

Review of the Building Safety Workforce in Wales

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document summarises the findings of research conducted for Welsh Government. The research aims to provide Welsh Government with detailed insights regarding the workforce carrying out duties relating to ensuring the safety of residential buildings in Wales in the occupation phase. This workforce, primarily employed by local authorities and working on activities including HHSRS (Housing Health and Safety Rating System) inspection and enforcement actions on landlords, is referred to throughout the research as the 'building safety workforce'.
- 1.2 The research is intended to provide a baseline for policy development and resourcing. IFF Research were commissioned by the Welsh Government to carry out the research as part of the Building Safety Programme, which was established in response to the tragedy at Grenfell Tower.
- 1.3 The research objectives were as follows:
 - (1) Explore the profile of the building safety workforce, including diversity and inclusion, and the workforce's current and future capacity across Welsh local authorities;
 - (2) Seek the views of key housing stakeholders on the residential building safety workforce and regulation;
 - (3) Capture current local authority ability to meet the existing regulatory requirements in relation to resource, team capacity and skills; and
 - (4) Explore the ways that local authorities meet existing regulatory requirements and identify barriers to carrying out inspections and enforcement actions.
- 1.4 The research consisted of qualitative interviews with policy stakeholders, conducted between October and December 2022; two online surveys, one with representatives from local authorities in Wales, and one with members of the building safety workforce, both conducted between January and April 2023; and qualitative interviews with members of the workforce conducted between April and May 2023. Full details of the methodology can be found in the final report.
- 1.5 This summary sets out the key findings from the full report, then sets out considerations to take note of based on IFF Research's interpretation of the research.

2. Key Findings: Current workforce

- 2.1 There are a range of organisational structures in use at local authorities in Wales for ensuring building safety in the occupation phase. Stakeholder interviews suggested that traditionally, Housing

departments have handled building safety in the occupation phase for council housing, and Environmental Health departments have handled this for other housing. However, the workforce survey found significant overlap in practice. It is unclear from this research which structures are most efficient or effective.

- 2.2 Around 200 people work in building safety for private sector housing¹ in the occupation phase in Wales, mostly (c.141) in inspection and enforcement roles. Data for individual local authorities indicates many have unfilled roles, suggesting overtime is being worked, or that other changes are necessary to meet the demands of the service. There is great variation in the number of officers relative to the local population across local authority areas, suggesting that there may be geographical variation in the service delivered.
- 2.3 Staff working on building safety often have wider roles, particularly Housing Officers, working only part-time on building safety. Given shortages in relevant skills and knowledge, this suggests resource could be better utilised, in a narrow sense, by ensuring they spend more time on inspection and enforcement.
- 2.4 In comparison to the Welsh working age population, the workforce contains a smaller proportion of women and ethnic minorities. The workforce is also older than the Welsh working age population, especially in Environmental Health departments and roles, suggesting a low volume of new recruits entering the workforce. As well as the implications for equality, this lack of representation could potentially lead to missed opportunities, since those in under-represented categories may have skills which would be useful to the sector.

3. Key Findings: Ways of working, skills, and training

How inspection and enforcement currently works

- 3.1 Findings from the qualitative interviews with the workforce indicate that inspections most often occur reactively, in response to complaints from occupants, or in response to HMO (House in Multiple Occupation) applications as part of the licencing process. Capacity appears to be the primary factor determining the frequency and proactivity of inspections. For example, one interviewee stated that they were not doing proactive inspections currently because they did not have the necessary resource.
- 3.2 There was some variation across local authorities regarding standard procedures of enforcement. For example, in many local authorities the standard policy is to take informal action after an inspection (unless there is an imminent risk to health) and try to resolve issues ‘amicably’ rather than undertake formal action. Informal enforcement actions are widely used in practice. Such actions include providing landlords with a report outlining the problems identified and setting a deadline for them to address them, at which point formal enforcement actions may ensue.
- 3.3 In other local authorities, a formal type of enforcement action is usually carried out immediately, for instance serving landlords with an improvement notice or a hazard awareness notice.

“Our enforcement attitude, particularly if it’s occupied property, is that if someone’s living in it, it needs to be remedied. Therefore, you’re almost always going to get an enforcement, and inspect and improvement notice. At the very least.”

Senior Environmental Health Officer

- 3.4 The variation between local authorities around processes of inspection and enforcement suggest local authorities have adapted to different circumstances, whether this is different levels of capacity,

¹ In this report, private sector housing is defined as all housing which is not owned by Local Authorities – this can include housing owned by Social Housing Associations.

different levels of experience and knowledge within the team, differences in oversight and management style or circumstances which are specific to each local authority.

Skills and sources of support

- 3.5 Around two-thirds of both the workforce and local authorities said that they were confident that their teams had the skills required of them. This suggests that in most instances the level of experience and training within current teams was adequate. However, considering the age profile of the workforce, the potential effect of experienced individuals leaving the workforce, and not being replaced by similarly experienced individuals, could be significant.
- 3.6 There were gaps in knowledge and lower confidence among the workforce in regard to carrying out inspection on tall buildings, including in areas where these buildings existed. Only one in five respondents to the workforce survey said that they were confident carrying out inspections on buildings of 11 metres or more in height, compared to just under half of all respondents for smaller buildings. In contrast, a large majority of respondents felt confident with respect to other HMOs.
- 3.7 There was sometimes a perception that applicants and recruits who had completed qualifications in Environmental Health lacked practical experience and skills in housing and construction. So, while they may have a good grounding in the legislation from their academic qualifications, they were felt by some interviewees to struggle in practical aspects of inspection and enforcement that were not covered in their studies. They therefore need time to receive training and build up the necessary experience, rather than being able to immediately fulfil every aspect of the role.

“There’ll always be training requirements for either inspection or enforcement... With graduates and post-grads, the practical technique around inspection of buildings is not being taught any more. They’re losing the ability to look at buildings, to visually gauge what a building is and what to expect in terms of the practical vocation.”

Senior Environmental Health Officer

- 3.8 Staff often felt the technical and legal advice available to them was somewhat inadequate, and that individuals working on tasks relating to building safety could benefit from legal training.

Training

- 3.9 The training available to the workforce was often provided by external training providers and was considered by staff and management interviewees to be good quality. Training availability was more of a constraint however, with limited supply from a small number of providers being regarded as a problem.
- 3.10 Training could also be made more accessible to individuals working in building safety. Staff time for training could be ring-fenced more effectively, and opportunities to attend more ‘niche’ training could be promoted. This could help boost staff retention.

4. Key Findings: Resourcing and recruitment

Workload pressures

- 4.1 Local authorities face significant capacity issues. The most common barrier to conducting work related to building safety was workload pressure. This often impacted upon teams’ ability to meet the demands on their time. In particular, some interviewees were concerned about the lack of capacity to carry out proactive inspection, rather than solely follow up complaints. Workload pressures were a particular problem for Environmental Health departments, whose staff often have multiple responsibilities - whereas Housing departments are under comparatively less pressure.

- 4.2 Local authorities stated in the survey that they were dealing with these shortages through short-term approaches (e.g., postponing non-essential activities), and introducing efficiencies through technology. Qualitative interviews indicated a number of different approaches to reducing workload, with varying degrees of impact. Some had reduced or stopped proactive inspection, while others had reduced enforcement. Others had put in place parallel forms of informal enforcement or triage.
- 4.3 Reflecting the lack of confidence in inspecting and providing advice on buildings 11 metres or more in height within the workforce, local authorities acknowledged that it was difficult to source the skills required to carry out inspection and enforcement actions for tall buildings. Of the 20 local authorities who responded to the survey, only one said they found it easy to access these skills.
- 4.4 The HHSRS, which is required to be used for inspections, is seen by some as onerous and sometimes disproportionate to the issue being investigated. The responsibility for its implementation also falls solely upon those with the requisite qualifications to carry it out. This puts further pressure on these individuals' workloads.
- 4.5 Concerns around lack of capacity (and secondarily access to skills) led to a large minority of local authorities saying that they did not have confidence in the ability of the system locally to tackle building safety hazards, particularly for tall buildings.

Motivations for working in the sector

- 4.6 Among the workforce, the key motivating factors for working in the sector were that the roles typically involved travelling to different sites rather than being stuck behind a desk, the day-to-day variety, the chance to engage with many different people, and the satisfaction derived from helping the community and environment. On the downside, some felt the role could be quite confrontational and therefore stressful, and was not well paid within local authorities.

"It's nice when we can get properties back into use, and it's really fulfilling when you're working with a landlord and getting a property back into use. It's quite satisfying. There are so many empty derelict buildings to get back into use. It's also about making communities more vibrant, and upholding standards for landlords."

HMO Licensing Officer

Barriers to recruitment and retention

- 4.7 High entry requirements in terms of qualifications and practical experience mean that there is a limited pool of candidates for local authorities to recruit from. The volume of people enrolling in these qualifications seems weakly connected to demand for recruits with those qualifications. These entry requirements may also be particularly difficult to meet for those seeking a career change.
- 4.8 Pay was seen by interviewees as a key barrier to recruitment and retention, as there was a perception that candidates and the current workforce would be able to earn a similar amount, or more, in roles that had lower entry requirements and were less onerous.

"The rate of my job scale, I could go to a neighbouring organisation and make £5k to £6k more annually... [it was] decided you did not need HNC for my role and held back the role increments, so it devalued the job where tradespeople were earning more than me despite my qualifications. People are earning more doing trades than as qualified surveyors for the local authorities."

Technical Officer

Role for Apprenticeships

- 4.9 Relatively few local authorities indicated that they would be likely to offer apprenticeships if there was a suitable framework available. However, the large proportion of respondents who answered 'don't know' to this question suggests that local authorities might be open to the concept.

5. Considerations

- 5.1 Based on the findings of the research, the following considerations to take note of have been outlined, including areas for potential future research to build upon the findings of this study.. It is important to note that the considerations are based solely on IFF Research's interpretation of the findings of the research, and that IFF Research's involvement in, or exposure to, ongoing policy development does not extend beyond the scope of the research.

The current workforce – key challenges

- 5.2 The research identified a relative lack of diversity in the workforce, pre-existing capacity challenges within local authority teams, and highlighted that many staff felt less confident carrying out inspections and enforcement actions on buildings over 11 metres in height than for buildings that are lower than this. These three findings represent the overarching challenges that the Welsh Government and local authorities face in relation to ensuring the building safety workforce is equipped to carry out their responsibilities.

- 1) At the time of the research, members of the building safety workforce in Wales were more likely than the overall Welsh working-age population to be male and were more likely to be over the age of 35. When recruiting, local authorities could consider how the sector can be made more appealing and attainable to parts of the population who might not otherwise have considered a career in the sector. Using the results of this research as a starting point, there is an opportunity for Welsh Government to open a dialogue with local authorities to identify and disseminate best practice advice for recruiting a more diverse workforce.
- 2) Local authority teams working on the safety of residential buildings during the occupation phase lacked the capacity to meet all of the demands upon their time. To maintain, and improve upon, current levels of service delivery, local authorities will need to ensure they are working efficiently, and/or increase the number of FTE roles in the teams working on building safety. It is also the case that some local authorities have larger teams working on building safety, and there are differences in the scale and type of demand. Local authorities could explore opportunities to cooperate and share resources as a solution for the lack of capacity within individual teams.
- 3) Local authorities and individual members of the workforce were less likely to feel confident carrying out inspections and enforcement actions on buildings over 11 metres in height than for buildings that are lower than this. This indicates that there is a gap in the skills and knowledge required to help ensure the safety of tall buildings in Wales. Local authorities should monitor the skills gaps in their teams and, depending on the outcome, might find it useful to train existing or new staff in those skills. Welsh Government can aid local authorities by liaising and conducting research with local authorities, training providers, educational institutes, and the workforce to establish whether this skills gap requires new training or resources to be developed to ensure that the appropriate training and education is made available at the required scale.

Recruitment to the sector

- 5.3 Recruitment should be considered a key component when addressing the challenges outlined above, particularly in relation to diversifying the workforce to bring in skills and experiences from parts of the population that are underrepresented, and in increasing the capacity of the workforce.

- 5.4 The report broadly outlined two entry routes to the sector - an 'early career pathway which usually involves higher education and gaining qualifications after leaving school, and 'mid-career pathways which could involve a change in career at a later stage of life. Some considerations around recruitment are set out below. However, more research would be required to gain a detailed understanding of pathways into the sector, their relative importance as entry routes, any barriers and opportunities, and any other considerations which were not uncovered through this research.
- 4) The key motivating factors for working in the sector were that the roles typically involved travelling to different sites rather than being stuck behind a desk, the day-to-day variety, the chance to engage with many different people, and the satisfaction derived from helping the community and built environment. When recruiting to the sector, these are key factors that local authorities could emphasise in job adverts and other promotional materials or events.
 - 5) High entry requirements in terms of qualifications and practical experience mean that there is a limited pool of candidates for local authorities to recruit from. These entry requirements may be particularly difficult to meet for those seeking a career change. Local authorities could explore ways in which job requirements, recruitment processes and promotional activities could be more open and attract interest from candidates currently working in other sectors (or in other teams within their Local Authority) who may possess relevant crossover skills. Welsh Government could aid local authorities by conducting more research into pathways into the sector and identify adjacent sectors which local authorities could recruit from.
 - 6) There was a perception that it was difficult to recruit to the sector due to a limited pool of candidates with the requisite qualifications. Alongside the workforce being older than the Welsh working-age population, a potential long-term challenge for the sector is to attract young people in the required volumes and ensure they receive the education and training needed. Welsh Government can aid local authorities' recruitment efforts by promoting cooperation between local authorities and educational institutes, for example through training partnerships or work placements. Welsh Government could also conduct research with local authorities, educational institutions, and young people to better understand the dynamics between the educational opportunities available to young people, the current and projected size of the candidate pool, and local authorities' workforce requirements.

Skills, training and resources

- 5.5 Recruitment alone will not solve the key challenges for the building safety workforce sector, in particular the short-term needs for skilled and experienced workers. The considerations below cover training and resources for the current workforce, as well as considerations around equipping those entering the workforce with the skills and experience that would benefit them and their teams.
- 5.6 With all of these considerations, a first step would be to gain a greater understanding of the current training and educational landscape, in order to connect the training required with those who would most benefit from it, in the appropriate volumes. It was beyond the scope of this research to map the current training landscape. Areas which could be addressed through further research include: which training modules and educational courses already exist and which would need to be established to address skills gaps; the volume of available places and their uptake; who in the workforce and wider population already take part or would benefit from such training; and the extent of any skills gaps and the volumes of training and educational places required to address those.
- 7) There was a perception that environmental health graduates lack the practical skills and experience required for the roles they are applying to. The Welsh Government and local authorities could explore opportunities for young people to gain exposure to the construction and housing sectors as part of their education and/or work experience. This could be through the

promotion and establishment of partnerships between educational institutes and local authorities, for example through providing training or work placements.

- 8) Related to the point above, local authorities could explore ways in which recent graduates, who have joined the sector, can gain practical skills and experience in construction and housing as part of their onboarding and training.
- 9) The HHSRS standard was seen by some as time-consuming and complicated, and the responsibility for its implementation falls solely upon those with the requisite qualifications, which puts pressure on these individuals' workloads. Training additional staff in the use of HHSRS might bring long term efficiencies in local authorities experiencing these issues. Welsh Government can aid local authorities by liaising and conducting research with local authorities, training providers, educational institutes, and the workforce to ensure that the appropriate training and education is made available at the required scale.
- 10) Some staff felt the technical and legal advice available to them was inadequate, and that individuals working on tasks relating to building safety could benefit from legal training. While local authorities could usefully provide training to address this, this study found examples of local authorities sharing skills in this area. Where not already doing so, local authorities could explore opportunities to share resources and sources of legal advice. Welsh Government could liaise with local authorities to identify and share best practice advice for accessing resources and legal advice.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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