How might we improve the wellbeing of people working in the migration, refugee and asylum sector?

MARCH 2023

Contents

Introduction

From September to December 2022, Refugee Action and SIDE Labs led a co-discovery project focused on answering the question: **How might we improve the wellbeing of people working in the migration, refugee and asylum sector?**

This project was in response to growing concern about staff and volunteer wellbeing across the migration sector since the beginning of the pandemic. The Insight Hub Survey survey in June 2022 revealed that 76% of refugee and asylum organisations were "surviving" when it came to staff wellbeing. The top 3 wellbeing issues reported were overwork, financial worries, and stress and anxiety.

To ensure this was a collaborative discovery process, we carried out 1-2-1 interviews with more than 20 people and ran 2 workshops with people working in the sector including caseworkers, mental health support workers, managers, CEO's, wellbeing experts, strategic member organisations and funders.

Organisations involved included AVID Detention, Manchester City of Sanctuary, Rainbow Migration, Micro Rainbow, CLEAR project, Helen Bamber Foundation, PAFRAS, Refugee Women Connect, Refugee Action Services and West of Scotland Regional Equality Council. Jump to the Acknowledgements section to see a list of all of the organisations and how they were involved.

This is not an exhaustive study, we see it as a starting point and a report collating the commonalities we heard across the project. With more time and resources, we would like to have interviewed more people and carried out a longer study. For example, revisiting conversations with people to see how interventions have impacted wellbeing.

Our top 3 learnings

1. Everyone has different wellbeing needs

We spoke with 18 different people who work in various roles in the sector and although there were some similarities, everyone had different experiences and different wellbeing needs. Because of this, it wasn't surprising that most people valued flexible working to help them juggle life alongside work. We recommend that solutions organisations implement to improve wellbeing are designed and driven by staff, and decisions are not made by leadership for them.

We also learnt that those who have lived experience of the asylum process and are working in the sector face unique challenges and therefore wellbeing needs. This includes having 'too much knowledge' about the asylum system from their own experiences of it. This sometimes leads to feeling a greater sense of duty to help people because they know more about what they're going through and can connect. However this can also lead to overworking and blurred boundaries.

2. The migration, refugee and asylum sector is unique

Although some of the causes of wellbeing challenges including funding pressures and overworking are commonly shared with the wider charity sector, there are some things that are different and therefore mean that more generalised wellbeing solutions on offer will not suffice.

People the sector serves are particularly vulnerable having lived through unimaginable experiences. These experiences differ greatly from client to client, as does the language they speak, their position within the asylum system and the places they have travelled here from.

"Conversations are very different. One could be about universal credit and another about how a client has been abused."
Participant

It is difficult for organisations and people to continue to keep up momentum and capacity to support people given the rising hostile environment, the Nationality and Borders Act, the Rwanda plan and the increase in far right attacks as well as responding to the impacts of global humanitarian crises.

"You are battling against the government and immigration system"
Participant

It was also recognised in the workshops that many people who don't work in this sector don't understand what we actually do. The Asylum Process is hidden from public knowledge and therefore it sometimes feels quite isolated. This was with the view that a lot of other services direct people straight to organisations within our sector rather than trying to offer some support themselves.

3. We need to work together to improve staff wellbeing

One of the biggest things we learnt from our workshops was the value that came from bringing people together and sharing experiences and ideas. We heard people tell us they felt 'reassured' after we'd shared what we'd heard from our interviews.

"I feel reassured that it's not just me feeling like this, maybe I'm not incapable of my job, maybe it's a wider sector problem"

We also had a chance to share some examples with one another, and come up with some ideas of how to turn this research into something useful. We heard from participants that this was one of the most useful parts: "stealing ideas from each other to implement in our own organisations".

There is demand to work together across the sector, at different levels. One reason for this is because sometimes it's easier to speak to people who understand, but are outside of your organisation. Another reason is to standardise some ways of working across the sector, sharing ideas, rather than each organisation having their own practice. Learning from others and working together may also save time when implementing strategies, writing policies, or creating procedures.

We hope that you find this report useful. All quotes in the report are from people who took part in the project. Due to the nature of the project, we have kept them anonymous.
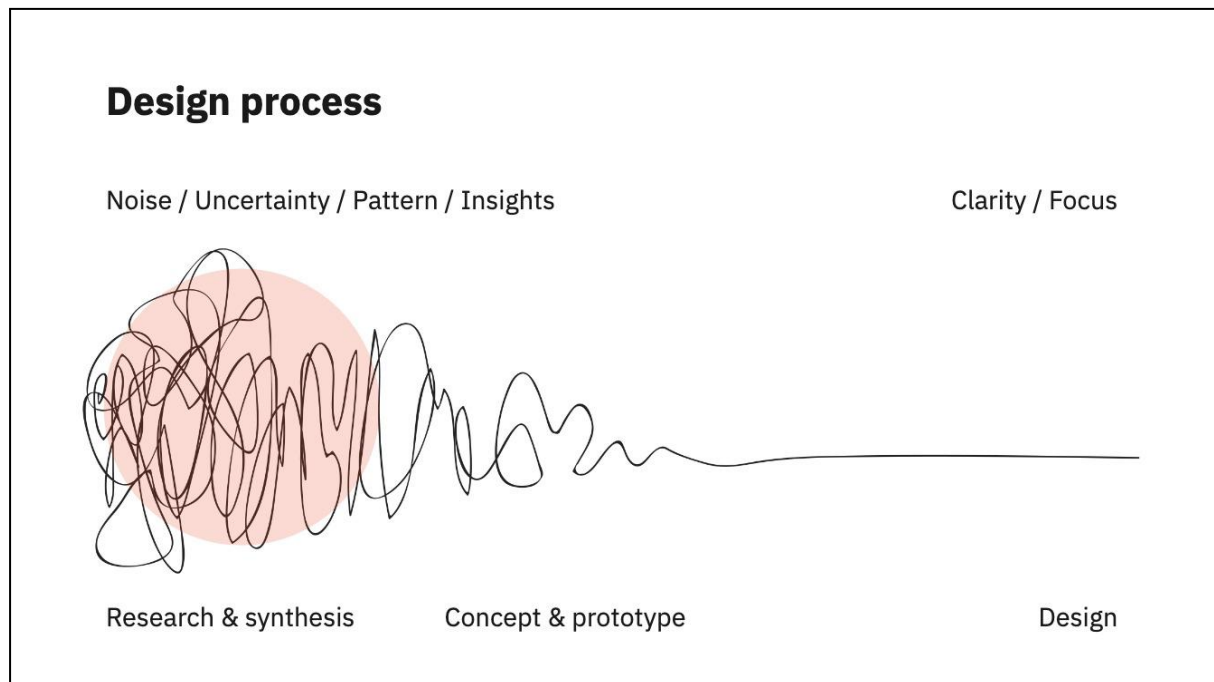
You might find that some sections are more relevant to you or your organisation than others, so we have created some links below to help you navigate it quickly.

If you're interested in learning about…

- How we ran this co-discovery project, go to Our process.

- The challenges people were facing, go to Main wellbeing challenges.

- The causes of people's wellbeing challenges, go to Causes of wellbeing challenges.

- Solutions to how people have improved their wellbeing or found a way to get better, go to How challenges are overcome and wellbeing is maintained.

- Dreams people had in our 1-1 interviews if there were no barriers to improve wellbeing in the sector, go to Magic wand ideas.

- Feedback from the workshops we ran and ideas of what we could do with the research go to Learnings from workshops.

- What we are planning to do next, go to Next steps and recommendations.

- The impact this project has had so far, go to What impact has this project had?

- Who took part in this project, go to Acknowledgements.

Would you like to get involved in/ are you interested in next steps for this work? If so, please get in touch with pascaleg@refugee-action.org.uk.

Our process

Design process

Noise / Uncertainty / Pattern / Insights   Clarity / Focus

Research & synthesis   Concept & prototype   Design

Design process

We use a design process to help us understand complex challenges better by putting people's experiences and knowledge at the heart of what we do.

The process starts with 'research and synthesis'. This is where we understand the problem space. For this project, we conducted interviews and did desk research to find out the current situation, what exists, where there are gaps, how people are feeling and where there could be opportunities.

We use what we learn to come up with ideas and develop 'concepts and prototypes'. This starts with sketching out ideas, testing them with target users, developing them and testing them again. We'll involve leaders, managers and frontline workers to ensure a community-centred design approach.

By the end of the process we'll have clarity on what products and services will serve the needs of our users and communities.

Framing the project

'Wellbeing' is a broad project focus. During the planning of this piece of work, we consciously decided to spend our 8 weeks together focused on research and synthesis. This has led to the concept and prototype development phase, however it is the wellbeing working group who will progress this work.

To help us frame our research, we developed a problem statement:
People working in the refugee sector are being overworked, have financial worries and are experiencing stress & anxiety.

This became a 'how might we' question. Moving us from problem space to opportunities:
How might we improve the wellbeing of people working in the migration, refugee & asylum sector?

Key phases in this project were:

1. Strategic planning

Planning for this project began in July 2022. We put together a core delivery team and strategic team. We convened meetings to interrogate The Insight Hub research and discuss wellbeing challenges and what we were hearing across the sector. These meetings helped us to understand gaps, provide oversight, and ensure we heard from a range of people including those with lived experience.

2. Desk research

We reviewed Bulletin 18 of the Insight Hub (see pages 15 and 16 for insights on staff wellbeing). We identified and reviewed products, services, resources and articles to learn about what already exists both in the sector and outside of the sector to support staff wellbeing.

3. Interviews

To ensure we recruited a good blend of people with different views, experiences and an interest in wellbeing, we asked organisations to register their interest in taking part. Organisations were recommended by the steering group or had participated in the Insight Hub survey and were keen to stay engaged. We interviewed 24 people through Zoom sessions. We spoke with:

- 5 frontline workers
- 10 leaders and managers
- 2 infrastructure orgs
- 8 experts
- 5 of these people have lived experience of the refugee and asylum sector

4. Two workshops

Workshop 1: Half-day workshop with interviewees, partners and experts to:

- Share what we learned from our desk research and interviews
- Reflect on our research and explore "How might we" questions
- Think about next steps

Workshop 2: We finished the project with a 2-hour workshop with interviewees, partners, experts and funders. We:

- Shared what we learned from the project
- Heard views from staff and experts who were part of the project
- Answered questions from funders
- Shared recommendations and discussed next steps

Learnings from desk research

Insight Hub staff wellbeing survey

We reviewed [Bulletin 18 of the Insight Hub](#), see pages 15 and 16 for insights on staff wellbeing. As mentioned in the introduction, **76% of refugee and asylum organisations said they were "surviving"** when it came to staff wellbeing. The top 3 wellbeing issues reported were **overwork**, **financial worries**, and **stress and anxiety**.

Organisations reported that the two main interventions to address overwork were **reducing capacity** (seeing less clients and reducing caseload) and **offering peer support** (providing more internal support to staff).

Organisations said the three main topics of interest to address wellbeing were **setting boundaries**, **care in processes**, and **rest and recovery**. These topics were drawn from the topics of sessions delivered by [Act Build Change](#) for the RAP Partnership in 2020/21.

Wellbeing support, products and services

Things we found that you might find useful. Please check suitability for your organisation.

👩🏽‍🏫 **Training**

[Act Build Change](#) / [Refugee Resource](#) / [Trauma Treatment International](#) / [Women's Aid](#) / [Jedi Consultancy](#) / [Mandala Staff Support](#) / [The Collective](#) / [Dr Mirjam Klann Thullesen](#) / [Claiming Space](#) / [Solace](#)

🧘 **Coaching, therapy & healing spaces**

[Body & Soul](#) / [Bird](#) / [Mandala Staff Support](#) / [Black Wellbeing Collective](#) / [Amna](#)

💻 **Self-led online support**

[Calm](#) / [Headspace](#)

🥾 **For people with lived experience / racialised groups**

[Black Wellbeing Collective](#) / [Solace](#) / [Freedom from Torture](#)

💬 **Employee Assistance Programmes**

[Wellbeing Lifeworks](#) (links to Microsoft Teams) / [Health Assured](#) / [Spectrum](#)

Services and products used by the wider charity sector

Wellbeing platforms

Unmind / Spill / Reward Gateway / MoveSpring

Online tools and tips

Mental Health at work Toolkit

Measuring wellbeing

What Works Wellbeing

Peer support

Clic online community for mental health

Chatbot/AI

Woebot

Articles, reports and resources

There are many articles, reports and resources about general workplace wellbeing. Here are some you might find useful:
- Five Key Drivers of Workplace Wellbeing (What Works Wellbeing)
- Putting science to work: Understanding what works for workplace mental health (Wellcome)
- The Mental Health at work Resources Archive
- The 3 charity sector examples in the UK's 'Great Place to Work' awards:
    - The Princes Trust
    - Hafod Housing Association Ltd
    - Choice Support

There are wellbeing offerings specific to the migration and asylum sector. However they are hard to find due to poor search engine optimisation (i.e. they don't rank highly in Google). There might be many more out there, yet to be discovered.

Learnings from interviews

User interviews

Staff, leaders and experts

Areas of learning
- Main wellbeing challenges
- Causes of wellbeing challenges
- What makes the sector especially challenging
- How challenges are overcome
- How wellbeing is maintained
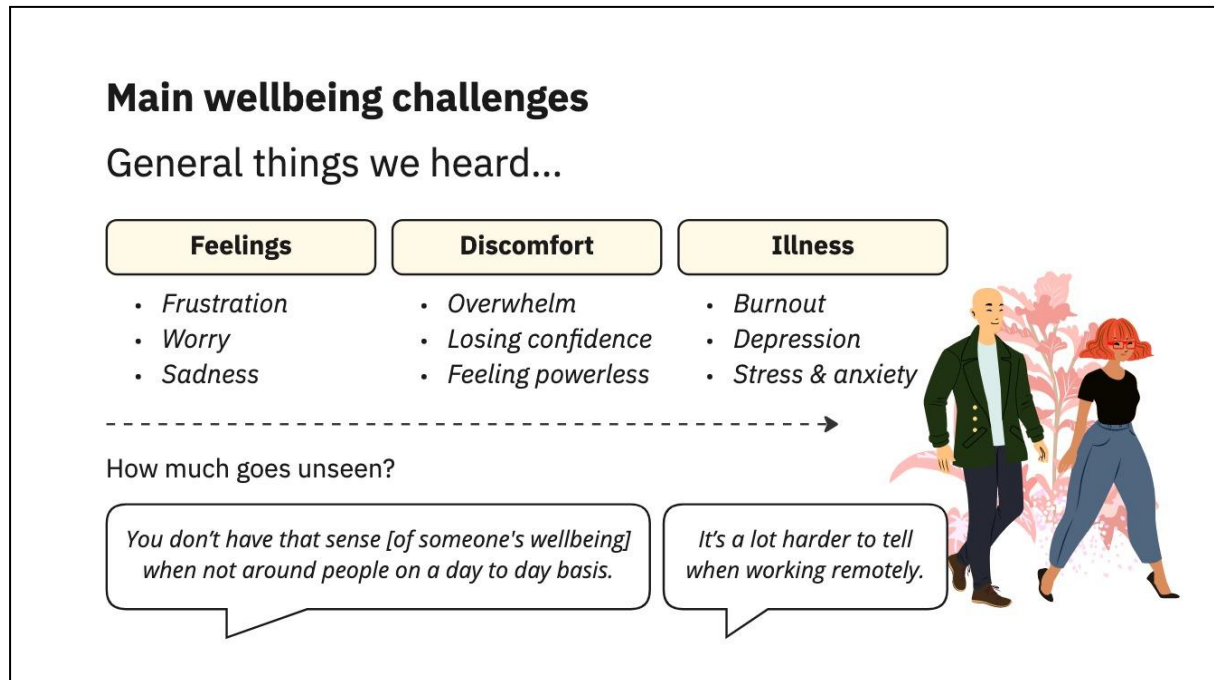- "Magic wand" ideas to address wellbeing

We interviewed staff, leaders and member organisations to better understand the main wellbeing challenges they and others in their organisation face, the causes of those wellbeing challenges and how they maintained or overcame them both in things they do independently, and what their organisations do to support them. Where it felt appropriate, we also chatted about what makes the sector especially challenging as well as what unique challenges staff who have lived experience.

With experts, we discussed their experiences of wellbeing in the workplace, what support they deliver, and what they think works, or doesn't work.

These conversations presented us with a lot of insights from many different perspectives. We've done our best to synthesise and capture the learning from our interviews in the information below.

Main wellbeing challenges

Main wellbeing challenges

General things we heard...

Feelings	Discomfort	Illness
• Frustration	• Overwhelm	• Burnout
• Worry	• Losing confidence	• Depression
• Sadness	• Feeling powerless	• Stress & anxiety

How much goes unseen?

You don't have that sense [of someone's wellbeing] when not around people on a day to day basis.

It's a lot harder to tell when working remotely.

General things we heard

It starts with feelings. People reported feeling frustrated, worried or sad. This leads to discomfort. Like being overwhelmed, losing confidence, and feeling powerless. Then, for some, comes illness, including burnout, depression and anxiety.

> *"I haven't struggled until this last year, we've experienced things that have never happened to us before like aggressive clients. I've noticed me and my team struggling more mentally"*
> Manager @ Small Charity

How much goes unseen?

One of the biggest problems is that wellbeing is going unseen. We heard this is mostly because of a rise in remote working. Staff are becoming increasingly isolated. Colleagues, managers and leadership are not able to easily check in to see how someone is doing.

> *"You don't have that sense [of someone's wellbeing] when not around people on a day to day basis."*
> Manager @ Small Charity
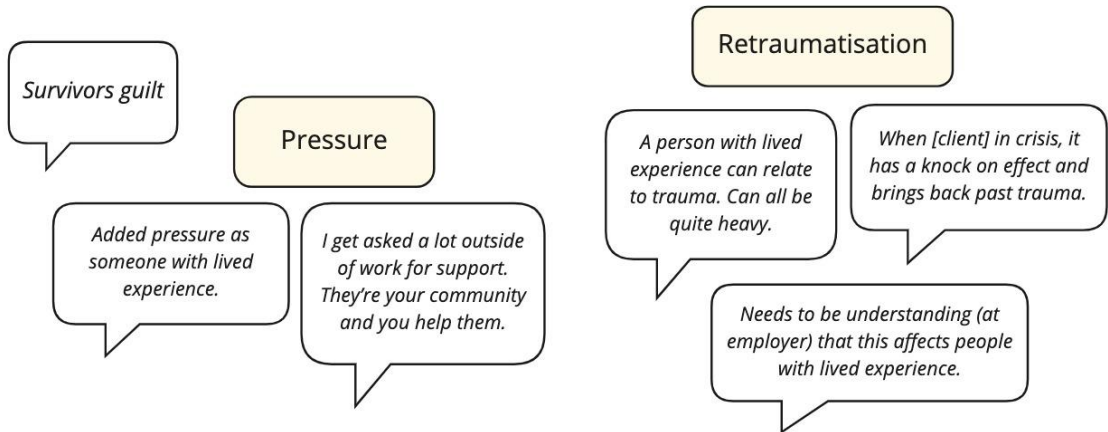
For people with lived experience

People with lived experience face unique wellbeing challenges. They feel an added sense of pressure.

> *"I get asked a lot outside of work for support. They're your community and you help them."*
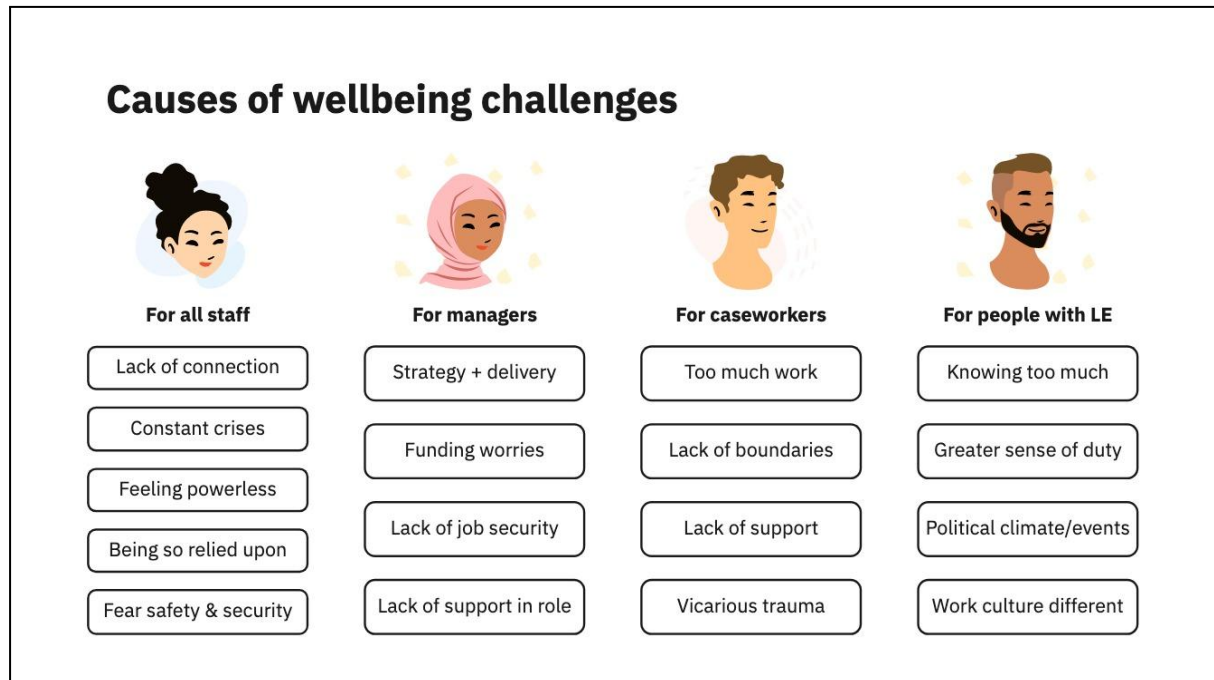> Caseworker with lived experience @ National Charity

Some reported feeling survivors' guilt. Many talked about the worry of retraumatisation. For people with lived experience, being exposed to a person in crisis triggers past trauma. Employers need to pay careful attention to the needs of people with lived experience.

> *"When [client] is in crisis, it has a knock on effect and brings back past trauma. There needs to be understanding (at employer) that this affects people with lived experience."*
> CEO @ National charity

Causes of wellbeing challenges

Causes of wellbeing challenges

For all staff	For managers	For caseworkers	For people with LE
Lack of connection	Strategy + delivery	Too much work	Knowing too much
Constant crises	Funding worries	Lack of boundaries	Greater sense of duty
Feeling powerless	Lack of job security	Lack of support	Political climate/events
Being so relied upon	Lack of support in role	Vicarious trauma	Work culture different
Fear safety & security			

For all staff

World events and government decisions over the last few years have meant people working in the asylum, refugee and migration sector are feeling powerless whilst facing constant crises. Services are being seen as an emergency service, meaning those who work in them feel so relied upon.

The coronavirus pandemic led to many people remote working and although some found this beneficial for flexibility of work life balance, a lot of people also reported it creating a lack of connection with team and people, something they need for their wellbeing.

At the same time, some have been experiencing a larger fear of safety and security due to far right activism and in some cases, service users becoming threatening due to the ripple effect of government decisions and people confusing government and charity bodies.

> *"Knowing I have to be in the office two times a week leads me to dread certain days. It builds anxiety. We've been so used to being in the comfort of our own home. Now we need to work from the office and work in a different way, this feels difficult. We also have a new office space. There's an undercurrent of hostility in the area of the office because we are a charity that supports people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The walk from the bus stop to the office makes me worry I'll become a victim of hate crime."*
> Manager @ Small charity

For managers

A lot of managers have to juggle organisational strategy as well as delivering frontline services.

For those who are directors or CEOs of charities, we heard many feel like they don't have support in their roles. There is sometimes a disconnect between the organisation and their trustees not fully understanding how they do the work and what the situation is like on the ground.

> *"I have staff coming to me for support, but no one ever asks how I'm doing"*
> CEO @ Small Charity

🔦 Spotlight on: Manchester City of Sanctuary

Insights from Liz Hibberd on supporting staff and volunteer wellbeing whilst running a small charity

Manchester City of Sanctuary is a small charity that works with refugees and asylum seekers. We primarily deliver activities that promote wellbeing and positive mental health and that create connection to people and places. We have 2 part time workers and around 15 volunteers.

We work in environments that are highly stressed, with multiple demands on time and limited resources. We are constantly concerned about funding as well as the precariousness of the lives of those we work with. There is a real lack of time and capacity to debrief, reflect and evaluate our offer, meaning that we often feel unclear of the impact we have and how to improve and respond effectively to changes in need.

It can feel very overwhelming and I have often felt a sense of paralysis as I can't see what the next step is or how to get there. It's been a relief to have another staff member join us, but there is added concern to ensure that their wellbeing and work/life balance is appropriate and supported.

Those that volunteer with us, do so out of a sense of altruism and compassion - it can be hard to ask them to set more boundaries and to step back, when they are so keen to be involved and help those more vulnerable than them. This concerns me as I don't want them to take on too much and that they have the training and understanding to know how to engage safely for themselves and those seeking sanctuary.

It's difficult to know what strategies to put in place as the paid staff seem to wear multiple hats all at once! Even when I've tried to, they don't become embedded and don't last long. One thing that has worked well, with our new staff member, has been flexible working and working from home. Feedback has told me that this works for them, and they appreciate how that flexibility helps to fit their life around work, meaning that they can go to the gym and have a later start sometimes. This has helped their mental health and allowed them to feel more positive about the work.

One thing that I would like to try is to block out at least a half day a week where there are no meetings or phone calls where I can focus on one task at a time!

For caseworkers

When people seeking asylum turn up in need of support, it is hard for caseworkers to have boundaries and say no. Especially for those with open-ended caseloads, work is unpredictable in terms of how many people they will have on their caseload at one time and what they're needs are. They usually face too much work.

The nature of the work also means caseworkers often hear people's stories and engage empathetically with traumatic incidents which often leads to vicarious trauma.

Some caseworkers experience a lack of support in their roles. Usually there's not the space or time to debrief with colleagues after difficult conversations and some experience not feeling like they can say they're struggling when others seem fine.

For some organisations who have mental health support worker roles embedded in their organisations, they have created structures to support staff wellbeing as well as clients.

> *"The job itself is difficult. You face so much trauma on a daily basis. There is so much demand for our services, but we're always doing crisis work"*
> Regional Coordinator @ National Charity

For people with lived experience

Those who work in the sector and have experience of seeking asylum face some unique challenges. This includes having 'too much knowledge' about the asylum system from their own experiences of it. This sometimes leads to feeling a greater sense of duty to help people because they know more about what they're going through and can connect. However this can also lead to overworking and blurred boundaries.

> *"When issues arise you want to challenge it due to your experiences but then you are held back by confidentiality so you think about it and scream about it but sometimes you can't do much about it. You want to help someone but your hands are tied."*
> Member Development Coordinator @ National Charity

> *"As someone with lived experience who has gone through the process, it's hard to switch off - you put the pressure on yourself to give support and advocate on their behalf. You still go home thinking about it."*
> Manager @ National Charity

The hostile political climate and events including the latest nationality and borders bill and the Rwanda plan have had big impacts on people who have lived experience. This includes feelings of 'survivors guilt' and worry for any family or friends who are trying to move here.

> *"Every refugee crisis, that has a knock on effect and brings past trauma"*
> Manager @ National Charity

The UK work culture can also be quite different:

> *"People from other working cultures need time to understand the working culture in the UK. This includes boundaries, technical skills, presentation of yourself, different support mechanisms and employee rights"*
> Manager @ National Charity

🔦 Spotlight on: Moud Goba

Insights from Moud Goba on what it's like for people who have lived experience and are working in the sector
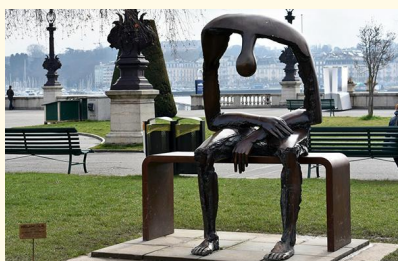
This picture is a sculpture created by Albert Gyorgy. For me, this picture is about grief. I really relate to this picture because it is almost the same as trauma. It's something you learn to live with and it's there. It's a hole that's left. You learn to live and change with it, but it is still there.

People working in this sector with lived experience, I think the thing to remember is when we come to work it's because of that experience, it's because of passion.

I was trained to be a teacher but after I'd been through the asylum system, I wanted to do something about it and work with refugees. I became passionate about it. It's often about passion, activism and the need for change. You have gone through this traumatic and often inhumane process and you don't want the next person to go through this experience. You want to support others and want to help. You also know where these challenges have come from. You are there, working in that place but that doesn't mean you've got over that trauma. Often people are still dealing with their own trauma.

You're supporting people who are going through the system that has broken you before. You don't want someone else to be broken and you know the challenges they are going to go through. That really can be retraumatising?. We have to be really careful so as not to be retraumatised. It has to be something we are alert to.

We have a boundaries policy at Micro Rainbow and that's supposed to help us. I know my boundaries and what I should be doing but the temptation is there because you know exactly what is going to happen. If someone calls you and they are homeless or they've left their home office accommodation because someone has been abusing them because as an LGBTQI+ person you know exactly how that feels. You know sometimes why they can't go back there. So where you are supposed to have boundaries you want to go above and beyond. Or when someone has gone through the whole process and some things have been happening then sometimes you have survivor's guilt kicking in especially with politics at the minute and Rwanda. You know what people are going to feel. At least I'm ok now, I need to do more for people who are going through this.

While you are working in that space, we are still migrants, some people are still going through the process of family reunification and citizenship, you still have to work with the home office. Sometimes for mothers they're still trying to reunite with their children and there's still challenges of integrating themselves into their community. I've lived in the UK for some time but there are challenges I'm still getting used to.

For many newcomers, we have to understand each other from an intersectional space. There are many things to adapt to, coming from a majority of black people, you now have to understand race and racism. As a woman, issues with gender, then as an LGBTQI person, your sexuality or gender identity. In the UK, you become 'the other'.

There are all these challenges but still you have to be present, and bring your whole self to work. You want to be able to do this work to the best of your ability. This is why we need to support our colleagues who have lived experience a bit more. They need more support because they're not just turning up to work and giving their expertise of lived experience and wanting to better the conditions for others, but they're still healing and going through trauma or working through it. They're still learning and integrating into their new community, understanding the politics, their race and new cultures.

Causes of wellbeing challenges

Organisational

- Structure and culture
- CEO & SLT not setting culture and policies
- Lack of policies, procedures, relationships
- Lived experience staff not provided conditions to thrive

Society, ecosystem & sector

- People see opening up as a weakness
- Funding target pressure & competiton
- Political climate and global events
- Toxic UK work culture informed by guilt

Organisational factors

For many organisations, it is difficult to fundraise for infrastructure support to improve the organisation, including for staff and volunteer wellbeing. A combination of dealing with constant crises, trying to meet the demands of growing numbers of people with less funding and being dedicated and passionate can result in organisations stuck in a cycle of not being able to prioritise capacity to plan, create and embed wellbeing policies, strategies and plans. This can lead to working cultures where it is normal to go above and beyond in terms of delivery, and neglect self-care.

For example when we ran this project it was very rare to find policies, procedures or cultures set around staff and volunteer wellbeing.

Many organisations have not got the understanding, conditions or procedures in place that enable staff and volunteers with lived experience of forced migration to thrive.

> *"The appraisal process is every 6 months, this is not enough"*
> Manager @ National charity

Society, ecosystem & sector

Unfortunately a lot of people in the sector see opening up as a weakness. For some, this has been a result of previous experiences when exposing their wellbeing challenges. For others,

it is easy to compare themselves to others who are facing 'worse' challenges and so diminish their worries and keep quiet about them'. During the workshop participants reflected they are sad to see this.

As mentioned in the causes of wellbeing challenges for all staff section, global events including the Coronavirus pandemic, the Afghan and Ukraine crisis', the cost of living crisis as well as political events including the new Nationality and Borders Act, far right activism and the Rwanda plan have had big impacts on people's wellbeing at work and outside of work.

Funding applications and targets have caused wellbeing challenges. As much as organisations would like to work together, competition is increasing between organisations to get funding due to reduced funding pots and increased costs associated with the increase in the cost of living and a battle for organisations to survive it. This creates financial worries including job security and organisations write bids that regularly go above and beyond what's possible in order to be successful. If they succeed, the battle is then to make sure they're meeting targets set by funders and that all the admin side is on track. Juggling report writing and funder pleasing with frontline service delivery is difficult and regularly feeds in to over working and wellbeing struggles.

Finally, some think that the UK work culture is informed by guilt that we're not doing enough. This feeds into all of our lives to work more hours, achieve more, and be the best we can be. This expectation of ourselves ingrained from an early age sometimes leads to burnout.

> *"There's so much added pressure on project managers to do the internal management and keep funders happy. It often feels like we're pandering to them and there is more of this now because funding is squeezed so we go above and beyond to make everything perfect. This also leads to a sense of unnecessary competitiveness in our sector that doesn't help the people we serve"*
>
> Manager @ Small charity

What makes the sector challenging?

What makes the sector especially challenging

Vulnerable clients	Constant, unpredictable stress	Immigration system
People have made a tough decision to leave their communities to a place with different language and culture. / Stresses that puts on client groups has a knock on to our staff and advisors.	With this setting, there is never an ending. / Unlike being a teacher, where you have the 6 week summer holiday.	You are battling against the government and immigration system. / Hard to maintain hope when you're banging your head against a brick wall.

Unimaginable experiences	Isolated sector	Lack of reward
People have lived through stuff that we could never imagine. / Conversations are very different. One could be about universal credit and another about how they were abused.	There is no one else. No one other than the sector helping these people. / Wellbeing of staff can be tied to political climate, as that has an impact of clients.	Hard for staff to feel rewarded, we don't see the positive side. / In other sectors (such as youth) you can see positive impact of your work more clearly.

As part of our research we wanted to understand what makes this sector especially challenging. The purpose of this was to learn what the extra needs are of people who work in the sector, if/how they're different from those in other sectors and why generalised wellbeing support we learnt about in our online research might not be the solution.

We learnt that people the sector serves are particularly vulnerable having lived through unimaginable experiences. These experiences differ greatly from client to client, as does the language they speak, their position within the asylum system and the places they have travelled here from. This, as well as no idea of how big caseloads will be from week to week creates a constant unpredictable stress for those working in the sector not knowing what they'll be faced with each day.

> *"Conversations are very different. One could be about universal credit and another about how a client has been abused."*
> Manager @ Small charity

> *"With this setting, there is never an ending"*
> Strategic and Partnership Lead @ Small charity

It is also difficult for organisations to keep going and supporting people given the rising hostile environment which contributes to this unique set of challenges facing the sector, and all of those working within the sector.

> *"You are battling against the government and immigration system"*
> Regional coordinator @ National charity

> *"It's hard to maintain hope when you are banging your head against a brick wall"*
> Manager @ National charity

It sometimes feels like the sector is isolated in terms of who's helping people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants. This was with the view that a lot of other services direct people straight to organisations within our sector rather than trying to offer some support themselves. However in our workshop, it was discussed that perhaps this wasn't always the case as some places had experience of localised support including church groups.

Another thing we came across is that there is a lack of reward in this sector. Positive stories aren't shared very often making it feel like challenge after challenge and we didn't find anything that acts as an appreciation for the work staff do.

> *"It's hard for staff to feel rewarded, we don't see the positive side"*
> Regional coordinator @ National Charity

How challenges are overcome and wellbeing is maintained

Talking

Talking was reported to be the most useful and helpful ways to overcome wellbeing challenges, such as burnout, stress and anxiety. It helps to talk with friends, family, and colleagues.

Debriefing with colleagues is particularly helpful as it is with people who understand the situation and can therefore relate. This creates the space to share and process what each other hears during case work meetings and get feedback and support straight away.

It is important for staff to build trusted relationships with colleagues to be able to do this well. This enables supportive, helpful two-way conversations, especially when meeting in real life.

Support from management

Having a supportive manager to talk to and/or supervision also came up a lot in the conversations we had. When people we spoke to had supportive managers who would actively listen and respond with wellbeing support like flexible working or encouraging rest and recharge and professional support where necessary, staff felt reassured and supported.

> *"There can be a lot of isolation. If the only person you've got is your manager, and they don't have time, then you have to wait a long time"*
> Manager @ National Charity

Therapy

When things get bad, or to prevent things getting bad, many people turn to therapy that has been paid for by their employer including 24/7 employee assistance hotlines. It can help to talk through challenges with a professional who is unbiased and get professional support to create a personalised strategy for you.

Having said that, some people have had better experiences with therapy provided by work than others. Those who are from a racialised background or who have lived experience

sometimes find therapy inaccessible and unsupportive for their needs. Therefore, some may prefer therapy from professionals from a similar background to them.

Rest & recharge

'Escapism' after work came up a lot in our interviews, not watching the news and doing something to completely forget about work in the evenings. A 'proper rest and recharge' is also necessary for staff to be able to reset themselves. This includes regular, and long breaks from work to completely switch off as well as taking time back when you've done more hours than necessary. Managers and senior leadership have a part to play in this by encouraging staff to have time off, as well as implementing generous holiday policies.

In some cases, we also heard this might mean moving jobs for a new fresh start and to take time off between jobs where possible.

> *"I make sure I have 2 week holidays twice a year"*
> CEO @ National Charity

Manageable workload

Different organisations have been trying different ways to manage workloads of staff including pausing new clients or having a 'wellbeing week'. For some, this is done where necessary, for others it is scheduled yearly. This has helped them to feel more on top of their workload and slow down a bit, finding time to build relationships and support networks and 'have fun' together.

Adapting services with a focus on empowering clients to be able to do some things themselves, a more preventative rather than reactive approach also helped manage workloads.

Boundaries

Boundaries look different to everyone and every organisation. Some organisations have physical boundaries including locking the office at 5:30pm or having limits on database access between certain times whereas others leave individuals to create their own boundaries. This includes things like being clear on personal capacity, ability to switch off after work and being able to say 'no'. Some people also told us that they'd learnt to accept the system the way it is and that they are not 100% responsible for everyone.

Some people find boundaries easier to implement than others. Our research isn't deep enough to reveal a specific pattern however we heard that people's personal experiences including lived experience, supportive line management and power might feed into it.

Learning & growing

Some staff told us that individual coaching, organisational coaching and training chosen by their team and not 'done to' them has really helped. However it is important that this is delivered in a trauma informed way, by professionals who understand the context they are working in.

Life & values fit

It is so important for people's lives and values to work alongside their job. We heard some people are selective about what jobs they apply for because of this and flexible working hours is something that is on offer at most organisations we spoke to. This is so that people can fit their job comfortably around personal responsibilities and hobbies. This might include childcare, a volunteering position or a gym class they are committed to. Alignment of purpose and shared values between someone's job and personal life is also crucial, especially in this sector.

Social & personalised

Some teams and organisations have benefitted from more personalised wellbeing strategies including a wellbeing fund where every staff member gets some money they have to spend on their wellbeing. Some teams have started doing wellbeing weeks where they pause clients for a week and do team building activities focused on building relationships. On an individual level, some staff rely on fun out of work activities including exercising and socialising to help them escape, decompress and relax.

> *"We were lucky enough to get a grant for wellbeing. Each member of staff got £200 to spend on something to help their wellbeing. They had to write a statement about what they wanted to spend it on and why. People used it to buy a drum kit, fairy lights, all sorts of things."*
>
> Director @ National Charity

Policies & procedures

Although we did not come across any wellbeing policies during the project, some organisations have been building their own procedures to support staff wellbeing. This includes organisational, collective and self care through different programmes including those delivered by Act Build Change and Black Wellbeing Collective.

Magic wand ideas
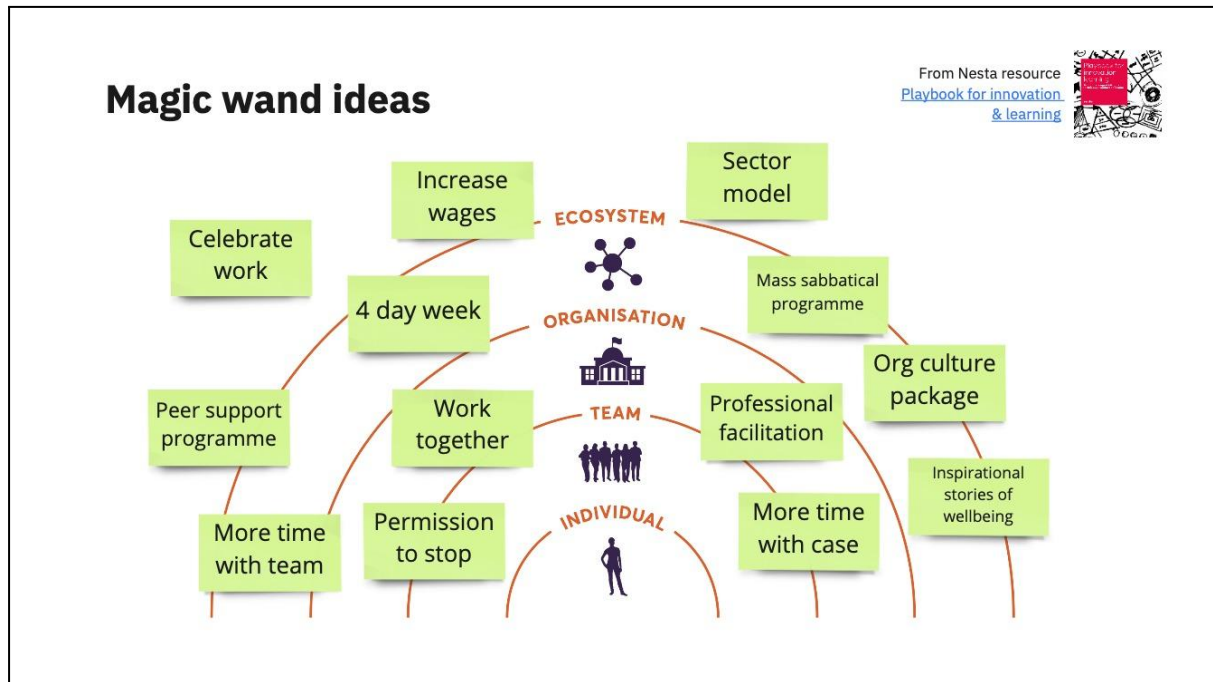
We asked everyone what their 'magic wand' ideas would be for wellbeing in the sector going forward. What would they like to do if there were no barriers?

The ideas are organised on a diagram from Nesta's 'Playbook for innovation and learning' to help us reflect which of those ideas would sit with individuals, teams, organisations and ecosystems. However, often they sit across more than one.

Magic wand ideas included:

- More time, both with cases and with their team
- Permission to stop
- Professional facilitation
- Working 4 day weeks
- Peer support programme
- To share/hear inspirational stories of wellbeing
- Create an organisation culture package that supports wellbeing
- A mass sabbatical programme across the sector so people can move around and support different organisations when necessary
- A sector model for staff wellbeing
- An increase in wages to reduce financial stress
- To celebrate good work and positive stories of the sector

Learnings from workshops

Workshop 1

After the interviews, we brought all the interviews together into a workshop to present what we'd learnt, gather feedback and think about what we should do next.
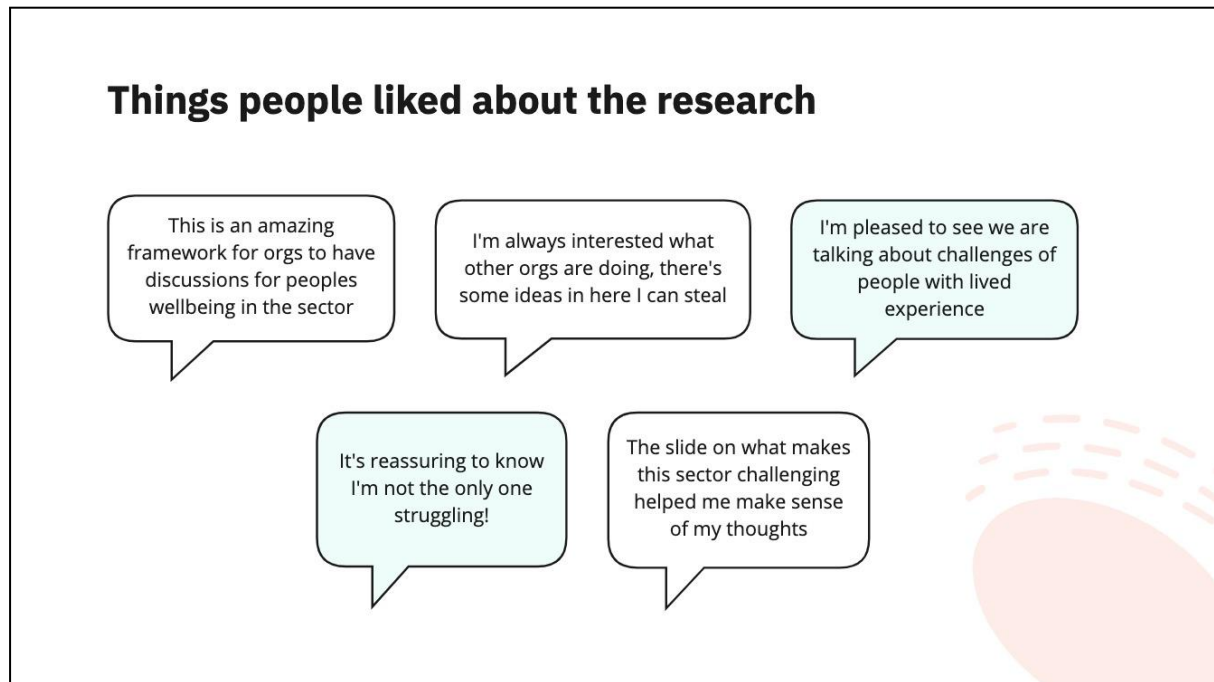
Things people liked about the research

One of the biggest outcomes was to hear that some people felt reassured by the information we presented. It became clear that how people are feeling might be the result of many things in the sector and not that they're incapable in their job roles. We also heard that it helped some make sense of thoughts they've been having for a while.

> *"It's reassuring to know I'm not the only one struggling!"*
> Manager @ Small charity

People were pleased to see that unique challenges for people with lived experience had come out in the interviews, and had been presented clearly in the presentation we did.

We also heard how people and organisations love to learn from each other and that this work provided a good framework for organisations to learn, have discussions and 'steal ideas'. The design and structure of the presentation was also easy to engage with and accessible, which everyone was grateful for.

> *"I'm always interested in what other organisations are doing, there's some ideas in here I can steal!"*
> Manager @ Small charity
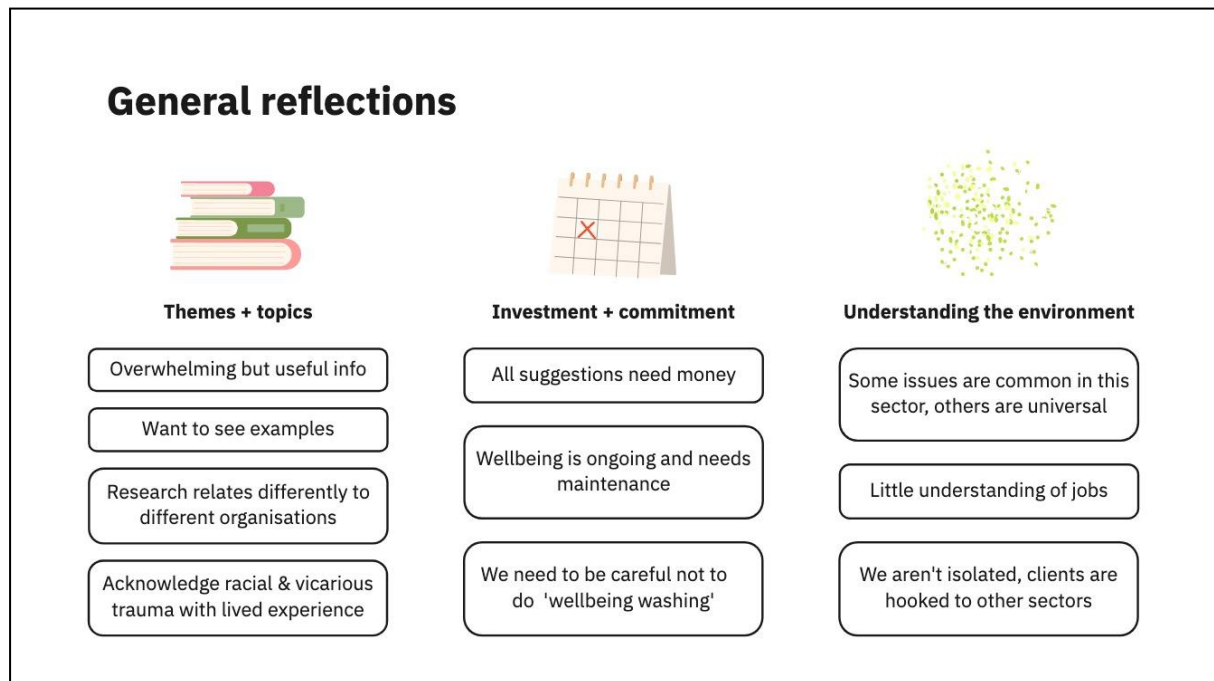
General reflections

As well as the things people liked, we received some general reflections which have been useful to keep in mind for the next stage of the project.

Some found the information useful but overwhelming, there was a lot of information there and not all the points are relevant for every organisation. The research relates differently depending on different factors including size or type of organisation.

People wanted to see more examples, so they can practically learn from others how to implement different wellbeing strategies.

We also learnt it is important to acknowledge racial and vicarious trauma with lived experience rather than separate.

It was also recognised that all suggestions need resource and money to implement, which is a challenge, considering funding is one of the big causes of wellbeing challenges.

We also heard we need to be careful not to do 'wellbeing washing'. 'Wellbeing washing' would be saying that we are doing good things to support staff wellbeing, but not following them through. An example of this could be writing a wellbeing policy for our organisation, but when it comes to implementing the things in the policy, we don't do it well or with care.

There were also comments to remind us to make sure we communicate that wellbeing is ongoing and needs maintenance all the time. It needs to be seen as a constant work in progress to stay well, rather than only focusing on it when things get challenging.

We reflected on the fact that some of the issues that have come up in this discovery project are common in this sector, such as battling with the immigration system and government decisions, whereas other issues are universal, especially across the charity sector including funding and overworking.

Because of this, there was a push back on the thought that the sector is isolated. It varies on location and organisation, but there was an acknowledgement that we are hooked to other sectors.

We also spoke about how most people who don't work in the sector have very little understanding about what we do. It's not like working as a nurse, or even for a homeless charity where people have an idea of how you're supporting people. The immigration system and needs of people seeking asylum are something that most people don't have an understanding of so it is difficult to talk about it and get support from those who don't work in the sector.

How might we turn this research into something useful?

In the workshop we asked each group 'How might we turn this research into something useful' as well as one other thematic question. These questions were:

- How might we address how power and hierarchy impacts wellbeing in the sector?
- How might we ensure organisations embed caring ways of working for a diverse range of staff?
- How might we help staff to understand, develop and stick to boundaries?
- How might we increase the capacity of wellbeing providers in the migration sector?

Throughout all the discussion, we found 4 key themes:

Publish it

There was a lot of demand for us to publish our research far and wide. This includes this report, but more importantly we heard people want practical tools, examples and guidance as well as a directory of suppliers in a way that is accessible and 'doesn't just get shelved.'

Peer learning spaces

One of the biggest learnings that came out of the wellbeing workshop was the value of peer learning and peer support. People were so engaged by hearing what each other's

organisations do to support wellbeing. Participants would like to see reflective spaces and sector wide training where you can link up with people external to your own organisation, at all levels of an organisation. The reason for this is that some people feel it is easier to discuss challenges with someone outside your organisation. There were also ideas that there could be webinars on different topics and that people in the sector could try ideas together. For example, if everyone tried no meetings between 12 and 2, it would be easier to stick to because all organisations in the sector are doing the same thing.

Further Projects

It was suggested that this piece of work could lead to many others. As we knew from the beginning, 'wellbeing' is a broad challenge and could be split up to do more research on different focus areas, for example how to support people working in the sector who have lived experience. We also heard how it might be good to use it to develop a sector wide wellbeing policy.

Influence policy and procedure

We also heard that participants would like to see this piece of work influence a sector wide wellbeing policy both organisational and governmental, and in employment law. It was believed that this could help develop workplace culture and implement boundaries. This could also encourage unionising.
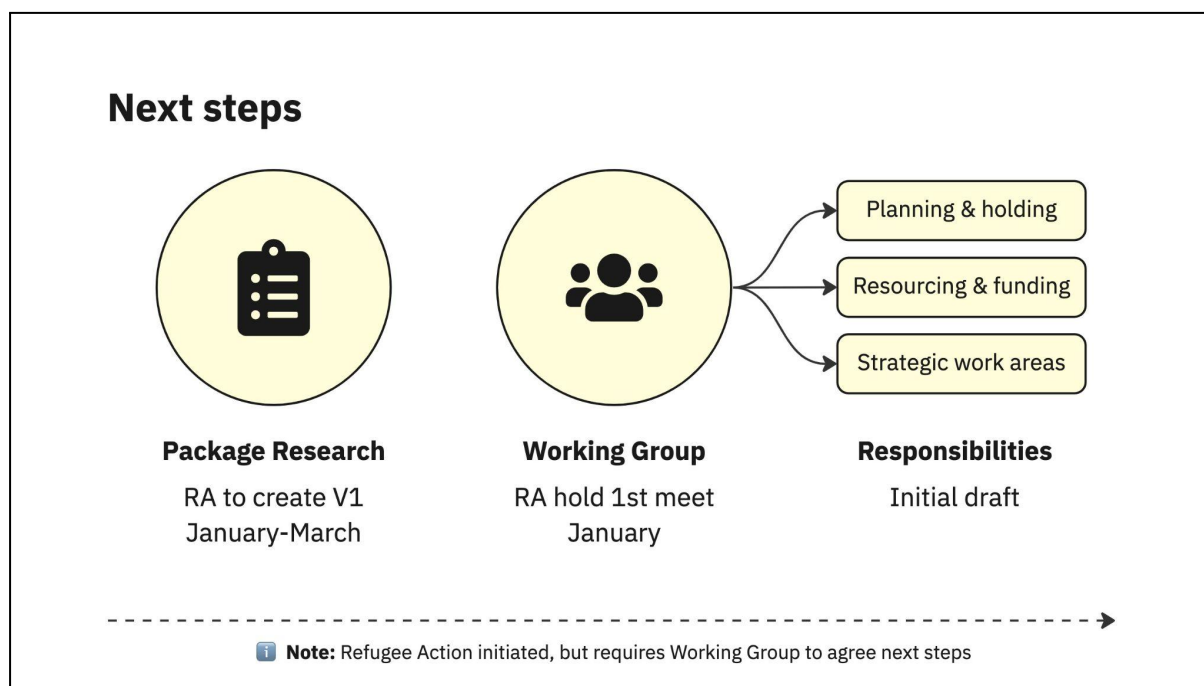
Workshop 2

We finished the project with a 2-hour workshop with interviewees, partners, experts and funders. We:

- Shared what we learned from the project to funders
- Heard views from staff and experts who were part of the project
- Answered questions from funders
- Shared recommendations and discussed next steps

You can find out our next steps if you continue to What next?

Next steps and recommendations

Next steps

Package Research
RA to create V1
January-March

Working Group
RA hold 1st meet
January

Planning & holding

Resourcing & funding

Strategic work areas

Responsibilities
Initial draft

ℹ️ **Note:** Refugee Action initiated, but requires Working Group to agree next steps

Refugee Action has funding to continue this work until the end of March 2023 and agreed to package up the research in this report. We hope you have found it useful.

There was a good appetite to keep this work going, so we decided to set up a Working Group. The responsibilities of people in this working group include:

- **Planning and holding** space for discussion and agreeing how to move work forward
- Find **resources and funding** for the ongoing work
- Focus on 3 **strategic work areas**, building on what we learnt from the interviews and workshops (areas subject to change depending on decisions made by the working group)

Recommended strategic work areas

1. Co-develop a framework

Co-develop a framework for how to approach wellbeing in the migration sector, including standards, patterns and tools. This needs to be created by and with people working at all levels in the sector.

2. Network and influence

Generate sector wide understanding and implementation of sustainable practices that improve wellbeing. This includes creating peer learning spaces across the sector where people and organisations can share experiences, ideas and learning.

3. Build a support platform

Build a dynamic and collaborative platform that signposts a range of effective wellbeing tools, services and offers. This could be the 'go to' place for people and organisations across the sector to find inspiration, a trusted directory of providers, and templates of documents including wellbeing policies, or bids that include funding to support staff wellbeing.

Would you like to get involved in/ are you interested in next steps for this work? If so, please get in touch with pascaleg@refugee-action.org.uk.

What impact has this project had?

Initiating this research and conversation about wellbeing has had a ripple effect.
It's a complex challenge, but this project has helped those involved to reflect on their own personal and organisational wellbeing practices. Below are some quotes from our participants:

"It has made me really think about how I am implementing ideas around staff wellbeing in my team and looking for additional support for my team from 2023"

"I am reviewing our policies to be more explicit about our support to the staff team and hope that we can take other practices forward as well."

"Keen to look at how it is incorporated in induction"

"We plan to do a follow up from the both of us and feedback to the team to decide on what we would like to take forward - short-term and long-term to present to our trustees. This will provide evidence to support our case to trustees."

"I think we'll need to consider our expectations of people with lived experience to put boundaries in place, which may need to be reflected in our policies. Maybe we'll develop a wellbeing policy."

"I will put in more regular breaks for reflection and evaluation, time to pause and reset."

"I'd be keen for us to engage with members of staff beyond SMT level + we will be organising a space/residential for caseworkers with a wellbeing element in mind"

"I feel like it has given me permission to advocate for myself and my team to have more support and time to focus on our wellbeing and what we need to stay healthy and supported in the workplace"

The information gathered will also provide a robust resource of insights and ideas that can be shared across the sector.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank our research participants, strategic partners and wellbeing experts for helping shape the project, provide insights, and co-designing a way forward.

This includes the 10 frontline organisations for participating throughout the project: AVID Detention, Manchester City of Sanctuary, Rainbow Migration, Micro Rainbow, CLEAR Project, Helen Bamber Foundation, PAFRAS, Refugee Women Connect, Refugee Action Services and West of Scotland Regional Equality Council.

And another 8 organisations who were involved in interviews. 5 of these were organisations in the asylum sector, to learn more about current experiences: Migrants Organise, Living Voices, Solace, Amna Healing and Refugee Action Experts by Experience team. 3 of these were other wellbeing experts: Homelessness Link, Reward Gateway, What Works Wellbeing and Living Voices.

We'd also like to thank those that worked with us on the strategic direction of the project and linking it up with other wellbeing activities: NACCOM, Migration Exchange, JTI and Pascale and Mo from Refugee Action.

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Finally, We'd like to thank the National Lottery Community Fund and Justice Together Initiative for funding this research.

Thank you,

Polly (Service Designer @ Refugee Action) & Noam (Director @ SIDE Labs)