

Community Support & Life After Lockdown Report



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Preface

The [Resident Voice Index™](#) initiative from MRI Software is a long-term project that seeks to provide insight and information that can be used to improve the lives of social housing residents by asking them directly about their feelings and perceptions on current topics. We present these actionable insights free of charge.

Our first study in 2021 investigated feelings of belonging, caring and safety amongst UK social housing communities. The framework and analytical techniques that were put in place allowed us to uncover useful relationships that helped formulate suggestions for interventions by all those living and working in social housing.

With the help of partners, residents, registered providers and other stakeholders, this next study has leveraged the structure that was put in place last year and extended the project into new areas. We hope that you find the results of this work enjoyable to read and that the sector can use the outcomes for the benefit of social housing residents.

Doug Sarney
Solutions Principal & Project Lead
January 2022

Resident Voice Index™ background

This is an independent national survey initiative from MRI Software that asks a broad spectrum of social housing residents at regular intervals what they think and feel about key topics that directly impact their lives. The project focuses on perceptions rather than conventional satisfaction metrics.

The key objective of the Resident Voice Index™ is to draw out meaningful and actionable insights and present these to stakeholders who are serious about improving the lives of social housing residents. This includes key decision makers in social housing, local and national government, ombudsmen, strategy groups, regulators and social housing residents themselves.

Why is MRI Software doing this?

MRI Software wants to give something back to the social housing sector beyond conventional Corporate Social Responsibility activities, which is why the Resident Voice Index™ is delivered as a free resource. This also makes it truly **independent**, which along with **breavity**, **transparency** and **anonymity** forms our principal set of cornerstones for the project.

Our partners

This project is a collaborative undertaking and alongside consultation with providers, policy makers and most importantly, residents, MRI Software has teamed up with strategic partners across the sector.

The [Housing Associations Charitable Trust \(HACT\)](#) has a wealth of experience in resident feedback and acknowledges the drawbacks of conventional satisfaction mechanisms. HACT has advised our research team to ensure that the Resident Voice Index™ project asks questions that matter – and asks them well.

The [Housing Quality Network \(HQN\)](#) is one of the sector's leading advisory, support and training organisations. They assist the project through the engagement of their established Residents' Network to ensure that resident insights are incorporated into the survey design.

[us marketing](#) is a specialist agency working with organisations that deliver social impact. Since the inception of the Resident Voice Index™ initiative, us has worked alongside MRI Software to shape the project with their expertise in community engagement and delivery of high-quality thought leadership.

Residents first

The Resident Voice Index™ incorporates the resident view at every stage of the project, learning what they'd like to be asked about, what their limits are as far as topics are concerned and how they wish to be communicated with. We ensure that all resident events and consultations protect their anonymity and have no landlords present.

In recognition of the aims of this initiative and the time that residents take to complete the surveys and engage with the project, we communicate our results publicly to residents first. In accordance with the way in which residents have expressed they would like their insights to be used, results are made available on residentvoiceindex.com, with the data being presented 'as is'.



Executive summary

In September 2021, the Resident Voice Index™ was put through its paces for the first time with the publication of its first report and following this proof of concept, grew in confidence to investigate some of the more timely themes impacting those living in social housing. At the time of writing, the UK has entered a period where it seems unlikely that another full-scale lockdown will be enforced upon the population in response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This presented an opportunity to capture some of the feelings about this extraordinary collective experience whilst it was still in the near past.

In the midst of the early lockdowns, the [OECD](#) recommended that nations recognise how well communities had responded to these events and analyse the factors that had contributed towards better outcomes in order to help prepare for inevitable future shocks. The OECD proposed that the trust communities have in institutions as well as levels of social cohesion and connection can affect how the same disaster unfolds in different communities. The results from the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey support this and many of the actionable insights uncovered point towards facilitating connection and fostering trust.

“More transparency and consideration into what local residents actually need. Thinking about the effects certain projects can have on neighbouring residents.”

Survey respondent

Since the publication of the Resident Voice Index™ [Neighbourhoods & Communities](#) report, a new UK Minister for Housing has been appointed and the ministry has been rebranded ‘[The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities](#)’. It is to be expected that soon enough there will be another shake-up in processes and approaches, especially as elements of November 2020’s Charter for Social Housing Residents become law in 2022.

In our consultations with sector professionals and residents in October 2021, these impending changes did not surface to the forefront of their concerns. Speaking to providers, there was a palpable sense of foreboding for the more tangible challenges of the coming months. Despite the ‘crisis’ phase of the pandemic appearing to have passed, there is still little sense of ‘business as usual’ – even if expectations of this are no more than for services to revert to pre-pandemic levels.

Both the workshops and the results of the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey revealed that the pandemic had exacerbated challenges faced by communities, such as loneliness. It had also accelerated changes in how residents accessed services, for example, the shift to primarily digital contact.

A noticeable number of respondents to the survey who described their housing provider as a great source of support during this time, also referred to them as having been good ‘before’ – leading the project to ponder the meaning of ‘organisational resilience’ and further questions on how it can be encouraged. Of course, the opposite sentiment also emerged, suggesting that the pandemic may have deepened existing practices, for better or worse.

The survey, which took an average of five minutes to complete, chose three central themes: loneliness, resilience, and optimism. Other questions also explored the sources of support that respondents received during the lockdowns and their relationship with their housing provider. The analysis yielded a different style of results to the previous survey; rather than ‘here and now’ and easily quotable statistics, what emerged were intriguing trends and shifts.

Highlights of the results

- Nearly 4,200 self-selecting UK social housing residents completed the survey
- In late 2021, respondents were more than twice as likely to be lonely than not lonely (56% vs 26%)
- Before the first lockdown (March 2020), 38% of people reported being lonely which increased to 56% after the lockdowns
- Almost 4 in 10 people reported an increase in their overall loneliness score because of the lockdowns

Findings that loneliness increased across the pandemic, when as a society we were asked not to socialise may be somewhat expected. However, the levels that are being reported are not inconsequential.

- It was reassuring that resilience levels were high, with over 60% of respondents classifying as such
- Additionally, there was relief that less than 10% of respondents scored in the extreme ‘non-resilient’ categories and those identifying as such only increased by a small amount across the pandemic

The quick emergence of building ‘resilience’ as a key strategy within the social housing sector has led to a wide array of work being undertaken to establish what it means in this context and how it works in practice. The results from the Resilience section of this report will help to bolster this body of work as it materialises.

- When asked about optimism, nearly 70% of people were unable to commit to being hopeful for the future of their local community
- The most common free-text inputs from those who were classified as ‘pessimists’ were identified by answers that asked for immediate ‘help’ or ‘support’, intimating that being in need may impact one’s ability to visualise the future positively
- Respondents who are aware of the actions of their housing provider are twice as likely to be optimistic about the future of their local community

When questions were filtered by living environment, results for the key themes favoured villages as better places for people to live. The implications of these findings for those who provide housing and build neighbourhoods are explored further in this report.

Regarding age, these results supported the previous Resident Voice Index™ study, in which across all measures, those under 35 tend to report more negative experiences.

New analysis was added to the Resident Voice Index™ for this survey; questions asking about feelings before March 2020 and in the present allowed for the measurement of the shifts in perceptions across this time. An index score splitting respondents into ‘Exemplars’ and ‘Detractors’ was once again applied to the results, which was then used to filter free-text answers. For the first time, the Resident Voice Index™ asked an ‘Ultimate Question’ that will now be included in every survey to create a trackable index.

Importantly, for respondents it often came down to the basics; “Decent housing and a compassionate housing provider”. One of the leading findings that came through was the need from residents to be listened to, consulted and involved. For those organisations that integrate the resident voice in how their services are delivered, there are wide-ranging positive ramifications. In this regard, [Housing LIN](#) associate reductions in loneliness and elevated wellbeing with community-led housing projects. Perceived neighbourhood quality has also been [linked](#) to resident health.

Many of the issues, challenges and solutions that are included in this report are far-reaching and require action at an individual, organisational, and state level – grand-to-small changes. The first are easy for us all to begin with, and it starts with neighbourliness. In the words of a respondent, “It helps if we know each other’s names”.

“Small things matter.”

Resident, Resident Voice Index™ workshop

“Listening is so powerful.”

Housing provider, Resident Voice Index™ workshop

“I believe it is largely down to individuals to support each other, and this then flows out to the community. If we leave 100% of it to councils and housing providers, lots of people fall through the cracks.”

Survey respondent



The Resident Voice Index™ score

Embedded within every Resident Voice Index™ survey is a simple calculation that scores every respondent based on their answers to three central index questions. Respondents score one point for each of the index questions that they answer positively and zero points if they do not respond positively. Using a five-point Likert scale, responding positively is defined as choosing one of the top two answers and equates to one point per question.

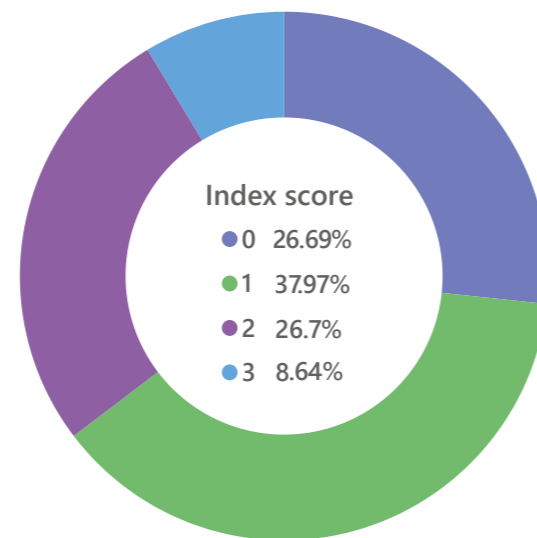
On completion of the survey, every respondent will have scored either 0, 1, 2 or 3 index points depending on their number of positive responses. Those scoring 3 points are labelled 'Exemplars' and those scoring 0 points are deemed to be 'Detractors'.

Three questions were chosen to explore the central themes of the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey: loneliness, resilience and optimism. The three index questions were as follows:

1. At the moment, how often do you feel lonely? (Often/ Always, Some of the time, Occasionally, **Hardly ever**, **Never**)
2. Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reactions. (**Almost always**, **Often**, Sometimes, Rarely, Almost never)
3. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Post-lockdown, I am hopeful for the future of my local community." (**Strongly agree**, **Agree**, Neither, Disagree, Strongly disagree)

Answers scoring an index point are shown in green text.

Analysis of the index scores shows that under 9% of survey respondents (360 people) classify as Exemplars, meaning that they are not lonely, they are resilient and they are optimistic for the future of their community. Conversely, over 1,100 respondents (27%) are categorised as Detractors, meaning that they classify as lonely, they are not resilient and they are not optimistic.



These results were compared with the 2021 Resident Voice Index™ Neighbourhoods & Communities survey, whose central themes were neighbourhood belonging, caring about community involvement and safety in the neighbourhood. The total percentage of Exemplars and Detractors was significantly higher in the earlier survey than in this survey (49% vs 35%), meaning that there were higher numbers scoring on only 1 or 2 index questions in these results.

The index score was then applied as a filter across the answers to the other questions in the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey with a focus on those that scored 3 and those that scored 0. These are the subsets that we hope will provide insights into the positive interventions to move towards, as well as those to be avoided.

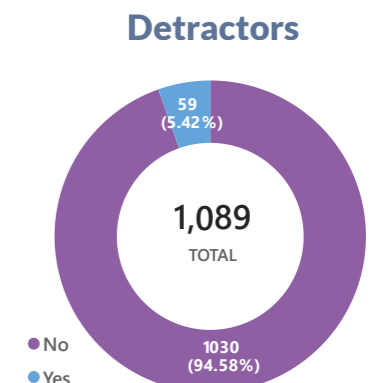
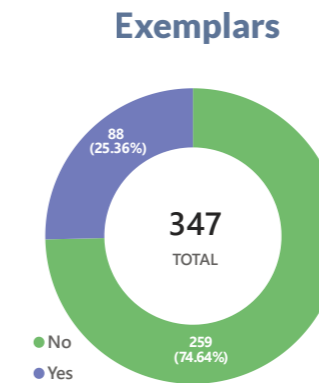
Exemplars

With only around 9% of respondents classifying as Exemplars, the sample size is somewhat limiting. However, visual analysis of the words that Exemplars use when talking positively about their communities shows that 'community spirit', 'face-to-face', 'local people' and 'working together' are important to this cohort.

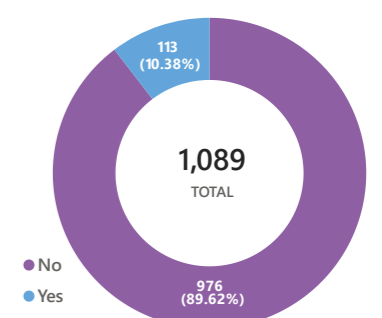
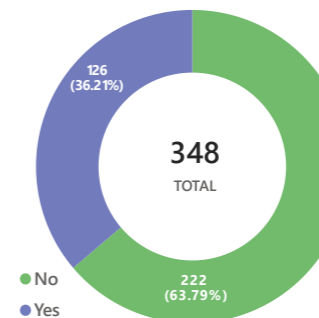
Results from this study echoed those of the earlier Resident Voice Index™ results, in that Exemplars scored significantly higher than Detractors on those questions that concerned their relationship with their housing provider.

Exemplars were almost 5 times more likely to think that the pandemic had improved their relationship with their housing provider and 3.5 times more likely to be aware of positive interventions from their provider.

Do you think that the pandemic has improved your relationship with your housing provider?



During the lockdowns were you aware of any actions of your housing provider that helped you or people in your community?



Detractors

With around 1,100 respondents being unable to commit positively to any of the index questions, the sample size for Detractors is more robust.

When asked the same questions concerning the community, there was a high frequency of being unaware or not caring in the responses. As a result, answers including 'community' and 'local' were demoted down the list of most common responses. Other common responses included 'social media' and 'mental health', which are absent from the top 10 responses for Exemplars.

Possible actions that could help social housing residents move towards being resilient, optimistic and not lonely could focus on those attributes that the Exemplars promote. Housing providers have a part to play in this due to the closer relationship that Exemplars have been shown to have with those that provide their housing.



Loneliness

What is loneliness?

It's only natural to feel lonely from time to time, but a sustained feeling of loneliness and the absence of the rewards of social connection can be damaging to our health. Loneliness sits alongside issues like air pollution, obesity and alcohol abuse as a significant pressure on public health. [Evidence](#) has shown that it can even increase an individual's risk of death by 45%, with some [studies](#) suggesting that a frequent feeling of loneliness can be as damaging as 15 cigarettes per day.

Since March 2020, the global population has had to deal with less face-to-face contact as a result of lockdowns and social distancing. It would be extraordinary for loneliness not to have increased amongst populations during this time - and it has. It's worth noting though, that loneliness has been rising for many years in the UK and was already a major concern [prior to the pandemic](#).

“Every year, European adults lose 11.4 million good years of life to loneliness. This makes loneliness more detrimental to human happiness than any other condition under consideration.”

Happiness Research Institute

The Resident Voice Index™ project has observed loneliness first-hand. In an early workshop with residents, one attendee remarked that they had joined the group simply to feel involved and experience some social interaction.

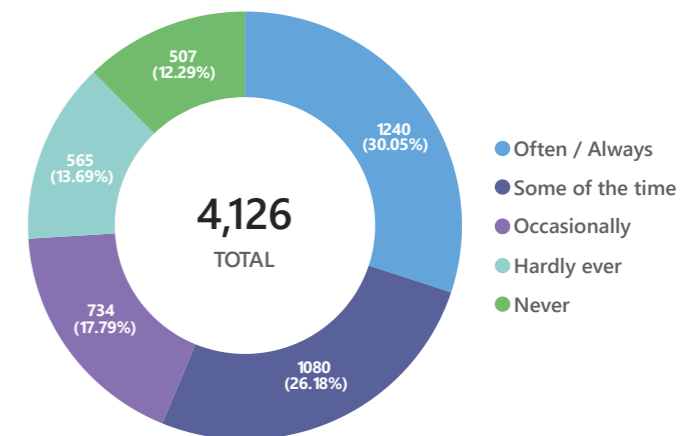
Purpose

Social housing residents are more likely to [live alone](#) than the rest of the UK population, which could leave them more susceptible to feeling lonely. Though it is important to state that being alone is not the same as being lonely.

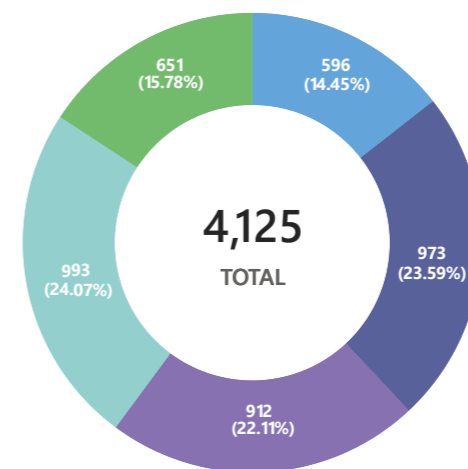
Legislatively, the [Charter for Social Housing Residents \(2020\)](#) encourages social housing providers to be active in tackling loneliness and in 2018, the government announced a [strategy](#) to tackle loneliness in England. At the time of writing, it seems safe to forecast that the days of strict lockdowns are now behind us in the UK, bringing in a time where local government, housing providers, service providers and communities need to mobilise to address loneliness and increase social connections.

The Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey asked self-selecting social housing residents how often they felt lonely at the time of asking (November 2021) and then prior to the pandemic. A loneliness Likert scale, used commonly by UKGOV, ONS and other organisations was employed when asking about loneliness.

1. At the moment, how often do you feel lonely?



- Often / Always
- Some of the time
- Occasionally
- Hardly ever
- Never



2. How often did you feel lonely before the pandemic i.e. before March 2020?

For the purposes of reporting and segmentation, as well as calculation of the index, in this analysis we classified the two categories at the more extreme end of the scale as 'lonely people'. Conversely, the two categories at the other end of the scale are described as 'not lonely'.

Results and discussion

At the time of asking, levels of loneliness were high across respondents, with over half reporting as lonely. Generally, respondents were more than twice as likely to be lonely than not lonely (56% vs 26%). It should be noted that prior to March 2020, approaching 4 in 10 people reported being lonely, showing that loneliness was still prevalent at that time. In these results, almost twice as many social housing residents (30%) reported being lonely 'Often/Always' than in the coinciding December 2021 [English Housing Survey](#) (17%). In that survey, social housing residents also showed higher levels of loneliness than any other tenure type, in some cases by more than 6 times.

The disparities in these results may be in part due to the Resident Voice Index™ data collection surveying only social housing residents and running in November and December when Covid-19 cases were on the rise and news of the Omicron variant started to circulate. We also note that asking for present feelings alongside those before the pandemic may have influenced respondents' answers.

Results from the survey showed that rates of loneliness decreased with age. When asked, the younger half of respondents (under 45) were significantly more lonely than the older half (over 45), with a similar trend prior to the pandemic. Loneliness is often framed by policy documents and within housing strategy as a [circumstance](#) affecting older people, however [recent and emerging evidence](#) is revealing an exponential rise in loneliness amongst young people.

It is worth noting that these results did not provide a large enough sample size for the over 70s (325) to draw insights in confidence about the loneliness levels of social housing residents in later life. In the context of this report therefore, 'older' indicates those over 55.

In the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, female respondents reported being lonelier than males (57.2% vs 52.8%). What's more, a markedly higher proportion of males were not lonely when compared with not lonely females. Results from before the pandemic revealed that prior to March 2020, there were negligible differences between males and females in their levels of loneliness, suggesting that females have been more greatly impacted in terms of loneliness in response to the pandemic lockdowns.



Community spirit

When asked about their communities, many respondents spoke of the value of ‘community spirit’, their disappointment when it is absent and the desire for it to grow where they live. ‘Community spirit’ is defined as ‘a sense of fellowship and solidarity which is felt by the members of a community.’ During the lockdowns many neighbourhoods became closer, offering mutual aid and getting to know one another better by a life contained.

It is also worth remembering that some, especially those in apartment blocks, were living cheek-by-jowl at the same time as being encouraged to limit social interaction, getting to ‘know’ the habits of those around them without getting to know and connect with them. In some cases, this was grating and in others even led to disdain for neighbours.

“I found that when you support others it makes a huge difference just helping with the little things, popping to shops to get groceries, collect meds and talking on the phone.”

Survey respondent

“People realising that community is what we share and that is where our strength and support will be, as shown in the pandemic.”

Survey respondent

Targeted investment in community cohesion works. In fact, in communities where local authorities have introduced active strategies to improve it, residents are twice as likely to volunteer and were found to have a greater sense of neighbourliness.

We wouldn’t have survived the past two years without ‘community spirit’ - from operators at food banks to vaccination centre volunteers, Britons were there for each other. Any service provider should be proud to invest in projects to nurture it.

The loneliness shift

The survey asked about social housing residents’ feelings of loneliness before the pandemic and in late 2021. This allows examination of the shift in loneliness that occurred over that time and analysis has identified multiple aspects of that change.

Firstly, a straightforward look at the shift in loneliness across that time revealed that since March 2020, 38% of respondents reported becoming more lonely, 7% had become less lonely and 55% exhibited no change.

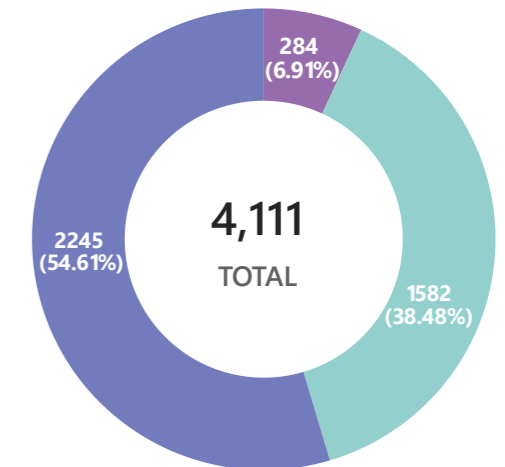
Respondents under 35 exhibited the highest levels of change from people being not lonely before the pandemic to being lonely now (21%), when compared with 35–54-year-olds (17%) and the over 55s (18%).

When looking at those who were not lonely before the pandemic but were lonely now, 18% had fallen into the most extreme bands for loneliness (‘Often/Always’ or ‘Some of the time’). Younger people were also more likely to fall from being not lonely into one of the two most extreme bands for loneliness.

The Loneliness Shift Index

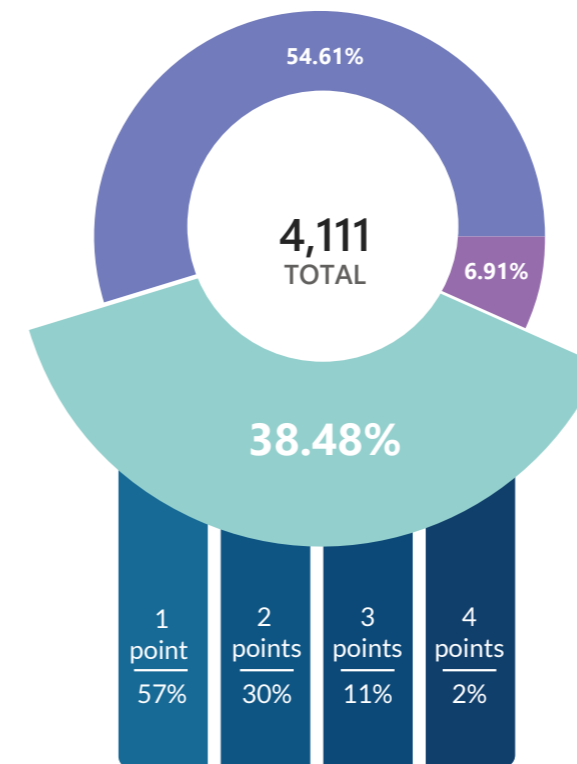
A parallel analysis of the data was undertaken, which set aside the classification of ‘lonely’ or ‘not lonely’ and looked only at changes in the loneliness score, regardless of whether the respondent had fallen into an extreme category or not. This revealed that 38.5% of respondents were reporting an increase in their loneliness levels as a result of the pandemic.

To obtain a finer understanding of the impacts of loneliness on respondents, it was important to split out these shifts to gauge the amounts of mild, moderate or major changes in loneliness that people experienced and the direction of change.



● Less lonely ● More lonely ● No change

● Less lonely ● More lonely ● No change



Loneliness Shift Index

Over half (57%) of those who felt lonelier only saw a mild change (moving 1 point on the Loneliness Shift Index), for example from feeling lonely ‘Hardly ever’ to feeling it ‘Occasionally’. For the remaining 43%, a pronounced shift in loneliness was experienced (moving 2, 3 or 4 points on the Loneliness Shift Index). Put another way, of the 38% of all respondents who became lonelier since March 2020, 43% of those got markedly more lonely. Only 33 people reported the most extreme four-point slide from ‘Never’ feeling lonely to ‘Often/Always’ feeling lonely. As the chart to the left shows, over half of people experienced no change in their level of loneliness spanning that time frame but 44% of those people remained lonely the entire time.

It is likely that some of those experiencing these drastic rises in their levels of loneliness may be feeling it in a sustained way for the first time and may not be equipped with the tools to alleviate it. When analysed by age, the over 55s were the least lonely people and experienced the smallest shifts towards becoming more lonely than other age groups. Additionally, the prevalence of those who exhibited no change in loneliness increased with age.



Across the survey, we asked, amongst others, questions pertaining to people's resilience, optimism, relationship with their housing provider and their suggestions for how to improve their communities post-lockdown. Our analytical tools enable us to filter loneliness results by respondents' answers to these other questions and this showed that those who were 'Never' or 'Hardly ever' lonely were almost twice as optimistic as those who were 'Always/Often' lonely (40% vs 22%).

In the free-text responses, there were examples where loneliness inhibited that person's ability to imagine the future positively:

"I feel more alone than I ever have, so have no answers for this question."

Survey respondent

Others saw addressing loneliness as a necessary approach for communities to thrive post-lockdown:

"There needs to be more support groups so people don't feel so alone."

Survey respondent

"More groups or meet ups for the lonely."

Survey respondent

When viewed through the lens of resilience, those who were not lonely were around 1.5 times more resilient (78%) than those who were 'Always/Often' lonely (45%). This suggests a relationship between sustained feelings of loneliness and not being resilient.

A comparison of urban and non-urban dwellers revealed few differences. Yet, when the results were broken down further by type of environment (City, Town, Suburb, Village, Rural), one stood out; Villages. Village dwellers experienced the lowest shift in people becoming more lonely across the pandemic and the highest level of loneliness in that time. For more detail, see the Village Life section on p26.

Last word on loneliness

As the results above reveal, loneliness may saturate one's ability to be hopeful for the future. [Neuroscientists](#) have found that when human beings are lonely, our thinking becomes more self-centred, caustic and distant. It limits our ability to empathise with those around us. In some of the free-text answers encountered across the survey, there were a number that viewed neighbours with distrust or dislike and others that centred their own problems in questions relating to their communities. Loneliness leads individuals to exhibit qualities that are off-putting to others and according to John Cacioppo, a specialist in loneliness, "We evolved to experience social rejection in the same way as physical pain." This dual impact of feeling acute pain and having negative feelings towards our fellows means loneliness is a hard state to escape by one's own volition.

"Catch-22 of loneliness: to escape it, we need other people, but the emotion itself impairs our ability to attract them."

John Cacioppo, Social neuroscience researcher

This 'Catch-22' places a responsibility of tackling loneliness in our neighbourhoods upon those who aren't experiencing it. At a personal and immediate level, by greeting as many people in our community as we can - and at a strategic level by local governments, housing providers, service providers and community groups, in ramping up approaches to tackle loneliness by building social connections as the UK is more freely allowed to come together.

"Identify those in need in the community, don't wait for them to ask for help just check in on them."

Survey respondent



Green spaces

During the pandemic lockdowns, having access to a garden or nearby green space offered respite from an unprecedented experience. It also highlighted the inequalities for those who could not easily access green spaces. In the free-text answers in the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey and in the preparatory workshops with residents, people often spoke about the value that green spaces, and private and communal gardens bring to their lives.

“Invest in outside spaces. During the lockdown period those who didn’t have access to gardens felt the disadvantage more than usual. Having more green spaces, as well as tending to existing parks and gardens, would be most welcome.”

Survey respondent

“I don’t think anybody was prepared. Definitely the parks and nature kept people going.”

Survey respondent

It is estimated that the UK’s parks save £2 billion in health costs per year and deliver £7 in added value for every £1 investment. What’s more, evidence is increasingly linking access to green spaces to a significant reduction in feelings of loneliness, with scientists urging policy makers and service providers to deploy, “Specific measures that increase social inclusion and contact with nature, especially in densely populated cities.” Increasingly, tools and methodologies are emerging for providers to evidence and account for the impact of natural capital across neighbourhoods.



Place quality and quality of life

Quality of ‘place’ is linked to our social capital, opportunities and health. It is highly influenced by the provision of housing. We define ‘place quality’ as the liveability of a place including elements, such as aesthetics and upkeep, inclusivity, affordability and safety. In short, how much overall value residents can gain and give to their environment.

Improved environment

In answers to free-text questions throughout the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, a varied vocabulary emerged from residents wishing to see the upkeep of their neighbourhoods improve; ‘bin’, ‘cleaner’, ‘clean’, ‘dirty’, ‘rubbish’, ‘litter’, ‘tidy’, ‘fly-tipping’ to name just a few. Others suggested in response to this question, that neighbourhoods had declined since March 2020 and were in need of attention. There were also multiple responses asking for ‘better housing’.

“The appearance of the local area has declined. A lot of the buildings and outside areas have fallen into disrepair. There is graffiti and rubbish everywhere.”

Survey respondent

Improving the maintenance and usability of neighbourhoods, including social homes could positively contribute to wider policy goals. The evidence for doing so is there, with place quality linked to a wide array of desirable social outcomes, including stronger civic pride, fewer accidents, social integration, better educational outcomes and greater levels of safety.

Throughout our lives the environments we live in shape our quality of life. The current government has made the consideration of ‘Beauty’ part of its built environment planning policy.

‘Beauty’ is, of course in the eye of the beholder. There is a consensus however, that clean neighbourhoods in good repair are desirable for social housing residents and neighbourhoods generally.

Some housing providers are embracing the challenge of creating liveable, ‘beautiful’ neighbourhoods. Camden Council has partnered with Peter Barber Architects to create new developments with good design at the heart of them.

Lighting

When asked about the relationship they had with their housing provider, as well as what could positively impact their local communities after lockdown, a number of respondents suggested improvements to lighting.

In the Neighbourhoods & Communities survey, this was also a popular suggestion in relation to safety. We spoke to Centre for London’s Nicolas Bosetti about the role lighting can have in engaging communities and why housing providers should undertake these improvements:

“There really is a case for engaging residents in lighting design because they are the people who live there. They will know more about what their needs are and will also be able to tell you what the problems are. We find that lighting really is a great way to engage residents because it is something that you can change; it’s more flexible than most things in the built environment.”

Nicolas Bosetti, Centre for London,
MRI Social Housing Podcast



Pandemic support and relationship with housing provider

Support across the pandemic

When the UK entered its first lockdown in March 2020, services had to adapt at pace to the changing circumstances. Social housing providers, local councils and communities leapt into action to support those who were more vulnerable at that time.

According to HACT, between March and September 2020, social housing providers made over 890,000 welfare calls, delivered £1.6 million in financial assistance to households and provided a wealth of advice, guidance and support.

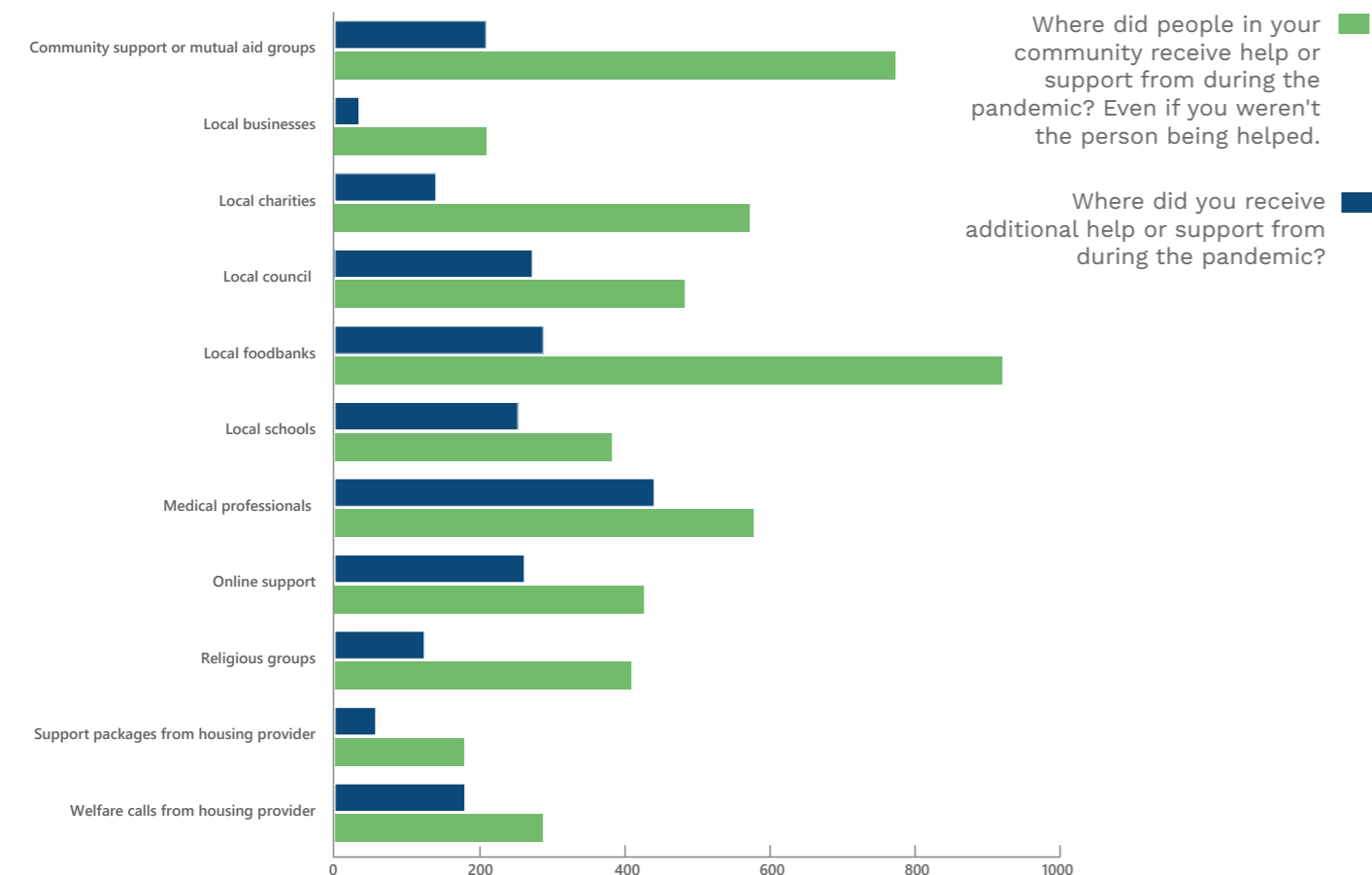
Results and discussion

Respondents to the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey were asked about the support they had received and the sources of help available to the wider community that they had noticed. For both questions, immediate sources of support - 'family', 'friends' and 'neighbours' - predictably dominated the results. In the graph below, these terms were excluded, with the aim of highlighting those other external resources that ranked highly. The term, 'foodbanks' was a prevalent answer for both the help that people received and that they saw their community benefit from.

Each list also included free-text space for 'Other' answers. For the first person question, the most frequent responses were iterations of 'nothing', 'no support', 'none'. Generally, these were referred to in the negative and intimated that these individuals felt that they could have done with more support. However, there were a number of respondents whose answers made it clear that they neither needed, asked for nor wanted help during that time.

"Did not need help or ask for it"
Survey respondent

Aside from 'foodbanks', respondents listed 'government food packages' as a source of support. Respondents also gave answers in the 'Other' space that cited work colleagues and employers as a source of support. When it came to the question of the help that they had noticed their community receive, the most common answers were those that showed a lack of awareness.



Relationship with housing provider

To explore the impact of the pandemic on the relationship between respondents and their housing provider, we asked three questions.

1. Do you think that the pandemic has improved your relationship with your housing provider?
Yes / No (12% / 88%)
2. Either way, please give examples (Free-text)
3. During the lockdowns were you aware of any actions of your housing provider that helped you or people in your community? (Even if you weren't the person being helped)
Yes / No (18% / 82%)

Usually, when binary questions are asked in a Resident Voice Index™ survey, it is not to expose these basic percentage splits, although we do observe them. What we aim to find with these comes through deeper analysis in relation to other questions, as detailed below. It is also worth noting for the first question, that the 88% represents those that reported the relationship hadn't improved, not that it had got worse.

The residents' view

A substantial proportion of the answers given for examples of how the relationship with housing providers changed, spoke about repairs that were required or the speed at which they were being carried out. There were also reasonably high incidences of the word 'excuse' or similar in relation to the impact of the pandemic on works and services, or that staff having to work from home had affected the quality of services. An observation is that patience is wearing thin with the disruption the pandemic has caused.

"Housing association seems even more distant now than before the pandemic. Repairs are slow and the ability to contact someone severely impeded."
Survey respondent

In their answers, many residents noticed the housing providers and local services that had served their communities across the pandemic. These insights correspond with those found in the Neighbourhoods & Communities report, whereby housing providers are perceived not only by how they treat people but by how individuals see those around them being treated, valued, listened to and supported.

"Our housing helped elderly and vulnerable tenants who needed it"
Survey respondent

"No discernible difference for me but I know that the provider did try to reach out to those who needed support"
Survey respondent

Some respondents attributed mergers and the closure of local services by housing providers as a reason for giving a negative response about the relationship across the pandemic. Resident Voice Index™ partner, [HQN](#) state that mergers "All too often are seen as business issues that are nothing to do with residents."

"Since my housing provider merged and changed name a few years before the lockdown, they have gone from being the best housing provider to the worst housing provider"
Survey respondent

Reports from our Resident Voice Index™ [Resident Ambassadors](#) show that mergers can be done well when residents are included on the journey and involved in decision-making. As discussed in the Neighbourhoods & Communities report, housing providers that build residents into processes show a [strong and intensified correlation](#) with improved financial performance.



In positive responses to the question of how relationships with housing providers changed, many of those that complimented their housing provider referred to them being good ‘before the pandemic’ and that having continued. This could suggest that the best housing providers had a better level of preparedness to withstand a shock, such as the pandemic.

“My housing provider has always been helpful, even before the pandemic”

Survey respondent

For those who answered that the pandemic had improved their relationship with their housing provider (12%), the most prevalent answers centred around communication. For example, ‘Phone calls’, ‘welfare calls’, ‘good communication’, ‘regular calls’, ‘via email’ (although the sample size was small, n=500).

The top answers for respondents whose relationship with their housing provider got worse or didn’t change (88%), were dominated by negative or apathetic phrases, such as ‘nothing changed’, ‘still waiting’, ‘don’t care’, ‘never heard’. These trends were mirrored when looking at those who were ‘aware’ and ‘not aware’ of the actions of their housing provider during the lockdowns.

In summary

These results, alongside supporting evidence from across this survey and the Neighbourhoods & Communities report, centre on improvements in communication between housing providers and residents. In the future, strategies that build the resident voice into decision-making at every stage of the housing delivery process are likely to be the most effective.



Mould and damp

In free-text answers about the relationship between respondents and their housing providers, numerous issues with mould and damp were reported. In some cases, the tone was despairing at the conditions respondents lived in. This echoes the public reckoning that the social housing sector has been subject to via ITV reporting, where hazardous and toxic living conditions due to damp were highlighted.

“We are still waiting for them (housing provider) to do something about our damp. It is a major thing as black damp has spread in the rooms.”

Survey respondent

“Mould, damp, everything broken, no help.”

Survey respondent

UK housing stock is some of the oldest and most poorly insulated in Europe. The impact of damp homes on residents is profound and as we have seen in answers to the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, even includes experiences of severe ill health. In 2021, 13% of social homes were estimated not to meet the Decent Homes Standard. This number is lower than privately rented accommodation and privately owned homes but is still beyond where it should be and needs to be made an immediate priority for the entire sector.

Knowing and communication

Knowing

An observation that arose whilst analysing the free-text answers for the question, ‘What things help your community to withstand shocks and help it to thrive?’ was that community resilience was strongly associated not just with using services or interacting with people, but also with simply ‘knowing’ that those things were there.

“Knowing that there is a community and support from people, neighbours and friends”

Survey respondent

“Knowing support is there, either neighbours or local council”

Survey respondent

It is known that a comprehensive social safety net improves resilience and achieves positive social outcomes. One example of this is ‘Nordic Exceptionalism’, where citizens of Nordic nations consistently report much higher levels of happiness and wellbeing than the rest of the world. This is facilitated by trust in the transparent and far-reaching social safety net.

Another observation in answers to the same Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey question was that 1 in 5 respondents weren’t aware of things that help their community to withstand shocks and thrive. This echoes a finding from the Resident Voice Index™ Neighbourhoods & Communities survey, where many respondents didn’t know of any positive contributions in communities made by their housing provider.

Communication

Communication and engagement were key issues that emerged across free-text answers. One respondent perfectly summed up what’s needed to impact communities positively in the future:

“Meaningful engagement of the local authority with our immediate community. Adequate resourcing and actions that involve the community in planning for themselves. Partnership work with the community. Engagement, engagement, engagement! An example could be a community engagement officer, anti-social behaviour officer or social prescriber to meet at least once a month to exchange information and progress on “known” problem areas that are historically under resourced!”

Survey respondent

Some respondents cited platforms, such as ‘Nextdoor’ that enabled interactions with their local community and helped them to connect in the absence of face-to-face contact throughout the lockdowns. Beyond interpersonal connections, well-planned and delivered communication with citizens from leadership and service providers during times of struggle has been shown to be a “central element” to improving community resilience. Moreover, studies have found that poor ‘top-down’ communication (from institutions or authorities) can negatively influence community resilience.

Improved communication and the deployment of engagement strategies that involve residents in decision-making is a repeated recommendation of the Resident Voice Index™ project, led by the contribution of respondents and the gathering of best practice evidence. Looking to the results of this survey and other studies on happiness and wellbeing, further research exploring the relationship between ‘knowing’ about a service or support source (even if it’s not accessed) and community resilience would be compelling.

Resilience

What is resilience?

The human quality that we refer to as ‘resilience’ is undoubtedly a complex characteristic, the definition of which has been the subject of extensive debate and [review](#).

In 2015, the Government Office for Science published ‘[Emotional and personal resilience through life](#)’ as part of the UK government’s Foresight Future of an Ageing Population project. In that report the author acknowledges that:

“One of the greatest challenges in the field of resilience is the variety of definitions of resilience used in research and in practice.”

It then adopts the following definition for resilience:

“The process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate this capacity for adaptation or ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity.”

If defining an individual’s personal resilience is a difficult task, the concept of community resilience is potentially more challenging still. Recently in [legislative environments](#), community resilience is related to preparing for disaster relief and long-term social and environmental changes. This shows that resilience is at the forefront of policy maker and service providers’ minds but how to encourage it is still in its development.

Community resilience frameworks in the UK are most mature in works exploring how to adapt to an ageing population and these results have encouraged a sector-wide analysis of what community resilience actually means. This sits within an environment where it is increasingly being used in social housing provider strategy and where staff members are being hired for ‘community resilience’ roles.

A recent job advertisement asked for the applicant to, “Support their (residents’) wellbeing and resilience in a post-pandemic environment” but similar job roles and providers’ websites often do not elaborate on what is meant by ‘resilience’ or how to achieve it.

Part of the understanding of resilience within the social housing sector is also related to the resilience of [social housing provision in itself](#). Defined as the ability to offer quality homes under secure tenure on a sustainable, non-profit basis, the authors of [that study](#) proposed that legislative changes over the past decade have seen some social housing providers shift away from their original social purpose in order to maintain financial viability in an increasingly hostile environment. Amongst other changes, they propose that the introduction of ‘affordable rents’ in the UK in 2011 saw an erosion of non-profit practices, which has challenged community resilience more than in other northern-European nations that were not subject to this legislation.

Survey design

Guided by the literature and after consultation with research and innovation specialists in the sector (for whose time and suggestions we are very grateful), we adopted the following questions to gauge personal and emotional resilience and the impact of the lockdowns on these:

1. ‘Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reactions’ (Almost always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Almost never)
2. ‘Before lockdown (pre-March 2020), I was in control of my reactions regardless of what happened to me’ (Almost always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Almost never)

For the purposes of reporting, segmentation and calculation of the index, in this analysis we classify the first two answer categories as ‘resilient’ people. Conversely, the two categories at the other end of the scale are described as ‘not resilient’.

A challenge for the Resident Voice Index™ was to measure social housing residents’ resilience in a succinct manner that encompassed as many of the underlying factors of resilience as possible without respondents being prompted by use of the word. In addition to the measure of personal and emotional resilience, we also sought to collect residents’ views on resilient attributes of their communities, i.e. those things which could help the community to ‘bounce back’ following the stress of the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

Respondents were therefore asked to provide free-text responses to the following question that was designed to explore community resilience specifically:

3. What things help your community to withstand shocks (e.g. a lockdown) and help it to thrive?

The [Community Cohesion and Resilience report from 2014](#) defines community resilience as how well a community is able to adapt to shocks and changes. The work also cites the Young Foundation, who describe a resilient community as one that has, “A collectively held belief in their ability to adapt and thrive in spite of adversity.” The question adopted in the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey was designed to be concise whilst encompassing the ethos of both these statements.

Results and discussion

The residents’ view

In offering free-text suggestions to the question, “What things help your community to withstand shocks (e.g. a lockdown) and help it to thrive?” respondents to the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey have given further insight into what constitutes and contributes to community resilience.

Of responses to this question, 55% were classified as containing positive sentiment, where the respondent suggested something that happened or could happen that positively helps community resilience. Of these, the most frequent response mentioned people helping each other / coming together / supporting each other.

“People helping each other”
Survey respondent

“Pulling together in times of need”
Survey respondent

“Talking to each other so we can get to know each others needs and support each other”
Survey respondent

Connectedness is core for both individual and community resilience; the more numerous and stronger the connections the more resilient the community. In accordance with the Resident Voice Index™ [Neighbourhoods & Communities report](#) (2021), a sense of community and community spirit were prevalent answers in identifying the factors that assist a community in overcoming adversity.

“Community, we are in this together.”
Survey respondent

Similarly, amongst the responses that showed negative sentiment, there was a high incidence of people reporting that there was not a community where they lived, or that it had disappeared.

Further aligning with the Neighbourhoods & Communities report, there was a high frequency of responses to the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey that mentioned outside spaces / green spaces / communal areas.

We also noted the reasonably high incidence of single word ‘Lockdown’ answers to this question suggesting, perhaps surprisingly, that the lockdown itself was the trigger that brought about increased resilience.

Funding

There were numerous free-text answers throughout the survey that pinpointed that ‘money’, ‘cash’, ‘funding’ or ‘investment’ was necessary for communities to recover and thrive following the events of the last two years. Forecasts of the ‘cost-of-living’ crisis looming in the UK will see many communities suffer without intervention.

“More money given to the community, so people don't have to rely on charity or make lengthy applications to access help/support.”

Survey respondent

“Our community is severely underfunded and running on a shoestring. Loads of new homes being built here but no expansion of existing facilities.”

Survey respondent

Socio-economic prosperity has been linked to community cohesion and on an individual level, struggling with money has been linked with depression and been shown to affect resilience negatively. To alleviate hardship, the adoption of approaches that measure impact, not monetary output may help as it becomes clearer that the market is not equipped to supply citizens with ample support. One method could see central and local government abandoning austerity in favour of MMT (Modern Monetary Theory), that encourages overlooking debt and spending money on community investment to build more prosperous futures. Housing providers however, are assessed by the regulator on financial viability, including levels of debt and so cannot adopt such an approach.

“The economic divide between social housing tenants and the rest of the population is likely to increase when the government removes its economic support package.”

Inside Housing, 2021



The word cloud below shows the top words in the responses to the question, “What things help your community to withstand shocks (e.g. a lockdown) and help it to thrive?” by those with a positive sentiment.



The top two-word combinations paint a similar picture of togetherness, support and community-spirited suggestions.

Respondents were not made aware that resilience was one of the survey’s topics of investigation. Despite this, having a sense of personal resilience and applying that to the community, sometimes via a clear sense of purpose in the respondent, appears to be a way by which the individual and the community both benefit from increased resilience.

“I think it just depends on how you are as a person and people working together”

Survey respondent

“We live in a resilient, multi-ethnic multi-generational neighbourhood made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds. So there’s usually wisdom, skills and knowledge available to deal with collective “shocks”

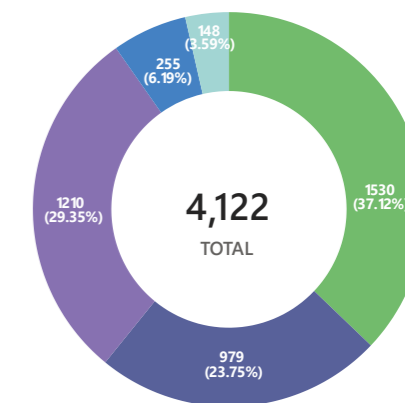
Survey respondent



Personal resilience

In contrast to the relatively high levels of current loneliness discussed earlier in this report (56%), it is worth acknowledging that only a small proportion (10%) across over 4,000 respondents was classified as ‘not resilient’ according to our measures. Over 60% classified as ‘resilient’ and there were no significant differences by age or gender.

- Almost always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Almost never

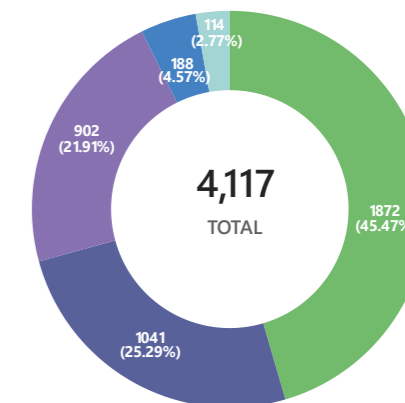


The resilience shift

As with loneliness, having asked questions about respondents’ feelings of resilience before the first lockdown in 2020 and then in late 2021, we were able to analyse the changes in resilience that occurred over that time. We note that asking these questions simultaneously may introduce some bias and that reflections on historical feelings may not be as accurate as comments on current ones.

This ‘before and after’ analysis showed that overall, resilience was impacted negatively by the lockdowns. The percentage of ‘resilient’ respondents (top two responses) dropped from 71% to 61%.

- Almost always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Almost never



Separately, from the classification of ‘resilient’ vs ‘not resilient’ individuals, we studied the general shift in the reported resilience score. Of respondents, 24% reported a decline in their resilience score, regardless of whether they changed their classification. Only 9% showed an improvement in their resilience score because of the lockdowns. Of the circa 1,000 people who were less resilient now than before, encouragingly 95% exhibited only a mild or marginal slide in their resilience (shifting only one or two points on the scale).

Under 35s



Over 55s



Age and resilience

In the context of 'resilience' including the ability to withstand shocks, an analysis of a lack of change with age proved useful. The proportion of respondents reporting no change in their resilience increased with age and whilst this was borderline significant within the resilience statistics the same highly significant pattern was seen in the loneliness statistics.

Following this discovery, consultation with experts in the field of resilience yielded an agreement that increased levels of 'No change' with age could be a manifestation of greater resilience. Thus, by not being affected as much, older people who have more lived experience, may be better equipped to be resilient in the face of adversity. We expand on this further, with actionable insights in the Age and Optimism section on p.28.

Word clouds of the over 55s compared with the under 35s also yielded marked differences, suggesting varying perceptions between young and old of what makes a community resilient.

Environment and resilience

Village dwellers showed the highest levels of 'resilient' people post-lockdowns, the lowest 'not resilient' levels, and exhibited the smallest shifts in the 'before and after' comparisons. For more detail, see the Village Life section on p.26.

Last word on resilience

The UK social housing sector has faced many shocks and adverse situations so far in the 21st Century, including welfare reform and Universal Credit, austerity policies, the Covid-19 pandemic and now the cost of living crisis. All of these influences, amongst others test both personal and community resilience and so it follows that we should seek to build and nurture more resilient communities that can weather these challenges.

Communities with better social infrastructure find it easier to respond to, withstand and recover from crises. For example, during the pandemic, towns with more community facilities tended to have a [higher number of mutual aid groups per head of population](#).

"A resilient social housing project is one which invests in both physical infrastructure and social programs to support residents in withstanding the increasingly frequent shocks and stresses of the 21st century. By doing this, it also helps to strengthen the city as a whole."

[Should resilience begin with the home? | EY UK](#)

As shown in the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey results, with fewer people now reporting being in control of their feelings than before the lockdowns and with the proportions of people who indicate no change in their resilience and loneliness scores increasing with age, communities should look to the life experiences of older residents to provide clues for elevated levels of resilience.

To increase community resilience, housing providers can help facilitate people coming together. Investment in forging these connections at grassroots level can support the people doing it for both themselves and for their communities.





Village life

Throughout the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, those living in villages reported markedly more positive experiences. Looking at the shifts from March 2020 until the time of asking, those from villages appeared to come through their pandemic experiences most unscathed.

Loneliness

Village life appeared to minimise impacts throughout the lockdowns. Those living in villages contained the highest proportion of 'not lonely' people, the lowest increases in levels of loneliness compared with before the lockdowns and the lowest percentage of people falling into the most extreme categories identified in this survey. Of these individuals, 57% cited no change at all, higher than any other environment.

Resilience

Village dwellers maintained the highest degrees of resilience compared with pre-lockdown levels and had by far the smallest proportion of people falling into non-resilient categories due to the pandemic.

"People in small communities are quietly confident in solving issues for themselves if the problems are relatively small. Faced with real dangers, they come together and help people – there is a real community spirit."

Rita Lawson, CEO of Tees Valley Rural Action

"We have moved since lockdown from a city to a village. During lockdown in the city there was little to no support from neighbours or local community other than a local church and their volunteers, from what I heard."

Survey respondent

Optimism

Nearly 4 in 10 respondents from villages stated that they felt optimistic about the future of their community, outstripping every other environment. This was in sharp contrast to cities, where nearly 7 in 10 people were unable to see a positive outcome, with half of them saying they felt pessimistic. Villagers also reported the highest levels of satisfaction with where they lived.

A possible factor influencing the apparent popularity and merits of village living could be 'Dunbar's Number', a theory which asserts that the majority of people can only cope with a maximum social circle of around 150 family members, friends and acquaintances. Population demographics show a relentless trend towards living in cities; 82% of the UK's population currently live in one.

For policy makers, communities and housing providers, a particular challenge lies in trying to raise the quality of life. The answer may lie in recreating village life by simulating the village environment in new urban development projects.

Optimism

What is optimism?

The effects of optimism and pessimism have been well-documented in recent decades, linked to the effectiveness in making social connections, to goal achievement, and to negative effects on health and positive effects on the recovery from illness.

Optimism and pessimism are modes of thinking, the consideration of which differs when applied to a circumstance and when experienced **consistently**; in the former case, as a resource to frame and manage expectations of a particular future outcome. In the latter, experiencing persistent optimism or pessimism can come to form one's overall disposition and mindset and when linked to formative experiences they shape character, and influence self-esteem and coping mechanisms.

In the context of this report, the approach was to gauge levels of optimism and pessimism amongst a sample of the UK social housing population. A question was posed to understand respondents' current disposition and how they could visualise life in a 'new normal'.

Results and discussion

Nearly all of our 4,000+ survey takers answered the following question:

1. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Post lockdown, I am hopeful for the future of my local community." (Strongly agree, Agree, Neither, Disagree, Strongly disagree)

For the purposes of this report, the 'Strongly agree/Agree' responses have been grouped as optimists, while the 'Strongly disagree/Disagree' responses are classified as pessimists.

Overall, there was a near even split across respondents of optimists, pessimists and those in between. However, with deeper analysis, there were marked differences when considered against age and where a person lives.

The over 55s had the most positive outlook of all respondents. They were significantly more optimistic than every other age group, with over 1 in 3 (35% +/- 1.9%) indicating that they viewed the future positively. This group also had the lowest proportion of pessimists compared to other age groups (27%).

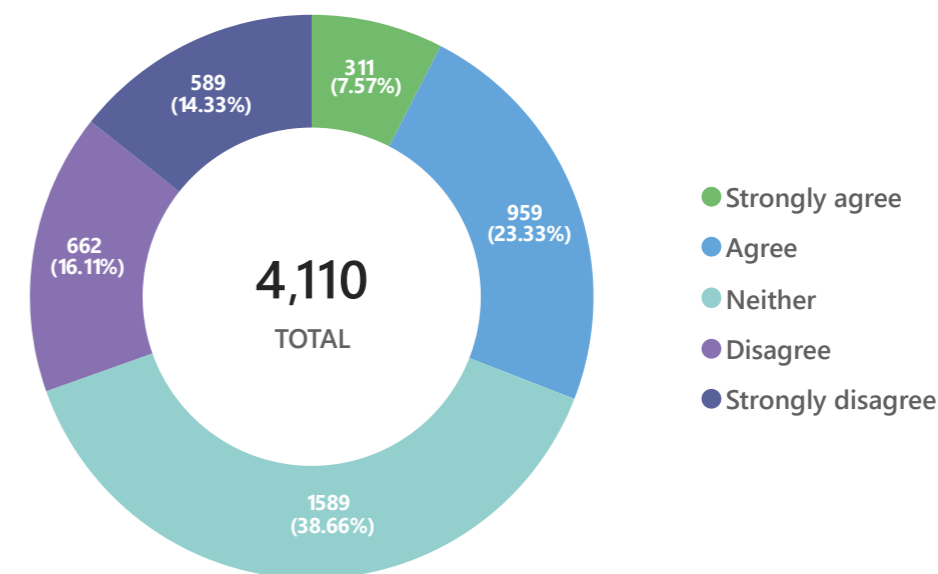
It would not be unreasonable to suggest that several factors were at play in the more senior groups, not least the value of lived experience and greater levels of personal resilience, as highlighted in the Resilience section on p.24 of this report.

Levels of optimism were almost identical between male and female respondents. However, at the other end of the scale, males were significantly more pessimistic, which suggests that they were more inclined to adopt a neutral position.

The results show that where a person lives plays a part in their levels of optimism, with significant differences across certain environments. There was a greater malaise amongst people living in environments classified as urban (City, Town), who were significantly less optimistic and exhibited markedly higher levels of pessimism than their counterparts in non-urban areas (Suburb, Village, Rural).

When responses were further analysed by type of environment, village dwellers were the most optimistic group. For more detail, see the Village Life section on p.26.

Post lockdown, I am hopeful for the future of my local community



Age and optimism

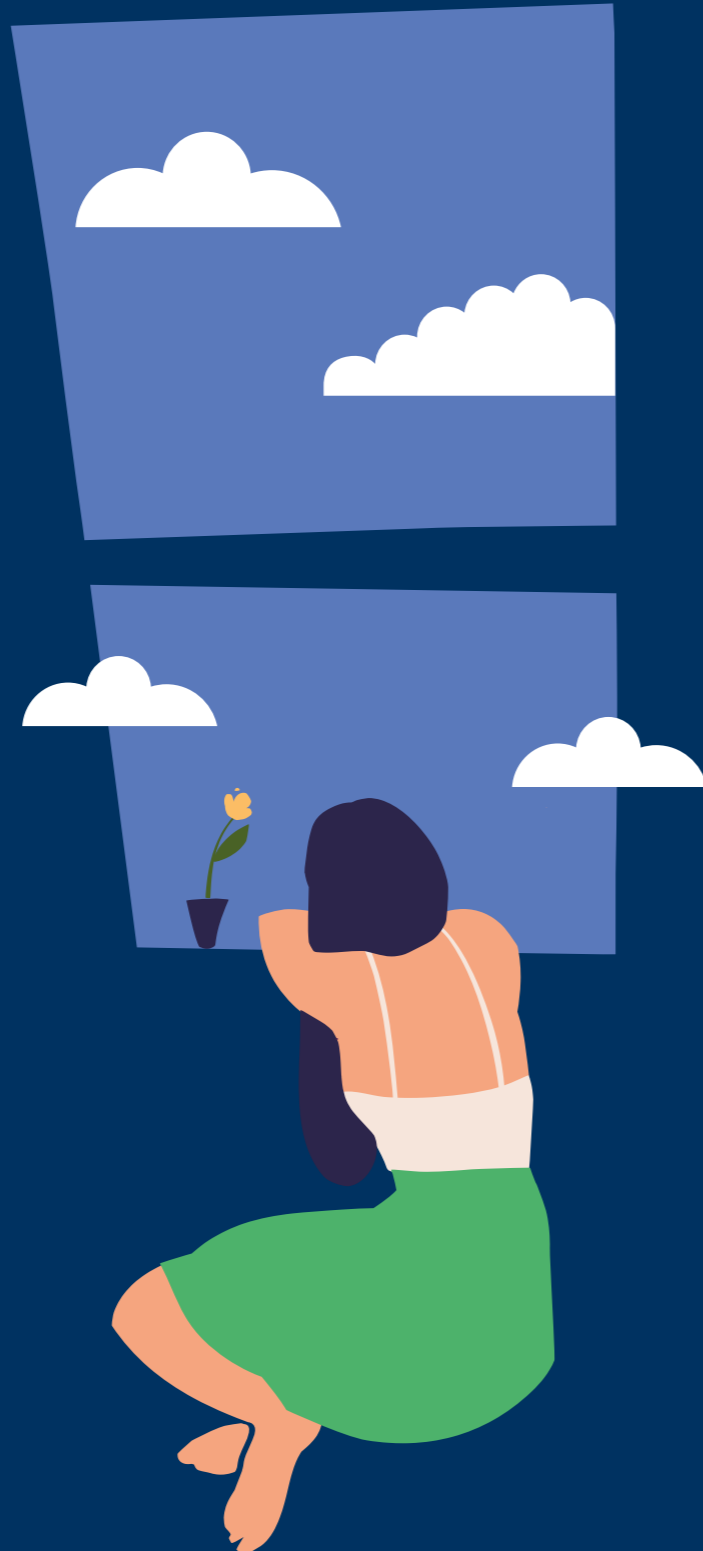
Results across this survey have highlighted that the young (under 35s) are in need of help and support. They emerged as the loneliest of all age groups, were more likely to fall into 'extreme' loneliness bands, and exhibited the largest overall loneliness shift since March 2020. The young also displayed the lowest levels of resilience and were more likely to dislike where they lived. 37% of under 35s were classed as pessimists.

This is not the first time this trend has been observed. In the Resident Voice Index™ Neighbourhoods & Communities report, the data revealed that communities may not be serving their Millennials and Generation Z residents, as they reported lower levels of feeling safe, belonging to their neighbourhood and caring about community involvement. These results should be a cause for real concern, as the risks are that if pessimism prevails, the impacts will be far reaching.

"Be less judgemental and more supportive to a community. If someone's behaviour changes, ask if they need help or someone to talk to. Just because the elderly are lonely and vulnerable it doesn't mean us youngsters aren't."

Survey respondent

In some cases, housing providers are actively addressing their younger residents to help build neighbourhoods that suit their needs. Sovereign Housing are one provider leading the charge, with a dedicated Youth Housing Panel that engages younger residents with decision-making.



The residents' view

Survey takers were asked to provide free-text suggestions for what they felt could change to positively impact their local community post-lockdown; answers were wide-reaching and detailed. There were familiar themes around calls for increased community investment to alleviate hardship, improve housing, and deliver cleaner streets, transport and security.

"More services and support for young people and young adults living in the community."
Survey respondent

"Carry on with some initiatives that have been introduced during the lockdown. Ensure that the elderly, disabled and vulnerable are not excluded in these initiatives, such as a greater online presence."
Survey respondent



When the responses to this question were filtered by pessimists and optimists, different desires emerged. For optimists, top answers included 'face-to-face', 'get together', 'community events' and 'better communication'.

"More 'feet on the ground' so that the housing association actually knows what goes on in the community"
Survey respondent

"The return of housing people visiting our community – doing everything by email saves you employee costs, but reduces your visibility in the community"
Survey respondent

Pessimists meanwhile, indicated a need for immediate support in communities. Popular phrases included, 'police presence', 'help people', 'help support', 'help housing', 'better housing', supporting 'young people'. Despite differences, for both optimists and pessimists, 'community spirit' was shared as a top answer.

Communication was a recurring theme throughout the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, applying not only to housing providers but within communities as well. In some cases, a need for greater collective responsibility surfaced, with several respondents citing increased levels of perceived selfishness and an inward focus from neighbours.

"Empathy, less judgement of people. Actually talking to one another and listening to one another's story. Community spirit without the negativity of gossip. If someone is quiet and isolated away because of fear of the outside world empathy and compassion from the community is everything."
Survey respondent



FACE-TO-FACE



COMMUNITY EVENTS

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

HELP PEOPLE



Community events

The most common free-text suggestions given by optimists for what they felt could positively impact their local community are shown on the right.

Covid-19 permitting, opportunities to hold face-to-face events should be taken by housing providers and local administrations in partnership with residents to encourage the strengthening of community bonds. Respondents gave a variety of suggestions as to what these might look like.

“More meetings that actively get the younger generations involved. Painting murals, planting a garden etc and just to have our voices actually heard and listened to.”

Survey respondent

“Free or low-cost hire of local community centres for things like Buddhist meetings, community events/classes/socials. The government/councils listening and involving people in their decisions.”

Survey respondent

“More use of community centres for art/pottery etc or just coffee sessions to get people together.”

Survey respondent

Disconnected communities have been estimated to cost the UK [£32 billion](#) per year. Speaking to professionals such as Rita Lawson, CEO of [Tees Valley Rural Action](#), a charity working to connect and support those in villages and isolated rural areas can provide inspiration. Collaborating with organisations such as [ACRE](#) and on the [Local Trust Big Local](#) project, she employs an [asset based community development](#) model. “Housing associations need to work with communities in putting together a meaningful strategy. Communities should be at the heart of all work done around the economy, skills agenda and even digital inclusion agenda. If you don’t invest in your communities and their social wellbeing, then all that work could be lost.”

“It’s worth taking fun seriously: it’s a surprisingly powerful technology for both intervening in civic structures and creating new ones.”

Ben Walter, UCL Urban Pamphleteer

Last word on optimism

It is interesting that a great many of the respondents identified the benefits of greater levels of community spirit. From the evidence gathered in the Community Support & Life After Lockdown survey, we observe that being in direct need of help or support may impact levels of optimism and the ability to forward plan and imagine a collective future.

Despite the impacts on optimism and outlook, many respondents were able to provide suggestions for a better community. Delivering on basic needs and finding solutions to immediate pain points can offer hope of a shift from pessimism to optimism.

“More services and support for young people and young adults living in the community.”

Survey respondent



The Ultimate Question

Hailed by some researchers as the '[Ultimate Question](#)', Net Promoter Score is a common investigative tool across UK social housing. This is not something that the Resident Voice Index™ project seeks to replicate.

However, inspired by [other sources](#), we have incorporated our version of an Ultimate Question into the Resident Voice Index™. This question attempts to measure overall domiciliary, neighbourhood and community satisfaction. It is one that we hoped would not seem out of place in any survey and could therefore exist in all surveys. Results for this question can then be analysed alongside the themes within each survey.

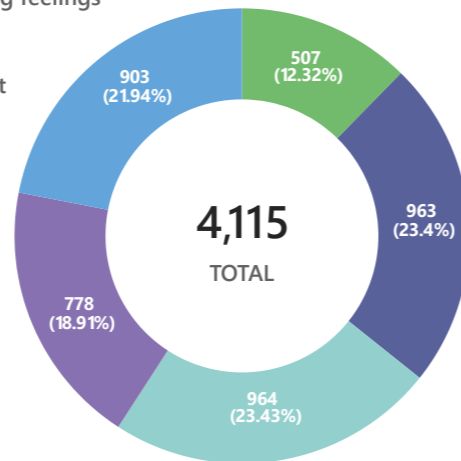
The Resident Voice Index™ Ultimate Question is, **'Taking all aspects of your home, local services, community and neighbourhood into account, which of the following best describes how you feel about where you live?'** (I really like it, I like it, I have no strong feelings, I dislike it, I really dislike it). The first two positive categories are labelled 'ultimate promoters' and the last two are categorised as 'ultimate detractors'.

The intention is to include this question in future Resident Voice Index™ surveys to facilitate an element of trend analysis over time. Whilst this is not one of the primary aims of the Resident Voice Index™, it can also be used to track changes in the proportions of respondents in each category. Comparing these changes alongside national, socio-economic, legislative and political changes could provide valuable future insight.

Results and discussion

Across all respondents, 36% indicated that they were positive about where they live and 41% were negative.

- I really like it
- I like it
- I have no strong feelings
- I dislike it
- I really dislike it



With 99% of survey takers providing a response to this question, the large sample size enabled robust analysis of the data by different subsets. Consistent with other Resident Voice Index™ figures, the proportion of 'ultimate promoters' increased with age whilst the percentage of 'ultimate detractors' decreased with age. Younger people (under 35s) were significantly less happy about where they live, such that only 28% were positive compared with 37% for the over 35s.

The proportion of urban (City, Town) 'ultimate promoters' was significantly lower than the percentage of non-urban dwellers (Suburb, Village, Rural) that responded positively to this question (32% vs 43%). Split further, those living in towns were the least happy with where they live and those in villages were the most positive about their environments, as explored in the Village Life section on p26.

Considering that only 36% of respondents to this survey were able to commit to a positive feeling about where they live, and with this statistic being improved by the results of non-urban dwellers and older people, interventions for younger people living in urban environments would appear to be a pertinent area of focus.

Conclusion

The aim of the Community Support & Life After Lockdown study was to investigate the help and support that communities have received since March 2020 and to ascertain, before memories fade, the self-reported impact that the events of the last two years have had on loneliness, resilience and the relationship social housing residents have with their housing provider. It also sought insights around optimism and asked for suggestions that could help to build a positive future.

In line with expectations, loneliness rose across this time. However, with over half of respondents reporting as feeling lonely in late 2021 and the noted ill-effects of loneliness on individuals and social connection, the extent of these results is sobering. This was supported by 69% of the social housing residents who responded to this survey being unable to commit to a hopeful outlook for the future of their local community.

Despite this, there was encouragement to be found in the fact that over 60% of respondents reported as 'resilient' and only 10% were classified as 'non-resilient'. Although levels of resilience were eroded (by 10%) from before lockdown to late 2021, this change was not as significant as loneliness, which showed 40% of respondents becoming lonelier across this time. Additionally, the free-text suggestions of respondents added to the growing concern of what 'resilience' means to residents in the context of attempts by those in the social housing sector to strengthen community resilience.

The necessity for the types of support that have been given to communities since March 2020 does not appear to have abated, and the top words from 'pessimists' pertaining to the need for 'help' and 'support' reinforced this. Likewise, every free-text opportunity throughout the survey, saw some inclusion in answers of the word, 'food' (banks, assistance, government packages). This is in conjunction with the incoming challenges facing the sector and residents as the cost-of-living crisis advances. Access to healthy and affordable food will continue to be an immediate material issue faced by some in social housing communities.

Analysis of the 'Exemplar' and 'Detractor' index scores have shown that reporting a good relationship with a housing provider tallied with higher levels of resilience, optimism and not experiencing feelings of loneliness. HACT name 'building resilience' and a 'local focus' as two of the most important strategies that housing providers can take to support recovery and protect their stability long term. Moreover, it may foster hopefulness for the future, since people who are aware of the actions of their housing provider are twice as likely (57% vs 25%) to be optimistic about the future of their local community.

One of the primary findings that emerged in this report was the more negative scores and inputs submitted by younger respondents (under 35s) across each question. This showed a need to open channels of engagement with younger residents to address their needs and understand what their neighbourhoods should be delivering. Another key discovery was that village dwellers scored highest in almost all measures, giving reason to explore which elements of village life might facilitate what appears to be a better quality of living.

As society emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic into a phase of tolerating (hopefully less virulent) forms of this disease, housing providers, policy makers, service providers and wider society need to shift from a reactive crisis mode towards more long-term planning and investment. The mechanisms that this rebuilding takes will ultimately be decided by those in the higher echelons of decision-making. However, the degree of success that these policies give rise to within the social housing sphere will undoubtedly be facilitated by collaborative working and engaging with residents themselves to establish where investment will have the greatest impact.

“Just don't forget us please”

Survey respondent



Making the RVI

By Doug Sarney, Project Lead of the Resident Voice Index™

Arguably data is just '0's' and '1's. How data is organised however, can deliver timely, relevant, and insightful information that can evidence where processes and strategies could change for the better.

When embarking on this project, we hadn't set out to build custom analytics but after looking closely at the capabilities of the source collection tool and weighing up what was otherwise available, we concluded that to achieve the Resident Voice Index's vision for a deeper level of data analysis, it would be necessary to develop it ourselves.

The goal was to offer uniquely sophisticated ways of associating question results, interpreting qualitative responses, visualising temporal shifts and drawing out actionable insights from the data sets. At MRI Software, we are privileged to have a global Business Intelligence (BI) team working across social and affordable housing and property technology. Rajashekar Hiregoudar led much of the build to analyse the latest survey and for him, "It was great to be challenged with developing some new analytical tools especially for this project. We had to find some novel ways of approaching this to get to the bottom of what was really going on in the results."

The ability to link answers gave us the power to create different subsets of the data we collected, the benefits being that we could explore those relationships which we otherwise wouldn't have had the ability to uncover. This is how we identified some of the niche results, for example, finding that those who were aware of the actions of their housing provider were twice as likely to be optimistic about the future of their local community. These kinds of relationships wouldn't have been possible to discover using conventional 'off-the-shelf' tools.

An exciting development for us is the constant and deliberate improvement being gained through the analysing of qualitative material. Our teams are using sector-leading tools to aggregate large volumes of resident responses, organising the wealth of their contribution into digestible information that can inform actionable insights.

To achieve this, we developed an algorithm that enabled us to associate words when they were clearly linked in respondents' answers. Other platforms have the capabilities only to analyse individual words and as such, the resulting analysis is weaker and less enlightening, giving flat answers of 'community' and 'spaces', for example.

Resident Voice Index™ results are shared freely. Firstly, to impact the sector positively by leveraging our direct access to a large pool of social housing residents and secondly, as a showcase for the BI capabilities we have available at MRI Software.

Our BI experts understand data, they excel in interpreting it and can deploy their analytical expertise to help address the pressing challenges faced by the social housing sector.



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Doug plays an integral role in the introduction of new products and services to the social housing sector, working closely with industry thought leaders and housing providers. He is the project lead for the Resident Voice Index™. After finishing his post-doctoral research, he worked with scientists, statisticians, and production engineers to help discover new pharmaceuticals and optimise chemical processes. He has many years of experience analysing large data sets and developing strategic, mathematical modelling solutions, the last twenty of which have been in social housing.

Stephanie is a qualitative researcher focusing on the built environment. For the past three years she has been researching and writing about the implications of and applications for technology across the social housing sector. Her work also includes facilitating community consultation across research projects. Previously she has worked with foresight agencies identifying and analysing trends that will impact how we live in the future.

Rajashekar is a Senior BI Engineer with over 13 years of experience in developing and supporting Business Intelligence systems. Skilled in Microsoft BI Stack, ETL development, Data Modelling, BI Reporting and Data Visualisation, Rajashekar has developed BI solutions for domains like Health & Care, Finance, Legal & Real Estate.

With over 30 years in national and international publishing, Adam has worked across various household names such as the Daily Express, The Times and ACCA Business Magazine. A Fleet Street journalist at heart, he now spends his time on digital media alongside a team of brilliant thinkers, working on projects focused around the development of organisations that deliver social value in areas such as housing, international education and food provenance.

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“The Resident Voice Index™ project is a unique initiative amongst social housing software and services providers. Combining the expertise of MRI team members who have worked in social housing for many years with the power of our advanced technology, we are able to deliver this insightful content free to anyone who wants to consume it. The impact of this work is potentially huge, I hope you find it useful.”

**James Massey,
Managing Director,
MRI Software**



For more information and to join us in shaping future surveys,
please visit residentvoiceindex.com

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