

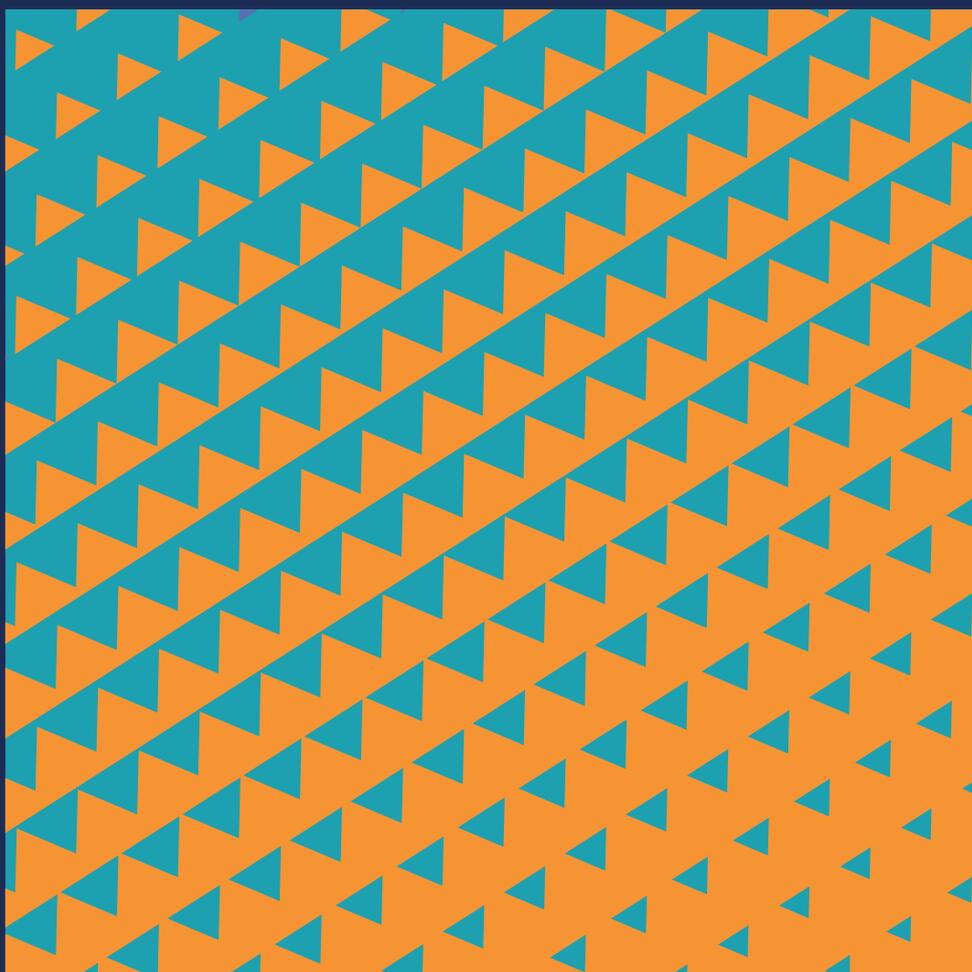


# Keeping it local

Employment support during the Covid-19 pandemic

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April 2021



# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Social housing and employment support</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. West Kent: a case study</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Flexible delivery</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5. Partnership working</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>6. Building resilience</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>7. Key learnings and recommendations</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>30</b>

Since this report was initially commissioned before the pandemic, this research was redesigned as a study of a place-based partnership working in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on the role of employment support through crisis response and recovery.

*Keeping it local:  
employment support  
during the Covid-19  
pandemic  
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# Summary

HACT worked with Town & Country Housing and Clarion Futures during 2020 to reflect on their employment and training offer in West Kent. Many decisions and adaptations had to be made quickly, some of which will inform future service delivery. There is no neat division between crisis and recovery, especially in the context of the health and economic uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the response of both social housing organisations is an important exercise in learning from emerging good practice, so they can remain insight-led.

Clarion Housing Group is a business for social purpose, and delivers a range of support, skills and opportunities to residents across the UK through its charitable foundation Clarion Futures. Town and Country Housing have a different approach, instead coordinating support for residents in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. Both organisations are committed to a range of resident services including pre-employment and in-work support.

Significant themes we identified from a series of interviews with frontline and community investment staff at Town and Country Housing, and Clarion Futures included:

- **Flexible delivery:** By necessity, the delivery of employment and training support has remained largely remote since

March 2020. In the short to medium term, this will remain an essential offer to keep people safe. This period has seen frontline delivery teams adapt at pace, driving innovation in delivery methods, while supporting customers to upskill digitally so they can access virtual services.

- **Building resilience:** In the uncertainty of the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the employment teams focussed on building resilience through a holistic support offer including mental health and wellbeing services. Evidence suggests this foundational support is a vital first step in building people's capacity to apply for jobs and achieve success in the workplace.
- **Partnership working:** Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing both operate in West Kent, with similar priorities around resident health, wellbeing and employment outcomes. The pandemic led to increased local collaborations between housing, health, the third sector, local government and businesses, with pre-existing partnerships facilitating a more efficient response to emerging needs.
- **Local focus:** Local working groups, shared data and research were important tools to ensure employment and training support were fit-for-purpose in a unique local context. National trends only partially map onto the local economy, meaning significant resources are needed to collate insights and identify opportunities.

# 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and its ongoing impact on communities has brought the role of housing and social housing organisations to the forefront. On the one hand, the relationship between social housing organisations and residents has been challenged by social distancing. At the same time, an increased sense of trust in social housing organisations has emerged as a result of the sustained crisis response role they have played locally and nationally. In addition, there have been changes to the delivery of core services, some of which may continue as social housing organisations prepare for a long-term recovery.

This research explores how two social housing organisations collaborated alongside each other and with other local organisations to address employment and training needs. It considers engagement and service delivery methods in the context of a broader commitment to the health and wellbeing of a local community. Reflecting on that wider context, and the networks and collaboration that can sustain meaningful interventions, provides the sector with a case study to learn from and inform service design and future decision making. Almost one year since the first lockdown began, there is value in reflecting on the pivot in service delivery and preparations for the future.

This research study with Town and County Housing and Clarion Futures was originally intended to be a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). Its aim was to test the effectiveness

of personalised communications to residents at achieving key outcomes of interest in comparison to the business as usual employment support programme. The RCT formed part of a broader joint HACT and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) programme of work around the application of RCTs in the housing sector.<sup>1</sup> As the research progressed, however, the method and model was revised in response to a number of challenges encountered, most notably with the Covid-19 pandemic and an evolving business model and delivery structure. HACT's research model and methods are flexible by design. We worked closely with the project team to align the study and findings with the current context in which employment interventions are delivered.

Social distancing restrictions are likely to be lifted in 2021, but the long-term impact from the past year will continue to affect social housing residents into the future as many sectors of the economy adapt and rebuild. Lessons can be taken from the initial crisis response and recovery, particularly from the networks of collaboration that were strengthened and built, the delivery methods that evolved, the way perspectives shifted. This report captures learnings amassed by Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures on the role of social housing organisations in communities, and in the

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<sup>1</sup> More details about Town & Country and Clarion's RCT journey and the JCT\_JRF RCT programme can be found in HACT ["Changing research in social housing: The role of RCTs" report](#).

delivery of employment and training support. It highlights areas of innovation, collaboration and opportunities to learn from emerging good practice that can be used to make the case for future investment, as well as in the design of more sustainable employment focussed interventions.

### 1.1. Research approach

The report draws on case studies from employment and community support hubs in West Kent. The research approach was targeted at different points between frontline delivery and decision making.

The following approaches inform this report:

- **Desktop review:** Both partners provided us with relevant documents relating to their employment and training support offer in West Kent. Information from HACT and the Centre for Excellence in Community's work in tracking and evaluating the housing sector's response to Covid-19 enabled us to place this information within the wider context of the housing sector's provision of employment support during the pandemic. This research also draws on the findings of the APPG Inquiry into Housing and Employment, published in October 2020.<sup>2</sup>
- **Qualitative engagement with staff:** We interviewed six key staff at Town and Country Housing and Clarion

Futures between March and September 2020, including a mix of frontline and strategic roles. HACT developed a learning log document that staff from both organisations used to gather and document their ongoing experiences and evidence change (see appendix). This data informed the assessment of the adaptations both organisations made between March and October 2020.

- **Qualitative engagement with residents:** Ten interviews were conducted with residents from both organisations, covering experiences around employment throughout 2020, and the impact of employment and training support. These interviews were undertaken by KEASH Consultancy, who work closely with Town and Country Housing and have extensive experience of working in health and housing in Kent.

This report does not set out to provide robust statistical evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of the support provided by Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures. Rather, it reflects on the ability of social housing organisations to mobilise and adapt to rapidly changing needs, and the role of data, insights and collaboration in informing decision making.

### Terminology

- **Resident:** The term residents is used in reference to both Town and Country Housing and Clarion Housing residents who have access to internal support offers

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<sup>2</sup> APPG Inquiry into Housing and Employment, <https://www.communitiesthatwork.co.uk/appg/> (2020)

and are signposted to a range of external partners.

- Services user: Many services provided by and supported by Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures are not just for social housing residents. At points this report refers to service users rather than residents. Both housing associations are invested in the wider community in which homes are situated, meaning they also work in tandem with other stakeholders to deliver support to both residents and other people in the local area.

## 2 Social housing and employment support

Social housing organisations are anchor institutions in local communities, with an entrenched presence in the local economy and community.<sup>3</sup> The social purpose of social housing organisations goes beyond simply providing homes; rather it is rooted in their community investment activities, or the work “social housing organisations do alongside people and communities to help them thrive”.<sup>4</sup> These activities include employment and training, health and wellbeing and anti-social behaviour.

The principles behind the anchor institution model are that housing and these associated activities have a considerable positive impact on the lives of residents and the local community.

### 2.1. Landscape before Covid-19

A disproportionate number of people experiencing economic disadvantage and exclusion live in social housing.<sup>5</sup> Notable issues include unemployment, lack of access to banking, insurance, affordable credit, advice, and financial capability support. Social housing residents are also less likely to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to become more financially stable.

In 2019, the unemployment rate of social housing residents was three times the unemployment rate of the general UK population.<sup>6</sup> Just under 30% of housing association residents were in full-time work, compared to 50% of the UK population, while 14% were in part-time work compared to 10%.

Social housing residents are more likely to be on low incomes. In 2020, 71% were reported to be in the bottom two income quintiles.<sup>7</sup> This disparity is associated with a number of issues for social housing residents, including negative outcomes for children. Children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at every stage in their education. They are also more likely to suffer from worklessness themselves as adults.<sup>8</sup>

Long-term unemployment can lead to financial instability. The Money Advice Service found that 22.7% of the UK population have immediate money concerns. People in this group are in receipt of social security payments or on low incomes, struggle with bills and payments, and have few savings.<sup>9</sup>

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3 CLES, [Housing Associations as Anchor Institutions](#) (2020).

4 Centre for Excellence in Community Investment, [What is Community Investment?](#)

5 Centre for Social Justice, [Social Housing and Employment](#) (2018).

6 [English Housing Survey](#) (2018-2019).

7 [English Housing Survey](#) (2019-2020).

8 Department for Work and Pensions, [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families Analysis and Research Pack](#) (2017).

9 The Money Advice Service, [Market Segmentation: An overview](#) (2016).

Social housing residents predominantly belong to this category. Consequently, many social housing organisations offer in-house or external support services for debt-advice and money management, as well as employment support services.

Many housing associations are also large employers, able to offer employment opportunities not only inhouse, but within their wider networks across a variety of workplaces. Their active role in local communities, and the relationships that builds, enables them to identify further employment and training opportunities.

Recent research has noted the need to target some of the wider contextual factors which limit employment prospects for social housing residents, from the provision of affordable childcare to transport and digital technology, as well as targeted employment support. Considering these factors, employment support provided by social housing organisations must address the spatial and social economic barriers that disproportionately affect some social housing residents.

Residents facing economic or health deprivations are more likely to require additional or substantial support from their housing provider. The business benefits as well as the wellbeing benefits of offering employment support to residents are therefore clear.

## 2.2 Examples in social housing

Social housing organisations spend £70m on employment support annually.<sup>10</sup> This support takes a variety of forms, from in-house support offers to funding external partners, delivered through a range of methods.

One example is the support offered by Riverside Housing Group, which has stock across 160 Local Authorities in England and Scotland.<sup>11</sup> As part of their tenancy sustainment offer, employment and training support is delivered alongside financial advice, energy and utilities support and a range of more intensive support. This holistic package recognises interconnections between issues and is designed to enable signposting between services.

Wandle is smaller social housing organisation in South London with a stock base of 7,000 homes across nine Boroughs. Its community investment is largely commissioned, with employment support provided by partners such as the Jobs Bus (a mobile space which can be repurposed to enable different in-person employment support) and MyWorkSearch (a SaaS platform providing residents with a variety of employment support services).<sup>12</sup> These sit within a larger package of commissioned services

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<sup>10</sup> [APPG Inquiry into Housing and Employment](#) (2020)

<sup>11</sup> [Riverside Foundation](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Wandle Housing, Financial Support](#)

for financial inclusion, business support, digital inclusion and more, again reflecting the need for a flexible and holistic approach to employment support. This approach enables smaller organisations to scale their impact outside of resource limitations, and to draw on the expertise of established local providers.

Across the board, these employment support offers in part reflect the various local contexts that organisations operate in. Place-based social housing organisations tend to utilise a different methodology to larger organisations with a dispersed stock. There are also examples of different housing providers collaborating in a local area, as in the case of Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing in West Kent.

### 2.3. The impact of Covid-19

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the employment market. In the four weeks after the national lockdown was announced in March 2020, there were 1.4 million new applications for Universal Credit.<sup>13</sup> A month later there were 2.5 million people registered as unemployed, equivalent to 7.5% of the UK workforce.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-29-april-2013-to-12-march-2020/management-information-1-march-to-12-april-2020-supporting-explanatory-note>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/>

The nationwide lockdown had a huge impact on social housing residents, who faced furlough, unemployment and challenging home environments, as reported to the Centre for Excellence in Community Investment's regional and national networks. As low earners, those who lived in social housing were seven times as likely as high earners to have worked in a sector that had to shut down because of the lockdown such as retail, hospitality and transport.<sup>15</sup>

In the medium to long term, nearly 50% of all the jobs at risk are in occupations earning less than £10 per hour.<sup>16</sup> For those in occupations such as cleaners, waiters and bar staff, 44% of jobs are at risk, while 35% of part-time jobs are reported as being at risk.<sup>17</sup> Social housing residents are 1.5 more times likely to work in part-time roles.<sup>18</sup> Part-time workers are also more likely to be women.<sup>19</sup>

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[bulletins/uklabourmarket/august2020](https://bulletins.uklabourmarket/august2020)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14791>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-in-the-united-kingdom-assessing-jobs-at-risk-and-the-impact-on-people-and-places>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-in-the-united-kingdom-assessing-jobs-at-risk-and-the-impact-on-people-and-places>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CSJ6364-Social-Housing-and-Employment-Report-180706-WEB.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-in-the-united-kingdom-assessing-jobs-at-risk-and-the-impact-on-people-and-places>

Covid-19 has demonstrated how life circumstances and external events can suddenly threaten the financial health and wellbeing of communities. It has also widened the disparity between those able to weather shocks, and those who suffer disproportionately.

Yet the Covid-19 pandemic has also raised the profile of community investment activities, including employment and training. While residents in social housing have been disproportionately impacted by the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic, the sector has reinforced its commitment to them through increased financial assistance, advice and support. The sector responded to this challenge with speed and adaptability. Staff not typically engaged directly with residents were mobilised from across businesses and social housing organisations delivered welfare support and food provision alongside an adapted and expanded set of community investment activities.

This report will be published in April 2021, one year after the first national lockdown. Following a third UK wide lockdown, social housing organisations are continuing to support a set of crisis response activities, but many have also adapted their core offer to continue delivering employment and training, health, wellbeing and community support services despite social distancing limitations.

## 3 West Kent: a case study

### 3.1 The local context

Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures both identified areas of significant deprivation in West Kent where large numbers of persons were in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). Internal Town and Country Housing research found that the relatively high levels of economic deprivation amongst residents could be a result of low financial income and moving in and out of precarious employment.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, West Kent had been affected by long-term trends that impacted employment prospects for social housing residents. In October 2019, a Business Register & Employment Survey for Kent reported “considerable reductions in employee jobs in seven of the 16 industrial sectors”, although there was a growth in professional and technical employment.<sup>20</sup> There was also growth in the service economy such as hospitality and retail jobs, and an increase in transportation and storage roles.<sup>21</sup>

These trends mean residents in social housing were already experiencing a transitioning job market prior to the pandemic. Its economic impact has been felt most acutely in the

accommodation and service sectors, which were growth areas in 2019. In this changing context, there is a significant role for employment and training support for people transitioning to new roles.

### 3.2 Local social housing organisations

Both Town and Country Housing and Clarion Housing Group have committed to providing residents with more than just homes and have a strong social ethos. They recognise that improving people’s ability to access employment, qualifications and work experience can increase overall levels of household income as well as the level and type of employment. Employment support forms a key part of business as usual for both organisations.

- Town and Country Housing has over 9,500 homes in the Kent and Sussex area and supports residents with a range of services from money management to mental health and employment support through the established Community Investment and Money Support teams and its new Tenancy Sustainment team. The organisation works closely with local charities and voluntary organisations through a network, signposting residents to local partners, covering mental health, befriending, youth support and more.
- Clarion Housing Group has 125,000 homes across England and is one of the

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<sup>20</sup> [Kent.gov, Business Register and Employment](#)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

largest providers of social housing in England. This includes a significant number in Kent. In Tonbridge and Malling alone, there are over 7,000 Clarion properties. Its charitable foundation, Clarion Futures operates across its national stock base and has a strong focus on providing employment support through the jobs and training team. This offers personalised guidance and support to help residents move towards and access meaningful employment. It reported supporting 3,834 people into work during 2019/2020. Residents are also able to use a wider suite of assistance and community investment through other teams.

## 4 Flexible delivery

### 4.1. Digital

Across the country, the national lockdown resulted in an unprecedented transition to remote working. The first priority for both organisations was to ensure they were operating effectively in compliance with the lockdown. Most staff began to work from home, ending all in-person delivery of employment and training support, with implications for effective service delivery. One member of staff at Clarion Futures described this shift as taking place “overnight and at pace”. Both organisations shifted from face to face support to online and telephone-based support, with digital delivery of support beginning on the 20 March 2020.

### 4.2. Digital inclusion

Staff at both organisations expressed concerns about engaging specific groups through digital means including those that do not have digital skills. Town and Country Housing staff highlighted “the elderly who are socially isolated, or those with English as second language, need peer to peer guidance, which is currently limited” as being at risk of not receiving support due to digital exclusion. Clarion Futures staff noted that during this period it became even more difficult to “engage residents because of a variety of issues that were preventing them from being online.” This informed the approach both organisations took to reaching out and

engaging residents.

During the first lockdown in March 2020, Town and Country Housing contacted the most vulnerable residents to check on their welfare and signpost or refer to support services. Of the 2407 households of vulnerable tenants over 70 initially contacted, 45% said they were not online. Town and Country Housing also contacted households consisting of a mixture of single, single parent and larger families as well as a range of ages and vulnerabilities.

Town and Country Housing identified three main barriers to online access through this exercise: no device, no internet connection and lack of skills/confidence. Both Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures have recognised these barriers and introduced new support offers to enable residents to become digitally connected .

Clarion Futures introduced a Digital Device Loan Scheme to support residents without a computer and internet connectivity, providing laptops, tablets and MiFi units.<sup>22</sup> This scheme has helped to connect both residents and non-residents with the expanded range of online support provided by Clarion Futures. Over 80 devices have been loaned nationally and of these at least six people in Tonbridge

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.uswitch.com/broadband/guides/what-is-mifi-mobile-broadband/>

and Malling have received a laptop. The range of online support provided by Clarion Futures includes its classroom based courses, which have been redesigned to become “bite sized” online workshops of 60- 90 minutes. As the use of apps like Zoom and MS Teams to communicate has increased, training in the use of these applications has also become an important part of the training offered by Clarion Futures. This training has been offered to residents, non-residents working with the Jobs and Training team, volunteer Digital Champions and staff and volunteers of partner organisations.

Alongside this, Town and Country Housing partnered with Compaid, who provide digital skills training and related computer-based activities in Kent and Medway.<sup>23</sup> Compaid moved their digital skills training to remote sessions due to the lockdown restrictions. Town and Country Housing purchased tablet devices and 4G Mi-Fi boxes alongside funding for Compaid trainers to support them to get online and learn new skills. Town and Country Housing reported that “the biggest challenge we’ve faced when engaging with residents is that other personal or health matters take priority, and getting online is not something they think is for them. The residents who have engaged are demonstrating great progress and learning to use their new devices more independently”.

There is a recognition across the sector that

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.compaid.org.uk/our-services/digital-skills/>

employment and training support benefits from a sustained, personal and immersive model of engagement, and that effective support is about “finding out what the individual wants and how to actually get them into a job and to give them confidence”.<sup>24</sup> Research has identified that peer-to-peer and more intensive, open ended and personalised support over time is required to deliver real impact.

Addressing digital exclusion requires a similarly engaged and sustained approach, which was not easy in the short turnaround when services moved online, as outlined in the Good Things Foundations Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included UK. This calls for “community-based, informal learning - blended with world-class free online resources” to bridge the digital divide long term.<sup>25</sup>

Looking forward, both Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures have identified that the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated work to address digital exclusion, and this work will provide a basis for a sustained digital support offer into the future.

### **4.3. Engaging staff in decision making**

There has been an increased involvement of frontline staff in operational and strategic decisions since the start of the pandemic. As the impact of the virus evolved rapidly,

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<sup>24</sup> [APPG Inquiry into Housing and Employment, \(2020\)](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Good Things Foundation, Blueprint for a Digitally Included UK](#)

and there was no real prior-experience or evidence to inform decision making, the insights and input from those engaged in direct delivery and contact with residents were invaluable.

Frontline staff were empowered to more actively inform operational and strategic decisions at Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing. Insights from residents were shared at weekly calls with the wider team and partner organisations in the Tunbridge Wells area. Staff from Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing noted that regular check-ins served as a valuable space to connect frontline insights with evidence from across Tunbridge Wells, and the wider region. Frontline officers valued the ability to make agile decisions and respond to what they learnt on the ground, with a more streamlined and empowered structure through which decisions were signed off. Both organisations see an opportunity to build on the skills demonstrated throughout the early period of the crisis, and that it is important to build from the increased responsibility rather than revert to the old way of working.

#### **4.4. Emerging opportunities**

Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing recognise the role they will need to play in supporting residents with difficult career transitions. The pandemic

has permanently impacted the job market, disproportionately affecting sectors employing a higher proportion of social housing residents. Those in the lower 50% of the earnings distribution are 2.4 times more likely to work in shutdown sectors, than they are to work in jobs which are likely to be able to be done from home.<sup>26</sup> More than 75% of housing association residents are in the bottom half of income distribution.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, more people have already switched sectors and retrained, or will likely need to. One Town and Country Housing resident indicated that they are “now thinking about re-directing my career doing security work as there is a high demand for this, this may only temporary but I am optimistic.”

Research by the Resolution Foundation suggests few adults will take up study and training on their own, which enables the move to a new sector.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, personalised and ongoing mentoring will be invaluable in enabling people to undertake the necessary learning to make this happen. Uncertainty in the economy and at a household level makes these decisions difficult. An Institute for Fiscal Studies briefing note on getting people back into work highlighted the multiple ways uncertainty

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<sup>26</sup> [Resolution Foundation, Risky Business \(2019\)](#)

<sup>27</sup> [English Housing Survey \(2018-2019\)](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Resolution Foundation, Can training help workers change their stripes?](#)

affects employment, from the dampening effect on the economy, to uncertainty at a household level.<sup>29</sup> Uncertainty also makes the job of employment support more difficult by hindering long term planning. In this context, providers like Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing can provide stability through sustained support, practical guidance and training.

*“People’s perceptions of the value and importance of health and social care work has changed. There is new pride in the work, and new appreciation. It’s been a time to get past prejudices about the work and its importance. And it is also an opportunity to raise aspirations for people in social housing. They may not feel there is a place for them in these sectors, but there is, and there is work to be done at both ends to make this happen.”*

Town and Country Housing  
Delivery Partner

Clarion Futures have been hosting a Monthly Job Shop, a virtual pop-up service for residents and non-residents during lockdown. Hosted in partnership with JCP, West Kent Housing and Golding Homes, the Monthly Job Shops are similar to the face-to-face job shops run by Clarion Futures and partners prior to the pandemic, where people can

receive on the day support from employers and social housing staff to help them secure work.

*“It’s important to both encourage people to set a goal and work towards it, but also provide practical and realistic advice around available opportunities. That has been harder with the wider uncertainty at the moment, but it’s a focus of what we do.”*

Clarion Futures staff member

Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures staff believe that the Covid-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to tackle entrenched stigmas about health and social work.

At a local level, employment advisors play an important role in mediating between people’s career ambitions, misconceptions, and available opportunities. This is a major responsibility with staff highlighting the need to maintain a balance between support and optimism, giving realistic advice and guidance relevant in the local job market. Addressing misconceptions around certain roles is a powerful way to expand horizons, especially in this period where vacancies in some sectors have diminished.

The 2016 Joseph Rowntree Foundation briefing note on housing and work incentives

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<sup>29</sup> IFS, [Getting people back into work](#)

for people in poverty stated that “workers at the margins of the labour market face demands from employers to be flexible, but their short hours and part-time or temporary working can hamper progression in the labour market.”<sup>30</sup>

Anecdotal evidence from social housing organisations suggests that these pressures on low-income, insecure workers have increased during the pandemic, not to mention the wellbeing and health risks associated with in-person work. The employment advisors we spoke to were conscious of their responsibility in providing guidance for those looking to switch to new roles.

*“Employment is important, but we are also conscious of the wider issues people are facing in their lives, than can make it difficult to clearly plan for the future.”*

Clarion Futures staff member

Facilitating this process enabled service users to get back to work and avoid financial insecurity. At the same time, there was an ongoing need to prioritise health and wellbeing, and other vulnerabilities that can put pressure on people to accept demands

from employers. The wider suite of support offers provided by Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing from debt advice to mental health support, can help to reduce the compounding factors that can lead to people being forced into difficult decisions.

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<sup>30</sup> [Joseph Rowntree Foundation, How does housing affect work incentives for people in poverty? \(2016\)](#)

## 5 Partnership working

### 5.1. Context

Partnership working enables organisations to pool resources at a local level and avoid duplicating support. With many local organisations facing financial and staffing limitations because of the pandemic, sharing support offers a more sustainable delivery model. There have also been examples of some partners providing assistance to organisations struggling to continue important work.

Looking forward, partnership working will remain an important part of the recovery, as the charity sector has been significantly impacted. The Institute of Fundraising, NCVO, and Charity Finance Group published a report on the impact of the pandemic on the charity sector, and found that 84% of charities surveyed said they had seen a decrease in their income during lockdown. Looking to the future from June 2020, 91% said they were forecasting a reduced income in the year ahead.<sup>31</sup>

### 5.2. The Social Landlord Impact Partnership

The Social Landlord Impact Partnership Forum is a group organised by DWP for

all social landlords in West Kent to come together to discuss any issues or support available to residents looking to get into work or progress to new opportunities.

This history of joint initiatives was built on throughout the pandemic in terms of Universal Credit advice and support. Locally, this was the initial big demand as there were thousands of new claimants. Just in Tunbridge Wells the figures rose from just over 1,000 claimants to just under 4,000 claimants in the space of a month.

Other joint work involves a focus on young adults via joint involvement in the Kick Start programme and the emerging DWP youth 'hubs'. Other priority groups identified include over 50's and women. Here both DWP and social landlords are investing in a range of training opportunities and access to digital technology and WiFi. There is also an open flow of information between local DWP Partnership Officers and Housing staff on various job opportunities and career mapping. This links to economic development in the area, and the current growth sectors.

### 5.3. Town and Country Housing signposting directory

Collaboration and partnerships operate at different levels, from key individuals acting as connectors, to formal partnerships and

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<sup>31</sup> Impact on the charity sector during coronavirus - research report June 2020. e Institute of Fundraising, NCVO, and Charity Finance Group, with support from PwC.

working groups. In the immediate local areas, Town and Country Housing staff felt that “partnership within Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has worked well and there is more of a feeling of ‘let’s just get this done’”.

Existing networks became invaluable in coordinating the initial response, enabling signposting and ensuring an efficient use of resources. Town and Country Housing produced a signposting directory, a central database of all local, regional and national partners, providing support in the following impact areas; local community support, befriending, food and medicine, mental health, young people and families, isolation, elderly support, health, domestic abuse, social services and money advice and employment. Each entry includes contact details and referral notes, as well as a description of the service offered. Town and Country Housing have shared this directory widely in the local area, including with local government.

#### **5.4. The Community Hub Maidstone**

Working in partnership with Golding Homes, West Kent Housing, DWP and The Mall, Clarion Futures set up a community centre at The Community Hub Maidstone, providing local residents with a space to support them into jobs. Based in a retail unit in The Mall runs, this hub provided regular training sessions, face-to-face advice sessions and job fairs prior to Covid-19. This support is

available 5 days a week and other community organisations can book times to run their own support sessions for their customers.

#### **5.5. New Wharf Road Job Hub**

Working in partnership with Clarion Futures, Digital Volunteers and DWP, the Jobs and Training team run a weekly job club for local residents from a centre on New Wharf Road, Tonbridge. The weekly sessions offered employment support to both residents and non-residents, with the addition of bespoke workshops and Digital IT courses, which were very popular and well attended. The digital volunteers also offered support with basic IT issues while the Jobs and Training team support with training, 1-2-1 job advice and job matching with local employers.

#### **5.6. futURe store in Tunbridge Wells**

Town and Country Housing part funds futURe store, a space dedicated to supporting local people’s employment outcomes, located in Victoria Shopping Centre Tunbridge Wells. futURe store was SEED funded by Town and Country & Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for the first year of its operation and is now sustained from a variety of funding streams.<sup>32</sup> Opening as a pilot in 2018, its founding principles were drawn from the learnings of the Taylor Review (2016) and Good Work

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<sup>32</sup> [futURe store partners](#)

paper (2017).<sup>33</sup> Recognising the increasing prevalence of insecure and low-paid work as a risk to individuals and the community's wellbeing, the idea was to provide a hub and resources to support services users achieve better employment outcomes.

Throughout the pandemic, the futURe store team have adapted their service to fit with government health and safety guidelines. The Partnership Action for Continued Employment, was formed from a collaboration between futURe store and Tunbridge Wells borough council, providing redundancy advice, 1-2-1 phone and virtual support, online training and support and more. This created a pathway for individuals to reach the team at futURe store during the height of the first lockdown. These services were open to all in the community in need. The Covid-19 response provided by futURe store was given stability by the securing of ongoing funding and support from British Land, a property development and real estate company that owns the shopping centre where the store is located.

### **5.7. TW Social**

Town and Country Housing was involved in the creation and maintenance of a centralised support directory for the local area around Tunbridge Wells, called TW Social. A range of

locally available support and training is listed alongside a weekly podcast, spaces for local cultural activities and events and wellbeing support. This online hub was designed to reflect the shift to digital delivery, and social distancing restrictions which prevented in-person support. As a platform with a holistic focus on the health and wellbeing of the Tunbridge Wells community, employment and training support sits alongside a diverse range of other services, covering couples counselling, food support, youth activities and more.

### **5.8. Sharing data and insights**

A key learning from this research is the value of established data-sharing agreements between organisations. National patterns in the virus and economic impacts are valuable for local organisations, providing a context for strategic decision making. However, it is important to use local evidence and insights to identify the extent to which these broader trends map onto diverse regions across the UK.

In the case of employment support, this is an ongoing exercise, to assess where interventions need to be targeted and services users need to be signposted. In certain localities, a single sector, or employers can have an outsized role in the local economy. Therefore the impact of national job-market trends can look different at a

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<sup>33</sup> [UK Government, Good Work Plan](#)

local scale.

Whilst the employment and training services offered through Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures were always open to all, the profile of users requiring assistance has become more varied. For example, there was an increase in young people out of work, in line with national trends. Locally, frontline staff have also seen more single parents and women in low pay positions reaching out for employment and training support.

*“The local approach and focus is important. Despite seeing on the national news that a major supermarket is creating new jobs, it may be that none of them are in the south-east, where our services users are. Locally, we work with DWP to find open roles. We also offer a free recruitment service for the local area, so jobs can be advertised by us. We work with the NHS to connect people to roles, and also use a site called Glassdoor in Tunbridge Wells”*  
futJRe store staff member

Collecting and assessing data to produce actionable insights was an important means of tracking these changing needs and tailoring support to the local context. Front line and senior staff from both Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing highlighted this as being a key part of their work in West Kent to ensure they are delivering effective

services and providing appropriate support to residents.

Town and Country and Clarion Futures quickly mobilised to deliver welfare calls to residents, initially to over 70's and vulnerable people, but expanding to cover a wider demographic as the reaching impact of the virus became evident, and resources were put in place to deliver these calls. These short calls provided the dual purpose of flagging where individual residents required support or signposting, but also as a chance to gather a more comprehensive set of resident data to inform decision making. These are valuable insights internally, for both organisations, but they can also feed into a collaborative, targeted local response.

*“We need to locate and signpost people to open roles, which involves going to different local and national job networks, and local employers to identify vacancies. You have to have time to do this, to make your service to residents is the best it can be.”*

Clarion Futures staff member

In terms of shaping service design and delivery, the Head of Community Investment at Town and Country indicated understanding the profile of the local job market and opportunities is a vital part of being able

to provide effective services. Similarly, a member of the futURe store delivery team told us that:

In this case, being tied into businesses and local networks allow for a tailored and specific support offer that reflects the immediate context. As noted, there is high regional disparity in terms of job opportunities. This does require a level of resource and time on the part of Town and Country and Clarion Futures staff to gather insights and develop networks, as described by a Clarion Futures member of staff:

As part of their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Town and Country were involved in mapping around careers and progression and identifying the growth sectors such as care and support and logistics. Projecting future trends is important as it allows organisations to plan and prepare their services at a local level, to meet future needs. For example, by working with local employers to project where future growth and investment will bring new jobs, organisations like Town and Country and Clarion Futures can equip frontline staff with the necessary training offers to prepare services users to meet these opportunities.

Clarion has an Employer Engagement Team which generates opportunities with employers across a range of sectors to generate diverse vacancies. They also account manage employer recruitment relationships

in order to access jobs for residents.

## 6. Building resilience

### 6.1 Crisis response: health, safety and wellbeing as a priority

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, the focus of the crisis response was on health, wellbeing and food and hardship support. The employment team quickly adapted their support offer to reflect these needs, and similarly noted that services users were not in the headspace to make decisions about future employment, compounded by the uncertainty at a national level about the duration and impact of the virus.

*“Our normal practice of employment support is difficult, due to how fast peoples lives are changing. In this context, employment is not their main concern, and our expectation of high (employment) referrals hasn’t happened.”*

Town and Country staff member

One Town and Country Housing resident rarely left home due to poor mental health and found lockdown difficult as “being told not to go out is worse than choosing not to”. Isolating as a result of being vulnerable to Covid-19 and being unable to get outside or use their bike, they became increasingly socially isolated. Town and Country Housing enabled this resident to access a range of services, including being signposted to health support, food parcels, and frequent wellbeing check-ins from the Town and Country team. For mental health support, they were referred to One You Kent, who have provided

invaluable support through a really difficult time. At the time of being interviewed, this resident indicated that they were uncertain about the prospect of returning to the workplace, with the associated health risks. In the meantime, the wider support has helped them to remain positive, and address underlying mental and physical health problems that were making the prospect of returning to work in construction a challenge.

### 6.2 Clarion Futures: money guidance

The Clarion Futures Money Guidance Service supports residents to manage their money effectively, through both its internal guidance team and externally commissioned services. The offer covers basic household needs like grants for white goods, help with food or fuel vouchers, benefits checks, council tax support and managing transition to universal credit. In addition, they can provide residents with support dealing with bills and debt; e.g. working out a budget, understanding bills, getting better deals, access to social tariffs for water & fuel and referring into debt advice when needed. Tackling fuel poverty is another priority; from understanding meters and bills, to switching and changing energy behaviours.

Sitting under their Financial Inclusion Team, Clarion Futures have dedicated Energy Advisors who provide vulnerable residents with one-to-one support. Their advice covers debt management and saving money on

energy bills.

### **6.3. Town and Country: tenancy sustainment team**

The Tenancy Sustainment team works collaboratively with the wider operations team (Housing managers, money support, income, community safety) at Town & Country to offer an enhanced service for those who are identified as having issues maintaining their tenancy. This may be for employment reasons, but also physical or mental health issues, dependency and addiction issues, bereavement, isolation or financial issues.

Following an initial assessment, the team can signpost residents to voluntary and statutory agencies who can provide specialist advice and interventions. The Tenancy Sustainment team manages the more complex cases, where longer term contact is needed to prevent repetitions of the initial tenancy challenges. The aim of the team is to enable tenants to build the skills and support networks to sustain their tenancies successfully.

The Tenancy Sustainment team was under development prior to the pandemic, however much of the service delivered has taken place since March 2020. The approach and service delivery is being continuously reviewed based on lessons learned and resident priorities established during the pandemic.

It has become clear from the experience of delivering tenancy sustainment services through the pandemic that there was a significant need to continue this variety of support, and two casework officers were recruited in summer 2020. A further two officers were recruited in early 2021 as demand for the service grew as it became established.

*“Back in the summer, there was a café job that came up in Tunbridge Wells. 400 applicants came forward for one job, and it was really difficult on some of our services users. In these circumstances, it's incredibly important to keep people positive and hopeful, and committed to keep trying. Especially with the wider news and uncertainty around Covid-19.”*

Town and Country staff member

### **6.4 Skills and training**

A key message from JRF's 2016 report was that those with fewer skills are more likely to experience the effects of housing on employment incentives, therefore they are more likely to go into “low paid, part-time and insecure” work. Building skills is more than just about finding work, it's about equipping people with the options to find meaningful and secure employment.<sup>34</sup> In

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<sup>34</sup> [Joseph Rowntree Foundation, How does housing affect work incentives for people in poverty? \(2016\)](#)

the case of Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing, prioritising accessible and affordable training during the early period of the pandemic was not just a fall-back option to keep services users engaged, it was also a means to prepare people to be successful for the future job-market.

In the initial weeks, long term employment decisions were difficult to consider and many were unclear about their future in restricted sectors, or were facing personal limitations if shielding, or caring for children working from home. Whilst the primary focus was on health, wellbeing and safety, the employment offer remained important, Town and Country Housing and Clarion Futures noted that by May 2020, more were raising concerns about unemployment and job security. There was a new degree of uncertainty in the job market, as well as amongst service users that made this service offer more challenging.

*“Its about building the skills now, to be flexible and find work in the future. This includes digital skills, but also the interpersonal skills, the confidence, communication and general ‘soft skills’ that make someone employable, and allow them to progress once in work.”*

Clarion Futures staff member

To compensate, both organisations strengthened and utilised a holistic support offer, that addresses wider issues in people’s

lives, and equips service users with the capabilities and soft skills to thrive in the workplace. As these skills are transferable, build confidence and improve employability, it was possible to support service users even while opportunities were diminished, or restrictions and furloughing prevented people from returning to work.

In this context, both Town and Country and Clarion Futures shifted their focus to building individual capacity and resilience, both through mental health and wellbeing and financial support, but also by encouraging clients to utilise training and skills development.

One key area was digital capability, as many sectors shifted parts of their services online. Services users were encouraged and supported to complete training courses to equip them to apply in sectors where jobs were becoming available.

In July, Clarion Futures recorded that there had been a significant increase in the uptake of e-learning amongst clients, with hundreds of enquiries about courses every week. The decision was made to respond by commissioning more remote and online courses from September 2020 onwards, to reflect the increased demand. Practically, there was some work to be done to move the sign-up procedures online, such as ID checks and registration paperwork, however this shift has shown the benefit of rapidly

reflecting on, and responding to an increased demand. Working in partnership with Social Value contractors and Microsoft, Clarion Futures expanded the range of e-learning and online training available to residents and non-residents, responding to key areas of need in the changing employment landscape, covering areas from customer service to fundamentals of excel.<sup>35</sup>

The futURe store also saw an increase in interest for online learning, and were able to signpost services users to free courses and learning to improve general IT and digital capabilities. FutURe store staff directed service users to sites like Alison, which supports people to improve their typing and other general workplace skills. “With all this free training available, its possible for people to improve job prospects, even while the job market locally is not offering much. This also helps keep people positive and focused on the future.”

One futURe store service user interviewed as part of the research had previously worked in health and safety roles, but after the pandemic started, had found it difficult to find work. In the meantime, they worked with

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<sup>35</sup> Courses available in February 2021 (not including additional e-learning offer. Customer Service, COSSH, First Aid in the Workplace, Food Hygiene, Food Allergies, SIA, Intro to Warehousing, Intro to Retail, Business Start-up, Social Media in business, Webinar - Sell your Skills, Fundamentals of Excel, Prepare for job interview success, Fundamentals of Word, Make your CV stand out with CV Assistant

staff at the futURe store to access online digital skills training, which they said was “very helpful – and kept me focused whilst looking for work.”

## **6.5 In-work support**

In-work support has long been a core part of the service offer in Tunbridge Wells. Clarion Housing, Clarion Futures and the Resolution Foundation published Working Hard(ship) in February 2020, just before the lockdown began in the UK.<sup>36</sup> The paper explored the concerning increase in in-work poverty as a major issues, and informs Clarions Future’s approach. These trends have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and reductions in hours and pay arising from mandated shutdowns, reductions in workplace capacity and reduced wages through the furlough scheme.

In addition, Town and Country staff were flagging an increase in in-work mental health and wellbeing concerns, with many of those still working in-person having to adjust to new health and safety measures and increased potential exposure to the virus.

Both Clarion Futures and Town and Country see success in their work as being more than a metric of jobs gained. The ultimate

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<sup>36</sup> [Resolution Foundation, Social Renting: A Working Hypothesis](#)

priority is meaningful, fulfilling work that can contribute to stability, health and wellbeing. For these reasons, the scope of support has always stretched beyond employment. In work support to aid career progression and combat the issue of in-work poverty has been an integral part of the Covid-19 response, especially anxieties increased around the safety of essential in-person work during the lockdown.

Clarion Futures' Jobs and Training teams provide regular In Work Support for customers once they are in work. This includes discussions around childcare, informing DWP, top up benefit payments, travel, health, and budgeting. This helps the customer feel confident in work as well as helps them to identify any possible issues that may arise. These meetings are repeated on a six monthly basis to review and assess if further support is required. At this point if the customer would like to retrain, Clarion Futures can apply for internal grants to achieve further qualifications and develop their career.

The Apprenticeship Team at Clarion Futures deliver a national, accredited mentoring programme to ensure that all apprentices are fully supported throughout the life-cycle of their apprenticeship. To date, over 50 Clarion staff have volunteered to be part of the programme and are now trained mentors helping to support our apprentices.

## **6.6 Summary**

The three themes of flexible delivery, partnership working and building resilience have been central to the Covid-19 response of both organisations, and guided the work of the employment and training teams across Clarion Futures and Town and Country Housing.

Continuing to reflect on delivery at a local level is important, in the context of the constantly evolving pandemic and impact on the economy. It's been difficult to predict and prepare for the future, making reflection and an open dialogue between organisations valuable.

The reflections shared in this section emerged through the use of tools to monitor, reflect and share information on decision making processes. With the pace of change so rapid, it is easy to lose sight of the decision-making process, and call into question how, and why action is taken.

## 7 Key learnings and recommendations

The uncertainty around the future course of the virus, and its continued impact on communities and employment remains. Whilst there was and remains a dialogue around recovery and building back better, social housing organisations face the more pressing need of supporting residents and the wider community through the winter and localised lockdowns. Restrictions are not as severe as March and April 2020, however key sectors continue to operate at reduced capacity, whilst some businesses are closing, leading to a new wave of unemployment.

HACT has collaborated with a number of partners in the sector to capture their response to the Covid-19 pandemic and explore the future role of social landlords in places. The following themes emerged from a key piece of work with PlaceShapers to understand what role social housing organisations can play in the Covid-19 response and relate to this research;

- The role of social housing organisations in place has become more dynamic and hyper-local.
- New challenges have emerged for those working across multiple localities and, in particular, across rural ones.
- The need for greater partnership working.
- Agile working and agile governance have both come to the fore, as has how we measure our value.
- Opportunities for resident engagement.
- Challenges from decentralisation.

These wider reflections on the position of social housing organisations in communities frame this research paper. In many respects, the Tunbridge Wells case study of the work of Town and Country and Clarion is an example of these themes in action, in particular the importance of partnership working and a place-based delivery model.

The three main themes highlighted in our conversations with staff from Town and Country and Clarion Futures provide useful guidance for good practice moving forward.

### **Flexible delivery**

- **Capture ongoing learning:** This research highlighted the benefit of capturing ongoing learning from different stakeholders. Using learning logs, staff from Clarion Futures and Town and Country engaged in period reflection exercises to record emerging challenges and reactive and proactive actions accordingly. Critically reflecting on decision making enables organisations to improve processes and better equip teams for the future.
- **Remote Working:** The ability to pivot to remote delivery required an immediate investment in equipment, new skills and an adjustment in working practices. Long-term, incorporating these learnings and adaptations can give delivery teams more flexibility to engage services users and offer training and support.

**Building resilience:**

- **Health and Wellbeing:** Both Clarion Futures and Town and Country see the importance of a holistic support package that covers employment alongside health and wellbeing. In the context of Covid-19, the foundational importance of general health and wellbeing, from which employment outcomes can improve, became more essential.
- **Digital Skills:** Covid-19 has catalysed existing trends which are seeing digital skills become more important in a variety of workplaces. Digital inclusion initiatives take time and investment to achieve success amongst harder to reach groups. Sustaining the increased investment made during the pandemic will be important during the recovery period.

**Partnership Working:**

- **Sustain Covid-19 Partnerships:** New local partnerships and networks were built to coordinate the local Covid-19 response. Whilst the frequency of calls sustained in the crisis response is not suited to long-term working, it is important to establish permanent partnerships were suitable, building on the inter-organisational relationships which have been created. A key learning was that established partnerships made the response quicker and more targeted.
- **Build New Partnerships:** The long-term recovery may call for new inter-

organisational collaborations, as long-term health and wellbeing patterns emerge, and the economic recovery progresses. Pro-actively seeking new collaborations outside of the crisis context will help local communities share resources to build back better.

- **Equip and invest in local data, insights and research:** The Covid-19 pandemic saw many national research agencies and charities produce research on a variety of issues, from the economic impact to the effect on young people and mental health. Whilst this provides a useful context, in the case of effective employment and training support, research at a local scale is invaluable in informing decision making.
- **Data Sharing:** Underpinning formal relationships is the sharing of data and insights. Contact details for residents, as well as the demographic profile of residents and other relevant indicators can improve operational and strategic decision making.

# Appendix

## **Switching Careers: futURe store services user case example**

After the start of the pandemic, they had to stop working as gas engineer, as the company had to prioritise jobs for their core workforce. Through futURe store, they were able to access employment support and financial guidance from the Look Ahead Scheme, providing support for vulnerable people

To get back into work, they access learning courses and CV advice through the futURe store. We were told this helped in building confidence and direction for the future

Whilst they spoke about concern and anxieties relating to working, wearing a mask and social distancing, we were told they had been adapting, partially due to the support of Town and Country and the other support offers signposted.

“It’s hard to find suitable work with many companies folding and making redundancies.”

The support provided has enabled them to retrain for security work, to find employment whilst there was less work as a gas engineer.

“I would say I am now thinking about re-directing my career into security work as there is a high demand for this. Whilst this may only be temporary, I’m quite optimistic.”



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