high-quality staff. While funding was cited as the major factor impeding this, in terms of staff salaries, for some providers availability of skilled and motivated recruits is a problem.

**Recommendation 1:** Any measures taken to encourage professionalisation should clearly take into account any possible impact on recruitment in the sector, either among new staff or transfer of experienced staff from other sectors.

### 10.3. Are currently available housing qualifications 'fit for purpose'?

234. Landlords were broadly positive about the qualifications available to them, and only one localised complaint about training provider quality was noted in the research. Some requests for more bite-sized and service-specific qualifications did appear to be rooted in a lack of knowledge of what was available. Broadly, new qualifications should not be a priority for professionalisation, with two exceptions. The first of these areas is qualifications specifically relevant to the needs of those working in specific sub-sectors in housing:

**Recommendation 2:** Government should examine ways to promote the development of additional qualifications for tenant-facing staff who specialise in specific forms of supported housing.

235. The second area with shortcomings is in technical apprenticeships for maintenance staff were also flagged in terms of including soft skills and skills relevant for maintenance rather than newbuild construction.

**Recommendation 3:** Providers should be encouraged by sector bodies or government to come together to create an Apprenticeship Standard which contains the skills required to maintain social housing. This should include content relevant to professional standards when interacting with residents.

#### **10.4. Is there a common approach to providing qualifications, training, and development across the sector?**

236. Landlords showed significant variation in approach, although all those participating were positive about qualifications and recognised the importance of staff training. Some took a very system-based approach, constructing role profiles and required training on a role-by-role basis, with a limited ability for individuals to choose training. They also commissioned large scale resident feedback systems.

237. Other landlords, mostly but not exclusively smaller Private Registered Providers, arranged training more informally. They gave a greater priority to individual career development and were more flexible about what training is required for a role. They engaged intensively with fewer residents and used fewer data systems. These organisations were often strongly against mandatory professional qualifications.

238. All of the case study providers were strongly attached to their own organisational culture and approach to training and qualifications.

**Recommendation 4:** Any changes to the framework used for skills and training in the sector proposed by government should take into account the diversity of approaches taken by providers, rather than mandating a specific approach to staff development in detail.

#### **10.5. How effective is the current approach to providing qualifications, training, and development in meeting the sector's needs?**

239. There were some gaps in the existing structure of training and qualifications; notably the survey revealed gaps in training around working with residents outside the core areas of Neighbourhood services and Customer services. Estate services and Rent

Collection in particular may be equally likely to encounter residents who have support needs or are in difficult situations, and yet do not currently receive the same level of training.

**Recommendation 5:** Government should require providers to train all tenant-facing staff who encounter tenants to minimum standards in a specific set of skills, including basic safeguarding and mental health awareness.

240. Small housing providers may see benefits if minimum standards for service delivery for sub-contractors in social housing were set at a higher level. Small providers may not have leverage over large contractors at an individual level, but potentially a level of collective negotiation or intervention by government might be more effective. The existence of such standards might also assist Local Authorities in justifying spending public funds on a higher quality service. For example, an accreditation scheme setting out minimum standards for common services required by providers might help. This might assist them to collectively influence skills, training, and minimum standards for service delivery.

**Recommendation 6:** Government should consult providers and sector bodies regarding the best way to set up and enforce minimum standards for sub-contractors across the social housing sector, in particular in property maintenance and contact centre provision.

241. Current approaches to training and development may be hampered by the wider environment in which staff work. Increased numbers of properties to oversee for each member of staff ('patch size') in recent years was cited by many tenant-facing staff and managers as another important factor in the ability to deliver a professional service. This was mentioned both as an obstacle to professional behaviour in itself and an obstacle to delivering training due to shortages of staff time.

**Recommendation 7:** In order to promote higher professional standards and enable high quality training, government should research the impact of large 'patch sizes' for tenant-facing staff on service, with a view to establishing minimum acceptable 'patch sizes' for specific role types.

## **10.6. What factors influence tenants' perceptions of the professionalism of the staff delivering their housing services?**

242. As already identified in the White Paper, residents' perceptions of professionalism are influenced primarily by a sense of being treated with respect and being listened to. They are also influenced strongly by the effective delivery of services.

243. The research showed some subtleties in tenant views, building on the picture shown in the White Paper. Although residents did not always feel treated in a professional manner, and sometimes experienced poor service, they often did not blame this directly on tenant-facing staff. Residents often (although not always) had a high opinion of the skills and attitude of tenant-facing staff, at least where directly employed by their housing provider. Discontent with professional standards tended to focus on the role of provider management, and on staff employed as sub-contractors who were often seen as unhelpful. For instance, they were often aware of the shortcomings of the systems used by provider staff, or irritated by online request systems they were required to use. These experiences were sometimes a key factor in perceptions of being treated unprofessionally.
244. Collective professional standards influence outcomes as well as individual professional standards which can be influenced by training and qualifications. Therefore, an effective approach to professionalisation should go beyond training and skills to consider systems. Weaknesses in systems were raised by multiple interviewees in the research, especially those with experience of customer service systems in other sectors.
245. Effective systems are also about allocation of decision-making, as well as technical capabilities. Staff being empowered to make decisions at an appropriate level is also important. The extent to which residents have a negative view of management but not tenant-facing staff at their provider may hint at potential issues here with decisions needing to be referred up to managers who the resident cannot speak to directly. Systems used must also be capable of registering resident concerns which do not fit a list of pre-defined issues, and may not relate to their own dwelling.

**Recommendation 8:** Providers should be required to demonstrate that their Customer Relationship Management system meets minimum standards, allowing staff to record, view and share information in a practical manner. It should allow residents to raise issues not relating to an issue with their own dwelling. This requirement should take into account that for the smallest providers, complex systems may not be necessary to achieve this. For larger providers, government should work with housing providers, sector bodies and providers of IT systems to the housing sector to explore ways of raising standards.

246. In addition, residents often highlighted issues with their housing provider in terms of listening. Although necessary, it is not enough to have a technically effective Customer Relationship Management system; it must be accessible to residents.

**Recommendation 9:** Providers should be required to evidence that they have taken into account customer needs in the design of their customer services (e.g., residents’ digital access, any disability that may affect engagement with specific channels).

## 10.7. Is there a case for mandatory qualifications for staff in particular roles or career grades?

247. This research found that while studying for professional qualifications more generally among staff could have significant benefits, the case for mandatory qualifications was weaker. While professional qualifications could help the sector attract and retain staff, it was unclear whether the absence of the knowledge conferred by a professional qualification was a key barrier to the delivery of good service to tenants. The predominant issues raised by tenants tended to relate to courtesy and respect, especially among sub-contractors, and to effective organisation and policy.

248. There were also significant practical concerns regarding large-scale study for professional qualifications in terms of:

- Obstructing recruitment and transfer of skills from other sectors.
- Staff time, especially where resources are already constrained by cost and / or recruitment difficulties.

249. The last issue is particularly significant because if qualifications were to be made mandatory, they could not reasonably be carried out in the employees’ own time. Providers stressed how currently this was a constraint on staff choosing to study for professional qualifications. Small providers with a limited workforce, or any provider with a small workforce covering a rural area, might find the time commitments required of staff particularly difficult.

250. Some of the disadvantages listed above do not apply to the concept of mandatory qualifications for senior or management roles, suggested by some case study participants. However, this concept was not fully tested by the research.

**Recommendation 10:** Professional qualifications should not be made mandatory for tenant-facing staff at this time. To avoid unintended consequences, mandatory professional qualifications for any role should also not be implemented without considering the practical and funding implications for providers.

251. It should be noted that the above does not rule out mandatory training to a less intensive level than a professional qualification or accreditation. There were gaps

found in mental health and safeguarding training outside core services, for example. In addition, some tenant-facing staff reported that essential training was delivered after they needed it for their role.

252. If anything, it is likely that these gaps are understated in the research since providers who are less engaged with professionalisation would be less motivated to take part in the research. Furthermore, although generally tenant-facing staff reported that internal training they received was useful and effective, this internal training was also not subject to any external monitoring.

253. In many technical sectors (e.g., construction, installation), as well as in social care, mandatory minimum training for safety purposes is required prior to working in various roles. There may be an argument for a similar approach in housing. This could sit alongside professional qualifications, and should not be a substitute for these.

**Recommendation 11:** Research and / or consultation should be carried out to outline the minimum basic training which staff should receive before working directly with tenants in core housing roles. Consideration should be given to making this basic training mandatory.

## **10.8. Is there an optimum approach in Continual Professional Development for housing management staff?**

254. This research found that providers took a range of approaches to development of staff, and that no one approach could be said to be better than another. Providers agreed that offering a career path to staff was key to retention. Managers and tenant-facing staff also agreed that regular training, including scheduled refresher training, was useful to maintain skills in the workforce.

255. However, organisations were strongly attached to their individual ethos and approach to training and development. Therefore, we would recommend against taking a prescriptive approach to this.

256. However, one area which did vary is the extent to which staff felt listened to by management, and the extent to which management said they were given the opportunity to talk about these types of issues. Some providers seemed overly reliant on annual reviews. Given tenant-facing staff interviewed were clearly aware of their own training needs, this seems an opportunity for improvement.

**Recommendation 12:** Larger providers should give tenant-facing staff more frequent opportunities to raise their concerns or request training.



## 10.9. What impact does the availability of high-quality training have on landlords to recruit and retain high calibre staff?

257. Experience in the social work sector suggests that there is significant value in recognising the sector as one with professional standards and recognising tenant-facing staff as professionals. This could help to give parity of esteem with those working in other related sectors. It seems clear from interviews with tenant-facing staff that this would be valued and would assist recruitment and retention in the sector, if implemented in a way which did not impose excessive workload or restrict initial recruitment to the sector.

258. Given the constraints above it is unlikely that without substantial additional staffing and funding, mandatory professional qualifications could be rolled out to a large proportion of the housing workforce. This does not mean, however, that they could not be further encouraged, and tenant-facing staff views suggest they could have value in recruitment and retention in the sector.

259. At the same time, housing providers often complained that it was difficult or impossible to spend their apprenticeship levy payment, given the offer to the sector. They also felt that the existing Level 3 apprenticeship required too great a time commitment to be widely used for tenant-facing staff at that level.

260. Currently, apprenticeships are available at Level 3 and Level 4. It may be that a degree or Level 6+ non-degree (i.e., professional) apprenticeship at Level 6 or 7 could provide a route to delivering professional qualifications at senior levels in the sector, and allow apprenticeship funding to be better used by the sector.

**Recommendation 13:** Sector bodies should investigate the feasibility of delivering professional qualifications through the medium of apprenticeships, and review the existing apprenticeships available with housing providers to ensure they meet their needs.

261. This approach could potentially go together with a co-ordinated drive by sector bodies and large providers to promote the sector to graduates and school leavers. Many interviewees mentioned that they had fallen into the housing sector by chance or through living in social housing, and had not thought of it initially. Few mentioned that they had seen it promoted. This will need to change if providing professional qualifications is to have an impact on recruitment, since potential recruits will need to be made aware of the changes for them to be effective in driving recruitment.