



# Your Voice Forum

Mental Health & Wellbeing

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# Tracey Lyth, Head of Customer Success, Mears Group

*Poor mental health affects one in four of us, in any given year. It can make it more difficult to deal with everyday life, and that includes maintaining a tenancy. When it comes to mental health, housing professionals and tenants are in it together.*

It's important to ensure that we create an environment in which we can discuss mental health and our well-being. Over the last 12-18 months, the pandemic has caused an increase in isolation and loneliness, which can ultimately make a large impact on an individual's day to day life. Therefore, it is imperative that we create conversations to raise awareness of mental health to enable organisations to consider this in their working practices.

As part of our Your Voice online tenant panel, we took the opportunity to gather their thoughts about what Mears can do to address behaviours or attitudes to help support residents' mental health and well-being. As a result of the survey, we received 51 responses. The common themes were:

## Communication:

- ▶ Blend of communication channels
- ▶ In advance of attending to complete works
- ▶ Updates on any changes to appointments or work
- ▶ Signposting to mental health support agencies on resources
- ▶ Clear introductions and ID
- ▶ Kindness is key and a simple smile can change someone's whole day.

- ▶ Making mental health and wellbeing a thing we all talk about and not something to be ashamed of will help lots of people
- ▶ Clear communication with the customer in their home on the job completed and anything outstanding

## Training:

- ▶ Listen
- ▶ Respect, care, and empathy in delivery service to customer and property
- ▶ Remember everyone is different
- ▶ Awareness training with operatives to support customer interaction
- ▶ Ensure items are returned to their place when jobs complete

## Delivering services:

- ▶ Minimise return visits where possible
- ▶ Honest with appointments, particularly in emergency situations
- ▶ Flexible appointments
- ▶ Understand anxiety of pandemic and the impact entering customers property
- ▶ Don't make assumption about people

The results demonstrate that communication is critical. It is important that as an organisation, we communicate with residents in the correct way before we enter their property, displaying ID and ensure we present ourselves as kind and approachable. As part of our training process, we reinforce and remind colleagues that a simple, "how are you?" can make all the difference.

In addition, it's important that we encourage our colleagues to listen and show respect to our residents.

The way in which we deliver services was a common theme from the survey. It is vital that when/if a repair doesn't go ahead, that our colleagues consider how to handle the return

visit and to minimise stress and anxiety for the resident, especially in an emergency. It's important for our colleagues to understand and respect that some residents may display anxiety due to the pandemic and may feel uncomfortable with someone in their home.

# Aileen Evans, President of the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and CEO of Grand Union Housing Group (GUHG)

President of CIH, Aileen Evans shared the background of the CIH 'Shine a Light' campaign.

Aileen advised that she was elected as President of CIH last year. As part of the presidency, she was able to choose a campaign, to which she chose mental Health and wellbeing.

Aileen shared her personal experiences in relation to mental health. This makes her work with mental health a very personal one, in which she wants to create the focus and environment that it is ok to talk about mental health and raised the awareness to the issue, in all walks of life, personal and professional. Aileen advised that she wants to start talking about mental health which will encourage others to and has adopted this approach in her adult life.

£114k

Total cost of mental health absences at GUHG

44%

Absences are mental health related

£119bn

Total cost to the UK in lost production

1 in 4

Will experience a mental health challenge

2 men a day

Working in construction will take their own lives



Aileen advised that she wants to lead the sector with resources and support. One of the resources is the Mental Health at Work Commitment Guide for the Housing Sector. The guide contains six standards and highlights the importance of mental health support.

In relation to residents, CIH released the Tenants Guide to supporting people with mental health issues. In cases where hoarding is present, this is usually due a mental health issue. The guide advises how to deal with the route cause, rather than the symptom.

Thirdly, the 'Wellbeing at Work in Housing' guide was authored by Professor Jo Richards. The report highlights that young people struggle working within a Housing Association as they are unable to see a clear career pathway. Each year, Deloitte conduct a survey and found that 45% people under the age of 35 experience work-related anxiety. Therefore, it is important to solve recruitment crisis by addressing mental health challenges.

Aileen explained that at Grand Union Housing Group they have trained Mental Health First Aiders, which is being extended to front-line colleagues. Aileen advised that her organisation has the responsibility to make sure people are well equipped with mental health training, otherwise they are unable to serve residents well.

Aileen reiterated the importance of communication, looking at processes and how they can be written in straight forward language, for residents to understand. An approach to social media that is very open and transparent, regularly reviewed and responded to, is critical.

As part of the Report Recommendations, Aileen advised that these were –

- ▶ Include mental health training as part of your induction and customer care training as well as offering further specialist training for people working directly with tenants/ customers
- ▶ Make sure that all housing and front line staff receive adequate training on interacting appropriately with tenants, including people with mental health problems
- ▶ Make sure that staff are aware of where they can refer tenants who require support with their mental health, encourage them to follow up on referrals and ensure they themselves are supported if necessary
- ▶ Provide training on how people's experience of mental health problems can affect their housing situation and their engagement with housing providers. For example, training could shed a light on the reasons why a tenant may struggle to allow access for a gas/electricity safety check, and may enable housing providers to review the way in which they communicate with tenants about these checks.

Furthermore, it is looking difficult post pandemic, and therefore it is important to train and make sure our colleagues are prepared to support residents, if required.

## Heather Hughes, Head of Learning, Mears Group

For the last three years, Mears has focused on how to support mental health and safeguarding in the workplace, with support from the senior management team.

At the start of the journey, a team was formed to discuss the importance of mental health and as a result, a strategy was adopted to support the rest of the Group. The consequences of the pandemic forced the Group to consider more about mental health and the effects it was having on furloughed colleagues. At Mears, there are 400 apprentices, some of which are young males who suffer with mental health challenges. Therefore, it was important to support those on furlough and provide reassurance regarding their apprenticeships.

As a result of the strategy, an e-learning module was created and is accessible to all colleagues to help them understand the effects of mental health. The training advises that colleagues are not responsible for diagnosing poor mental health, but to signpost if required. In addition, Mears holds regular coffee mornings to allow colleagues to share how they are feeling.

To equip line managers and ensure they recognise that mental health is a concern, Mears developed a two/three-day Level 2 Mental Health First Aid Awareness Course. The course enables line managers to understand how to recognise and support those with poor mental health and how to sign-post.

Within Mears, there are 69 colleagues who are trained as Mental Health First Aiders, to provide colleagues with the correct advice and guidance.

The Wellbeing Centre is available on Mears' internal platform, Connect. The centre provides colleagues with helpful advice and guidance around diets, exercise, finance, and mental health. In addition, Mears also has an Employee Assistance Programme, which provides colleagues with free impartial and confidential advice. The programme allows colleagues to have six free counselling sessions with a qualified counsellor.

Mental health is part of the induction process for new colleagues. The induction process advises colleagues what to do if they are concerned about a resident. It is important to understand that colleagues should not diagnose poor mental health, but to signpost to specialists if required. The subject of mental health has also been incorporated into toolbox talks, and safeguarding training is currently in the pipeline.

At Mears, the importance of mental health is paramount, and the subject of the menopause has been high on the agenda. As a result, two groups were formed – one for women and the other for men to discuss the impact of menopause.

The key message is that it is important to recognise if someone is experiencing poor mental health, and to ensure colleagues are equipped to support and signpost.

# Discussion - Recommendations/ Considerations

It is important to recognise that people with mental health challenges do not like titles. Some are not comfortable with being called customers or tenants and prefer to be known as a service user. In addition, some service users do not want to be helped and may feel that a contractor is interfering. It's also important to understand that those with mental health issues understand things differently and therefore their perception may be dissimilar. It is important to ask questions and to be interested in the response provided.

- ▶ In terms of language, it is important to understand that everyone is different.
- ▶ Residents may want help but not what is being offered by an organisation. It is important to ask the correct questions and to listen to the answers.
- ▶ Front line training critical to identify when a resident has poor mental health and be able to signpost to a professional.
- ▶ On visits to tenants, it is important for them to reiterate what they are there for. It is also important to say hello and ask how they are, the best thing to do is to create an atmosphere to have a conversation.
- ▶ Improve availability of information regarding mental health support, so readily available.

**Gillian McLaren, Tpas: What is one thing which we can take away from today?**

## Comments:

- ▶ Awareness and creating the environment to discuss is so important with teams
- ▶ Getting the message that making assumptions is not helpful, listen and learn.
- ▶ Everyone is different, not one fits all when it comes to Mental Health, and to actively listen.
- ▶ Good communication is critical

## Speakers

Tracey Lyth, Group Head of Customer Success, Mears Group

Aileen Evans, President of Chartered Institute of Housing and CEO of Grand Union Housing

Gillian McLaren, National Engagement Manager, Tpas

Heather Hughes, Head of Learning, Mears Group

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