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# ARMA & IRPM INDUSTRY WELLBEING SURVEY REPORT 2021





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For those working in residential leasehold property management, times are tough. Staff turnover is above the national average, and the issues of cladding and the lasting impact of a pandemic are set to be felt for many years to come.<sup>1</sup> High churn rates across the industry have cost implications for businesses, resulting in the loss of valuable and experienced staff. Crucially, it also suggests that the wellbeing of individual workers is not being accounted for.

ARMA and IRPM have conducted a 'mental health check' of the industry in order to understand the wellbeing and resilience of the individuals involved in residential leasehold property management. The key findings reveal a workforce that is often overstretched and under a myriad of sometimes conflicting pressures.

Property management staff consistently score below ONS averages when asked about how worthwhile their life is, their life satisfaction and their levels of happiness. Many are also concerned for their physically and mental health. Almost 60% believe their mental health is at risk from their work while almost all respondents noted they had been treated rudely in the last 12 months. In some cases, staff have noted experiencing physical assaults while working, or have been the subject of hate crimes.

Across the sector, work stress factors outweigh other non-work pressures, with leaseholders and, to a lesser extent, freeholders/landlords and employers noted as key sources of stress. When it comes to support, employers, professional/trade bodies and the government were judged to offer lower levels of support than expected. As a result, 19% of staff can't see themselves staying in the sector for the next three years, while 29% are unsure.

These sentiments are further compounded when respondents are grouped based on whether or not they deal with cladding issues – a 50/50 split. The differentiated results reveal that life in property management is even tougher for those involved in cladding remediation as they face increased work pressures which impact their life satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing. They are also 90% more likely to have left the sector in three years' time compared to the staff not involved in cladding remediation.

ARMA and IRPM intend to use the survey results to help the sector shape and improve its wellbeing and resilience initiatives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Wellbeing Survey was distributed to residential property management professionals between 8 February and 1 March 2021. In total, 743 individuals from across the sector responded, with a 100% completion rate and over 200 additional comments, all of which have been read – we are encouraged that the first survey of its kind had this level of response and support. We would like to thank each respondent for their valuable time, insight and honesty.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.xperthr.co.uk/survey-analysis/labour-turnover-rates-survey-2020/165727/?keywords=labour+turnover+rates+survey+2020>

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## BACKGROUND

Residential leasehold management has never been an easy profession, but recently it has proved tougher than ever. With the cladding and building safety crisis and proposed leasehold reform (each representing huge challenges in their own right) landing during a global pandemic, the resilience of property management professionals is being tested to the limit.

A well-trained and highly competent workforce is essential and today's employers understand their greatest asset is their people. Supporting departments, teams and individuals as they face an even bigger onslaught of daily challenges is vital to the creation of a positive workplace culture, a more stable and successful business, and better outcomes for clients and residents.

It is important to understand issues before responding to them. ARMA and IRPM have teamed up to provide a 'mental health check' of residential property management professionals, identifying the key pressure points to inform and help shape the future of mental health and wellbeing support for the sector. We will be revisiting this survey on an annual basis in order to track the progress our sector has made.

## METHOD

Our research was carried out using a quantitative and anonymous questionnaire distributed online using a survey tool called SurveyMonkey, with 42 questions, and one question which allowed for further comments and open-ended responses. The sample included IRPM's database of block management professionals and members of ARMA, and the survey was also shared publicly through social media, as well as being posted on both IRPM and ARMA's websites. Respondents were distributed across the UK.

Responses were requested from property managers, as well as onsite and back-office support staff. The survey required respondents to share their current life pressures, their experiences of aggressive behaviour, the implications of COVID-19, and also identified those dealing with cladding and external wall systems issues.

The survey also set out to measure current levels of job satisfaction by establishing whether existing employer support is adequate and gauging what proportion of the workforce is likely to seek employment in a different sector in the near future.

Once the responses were collected, IRPM and ARMA conducted an exploratory data analysis. This report includes discussions, observations and proposals, derived from the findings of the survey.

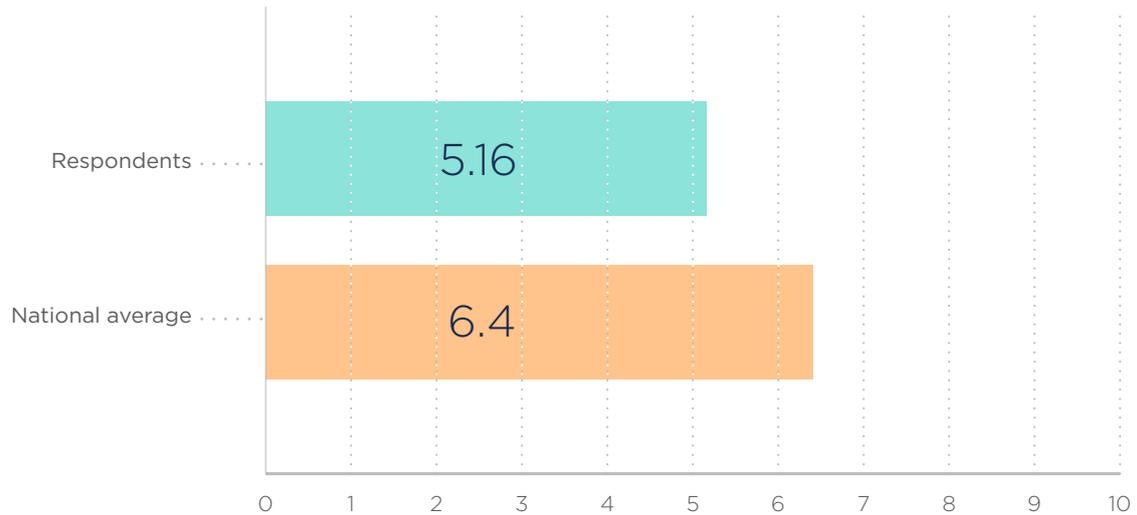
## COVID-19

The survey was issued during the third national lockdown in England, and when the home nations were under similar 'stay at home' instructions. Although we can't account for this bias in our results, we have compared the data from our wellbeing questions with a survey published by the ONS which asked identical questions and was issued at a similar time (7 January–30 January 2021).

## THE CHALLENGES

### 1. SATISFACTION, HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING

**OVERALL, HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE NOWADAYS?**



OF 743 RESPONSES

An average satisfaction with life rating of 5.16 for our respondents; this is compared to a national average of 6.4.

#### Rationale

We opened our survey with general indicators to help build a picture of how our industry is coping and give an overview of 'wellness'.

This gave us an opportunity to benchmark our findings against the national average using the most recent data from the Office of National Statistics' (ONS) wellness survey published on 25 March, entitled 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on rural and urban areas in Great Britain, 2020 and 2021'.<sup>2</sup>

This UK-wide survey has been issued on a bi-monthly basis since June 2020 to gauge the social impact of the pandemic on the adult population. The first part of our survey focused on general wellbeing and asked the same questions used in the ONS survey issued in January 2021. The sample size of the ONS survey was 16,790.

#### Findings

The above graph shows an average satisfaction with life rating of 5.16 for our respondents; this is compared to a national average of 6.4.

A similar question asking respondents 'to what extent do you feel that things you do in your life are worthwhile' gave an average score of 6.0, compared to a national average of 7.0.

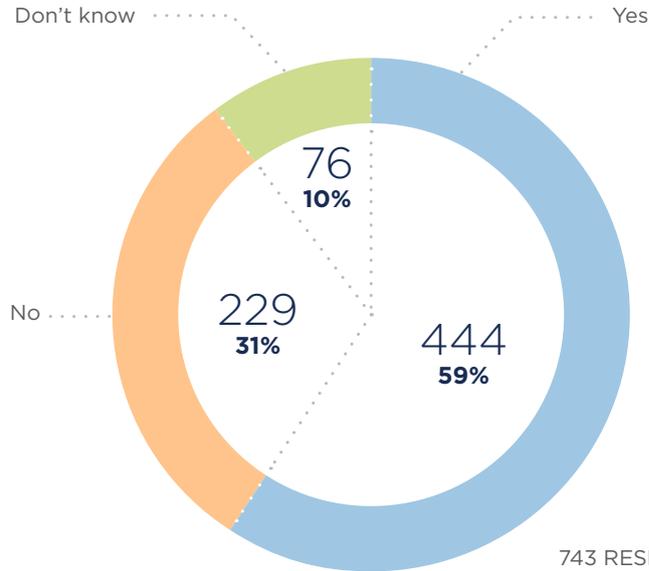
Property managers are also below the national average when asked how happy they felt the previous day. Respondents averaged a score of 6.0, compared to a national average of 6.4.

*"I think everyone talks about [wellbeing], things are put in place, but do things really happen actively enough?"*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/adhoc/13066coronavirusandthesocialimpactsonruralandurbanareasingreatbritain2020and2021>

## 2. PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

**DO YOU THINK YOUR MENTAL HEALTH OR SAFETY IS AT RISK BECAUSE OF YOUR WORK?**



*"Leaseholders' opinions on the virus are varied and... I have concerns about keeping my family safe as they have health issues."*

Of all respondents, only 31% believed that their mental health was not at risk, whilst almost 60% thought it was at risk because of work. These remarkable figures are telling of a sector that is not doing enough to account for the health of its workforce.

### Findings

Our survey showed that those working within the property management sector believe they are at increased risk, both physically and mentally.

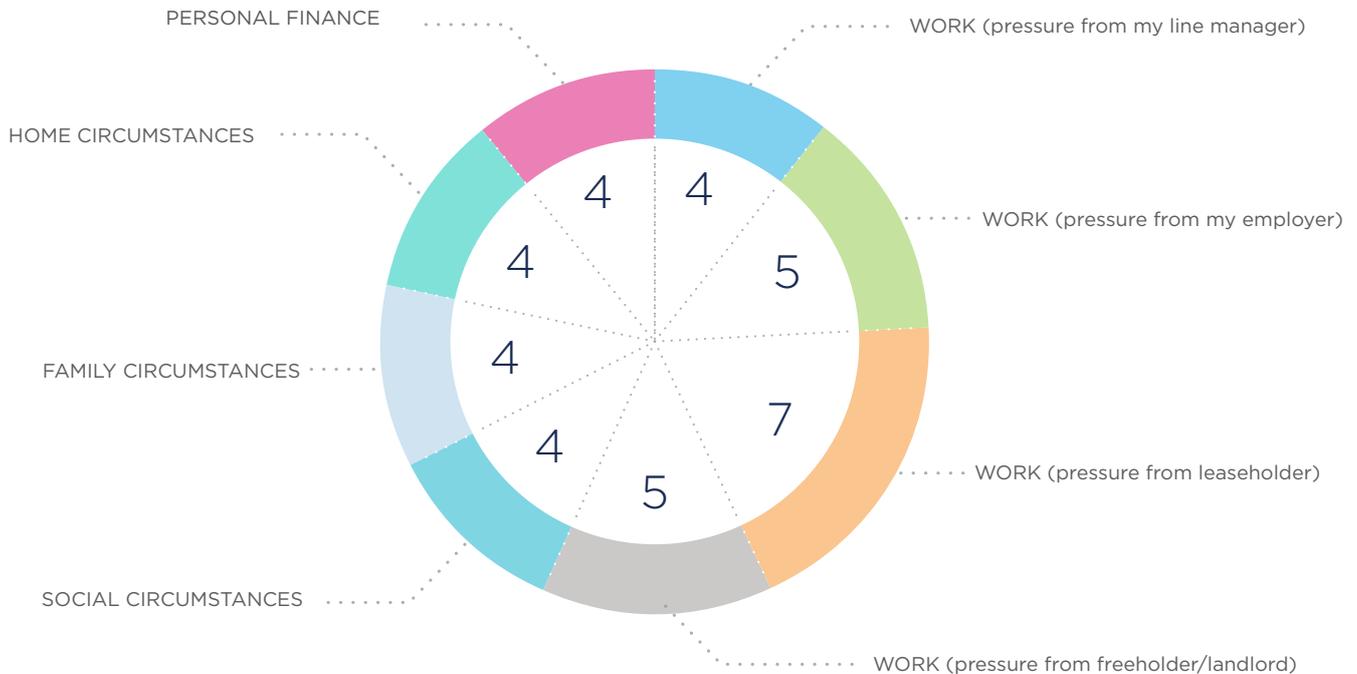
The most basic of staff needs, those of physical health and safety, were identified to be at risk by a significant number of workers in residential leasehold management. When asked if their 'physical health or safety is at risk because of work', 65% of respondents said it was not at risk, but 28% believed it was.

The results followed a similar pattern when we focused on mental health.

Of all respondents, only 31% believed that their mental health was not at risk, while almost 60% thought it was at risk because of work.

## 2. PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY (cont)

### QUESTIONS 6-13: RATE THE FOLLOWING OUT OF 10 AS SOURCES OF PRESSURE IN YOUR LIFE



#### Findings

When comparing the stress of work to other life factors, we can see that work-related pressure outweighs personal stresses.

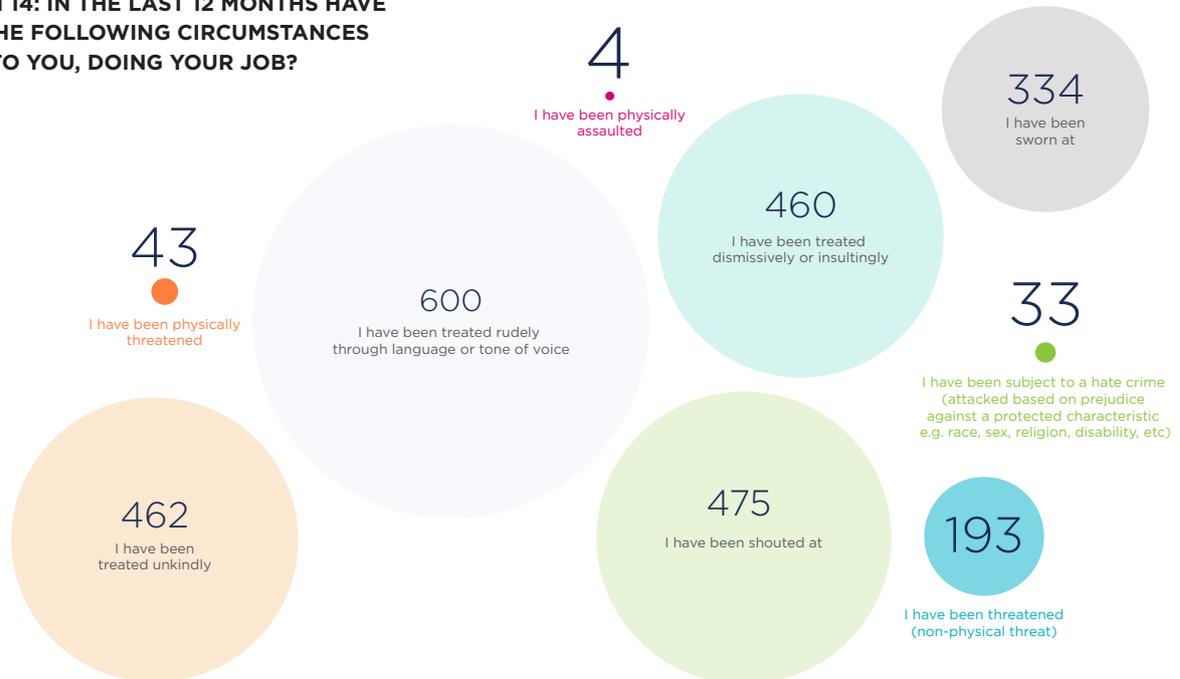
The most significant pressure came from leaseholders and, to a lesser extent, employers and freeholders/landlords.

Property management relies on good working relationships between managing agent staff, leaseholders and freeholders/landlords. Our survey suggests that at present, these working relationships are too often strained, indicative of a broken culture whereby property management staff feel they are expected to overdeliver for employers, leaseholders and freeholder/landlords. In turn, this can leave professionals feeling unsupported by their employer.

A focus on collaboration is needed within the sector, as strained working relationships impact negatively on all parties. Partnership-orientated working should improve the wellbeing of managers and their customers, and it should follow that all stakeholders will benefit from boosted productivity and positivity.

## 2. PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY (cont)

### QUESTION 14: IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CIRCUMSTANCES APPLIED TO YOU, DOING YOUR JOB?



#### Rationale

As the recent ONS survey reveals, over the past year the pandemic has caused a decline in happiness and life satisfaction along with an increase in anxiety across the population.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the residential leasehold management sector is also grappling with a cladding crisis which has left many leaseholders trapped in unsellable flats and facing crippling bills. Frustrations often spill over, and our survey reveals that property management staff are now regularly facing abusive behaviour in their day-to-day lives.

#### Findings

The question asking property management staff to detail the types of abuse received in the last 12 months revealed that nearly all respondents had been treated rudely through language or tone of voice (94%), while 72% had been treated unkindly.

Of all respondents, 74% noted being shouted at, 25% said they had been sworn at and 30% recalled being threatened in a non-physical way.

Our survey also revealed that 7% of respondents had been physically threatened, with 1% being physically assaulted. This equates to five ARMA member firms experiencing a physical attack each year, or three IRPM members each month.

5% of respondents were also victims of hate crimes, a figure that is unacceptable in any context.

Question 15 focussed on whether work stresses had increased or decreased in the past 12 months, revealing that 74% of respondents had noticed an increase.

Every day, a property manager is threatened with physical violence.

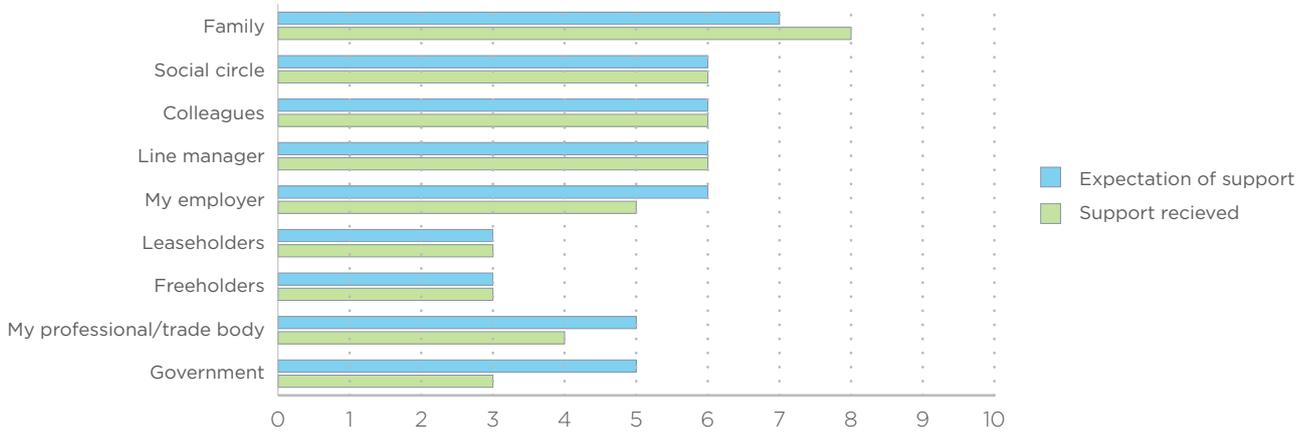
Abuse in the workplace should not be tolerated by employers and employees. Both ARMA and IRPM firmly believe that the sector needs to create robust ways of protecting its staff from abuse.

***“I have been verbally abused on social platforms, named in public forums, had direct emails, phone calls, accusing me of all kinds of disgusting behaviour. I have also dealt with racism. In order not to affect my family, my work, my relationships, I have internalised the pain this caused and suffered in silence.”***

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/adhoc/13066coronavirusandthesocialimpactsnonruralandurbanareasingreatbritain2020and2021>

### 3. SUPPORT

**QUESTIONS 22-39: ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10 HOW DO YOU RATE THE SUPPORT YOU ARE RECEIVING FROM THE FOLLOWING GROUPS?**



**Rationale**

Having outlined the pressures that property management staff are faced with, our survey then moved on to focus on the support, both perceived and actual, that is available to them.

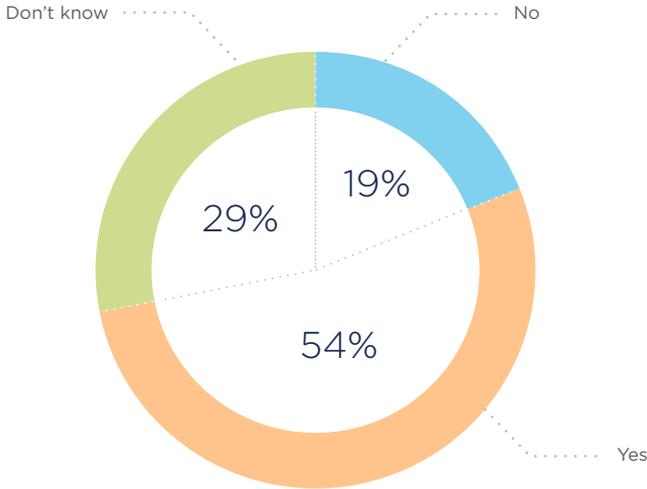
**Findings**

Naturally, those closest to workers, such as families, friends, colleagues and line managers, offer the most support, and at times exceed the levels of expected support. Conversely, employers, professional/trade bodies and the government were judged to offer lower levels of support than expected.

*“The answer for me is to change job rather than expect changes within my current role. I am lucky to have options as I do not feel supported at work.”*

When asked about positive action taken on health and wellbeing by employers, over two thirds of respondents said their employers had taken positive steps. Judging from the wellbeing of staff and the evidence of mounting work pressures, the steps already taken by employers may not have proven effective enough in providing support for workers.

## 4. JOB SATISFACTION



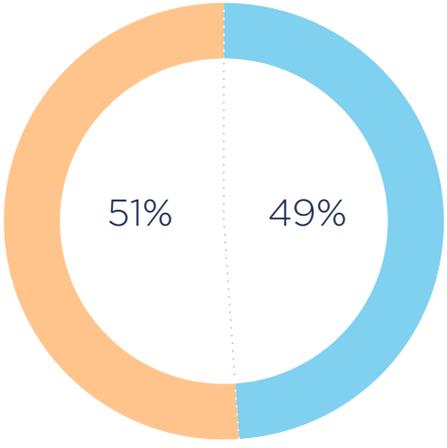
### Findings

Question 42 focussed on whether workers thought they would remain in property management for the long term. The results revealed a resilient and committed workforce. 19% can't see themselves staying in the sector for the next three years, whilst 54% can and 29% aren't sure. Wellbeing of staff is one factor which will prove critical to the sector retaining its skilled and experienced workforce.

*"A happy call or a thank you would mean the world these days... It's hard to keep my love for my job when you battle...all the time."*

## 5. THE IMPACT OF THE CLADDING CRISIS ON WELLBEING

*"The cladding remedial process, particularly the funding process is so difficult with some tasks nigh on impossible. We are expected to have knowledge and solutions way above our capabilities, and there is no magic time capsule to allow us the hundreds of extra hours of time this takes."*



Of the 743 respondents, 49% were involved in cladding remediation for clients and leaseholders.

### Cladding Scandal: The Picture Today

Progress in ending the cladding scandal has been made recently by the introduction of an additional £3.5 billion to remediate unsafe cladding from buildings over 18 metres. The Waking Watch relief fund will also help equip buildings with fire alarm systems, alleviating the need for costly patrols.

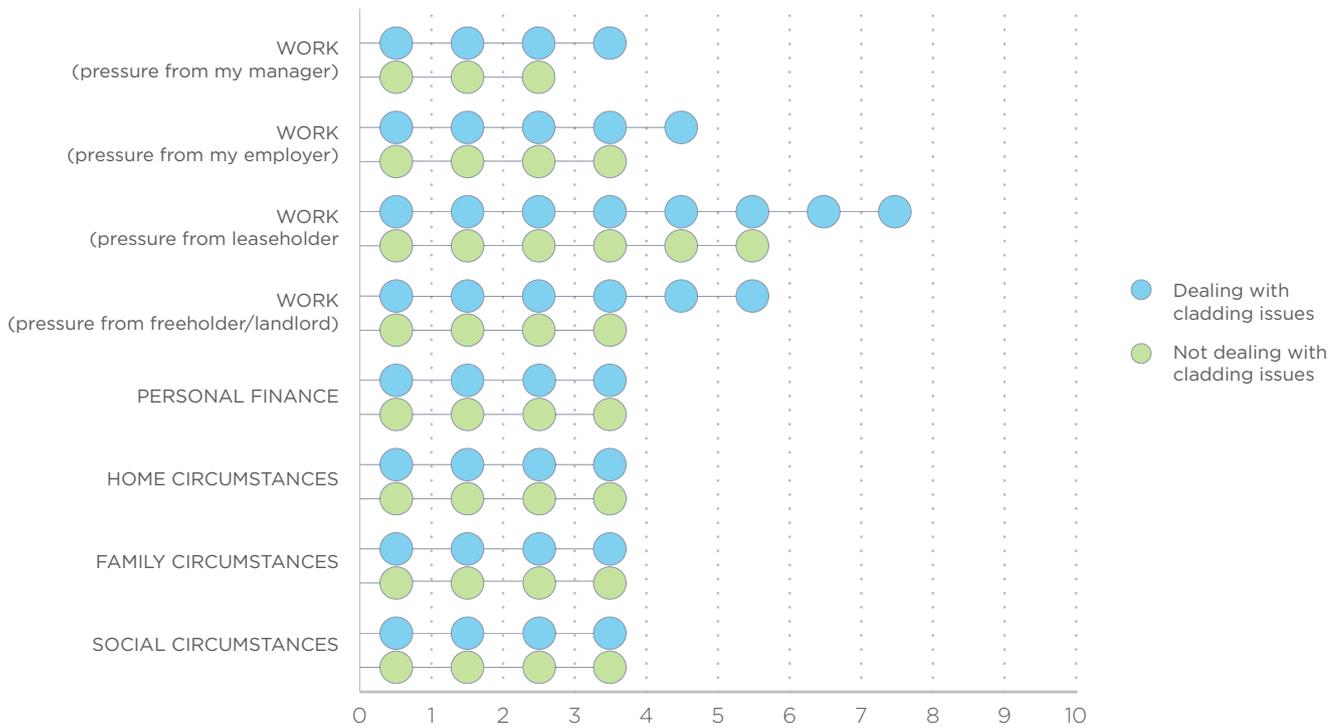
However, not all blocks will be able to benefit. The £3.5 billion will only cover buildings over 18 metres in height. Leaseholders living in buildings below that height could face £50-a-month bills to help pay for remediation, with these costs likely to affect the valuation of their homes.

In addition, recent ARMA and IRPM surveys reveal that compartmentation issues, which are likely to exist across significant numbers of blocks, could cost an average of £25,000 per flat to remedy - £2,500 more than the average cost of cladding remediation per flat in 2020. Furthermore, rising insurance premiums in buildings with unsafe cladding will have to be covered by leaseholders, too. This leaves many trapped in flats they cannot sell, with significant annual charges.

These factors, coupled with the lack of available teams qualified to remediate cladding, means that we estimate the crisis may continue for 5-10 years.

## 5. THE IMPACT OF THE CLADDING CRISIS ON WELLBEING (cont)

### CLADDING CRISIS IMPACT ON STAFF: OUT OF TEN RATE THE FOLLOWING AS SOURCES OF PRESSURE IN YOUR LIFE



#### Findings

Our survey reveals the impact that the cladding crisis is currently having on leaseholders and the property management staff who must oversee it. There were notable differences in perceived physical and mental safety between the two groups: 32% of staff managing cladding remediation thought their physical safety was at risk, a score that was 28% higher than staff not involved in cladding (32% vs 25%) – for staff not dealing with cladding remediation, 25% felt their their physical safety was at risk. Focussing on mental health and safety, 70% of staff managing cladding remediation thought their mental health was at risk, which was 37% more than the staff not involved in cladding.

***“Dealing with the cladding crises has dominated my role, PM’s are in a no win situation. The buck has been passed to the ... PMs and leaseholders. PMs are taking the brunt of the frustration.”***

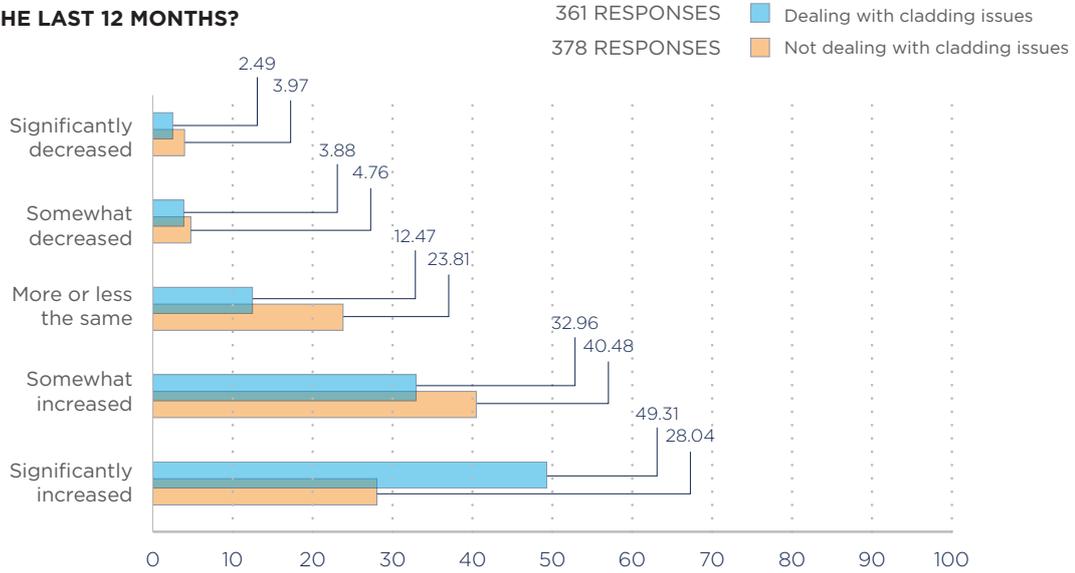
The sources of stress also rose for those dealing with cladding issues.

Those involved in cladding remediation had higher work-related scores compared to those not involved in cladding. For both groups, stress factors from personal circumstances remained identical.

Those involved in cladding remediation also recorded higher levels of abuse, with results showing they were 54% more likely to have been sworn at, 76% more likely to have been physically threatened, twice as likely to have been physically assaulted and 65% more likely to have been subject to a hate crime.

## 5. THE IMPACT OF THE CLADDING CRISIS ON WELLBEING (cont)

### CLADDING CRISIS IMPACT ON STAFF: HAVE YOUR WORK-RELATED STRESS LEVELS INCREASED OR DECREASED IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS?



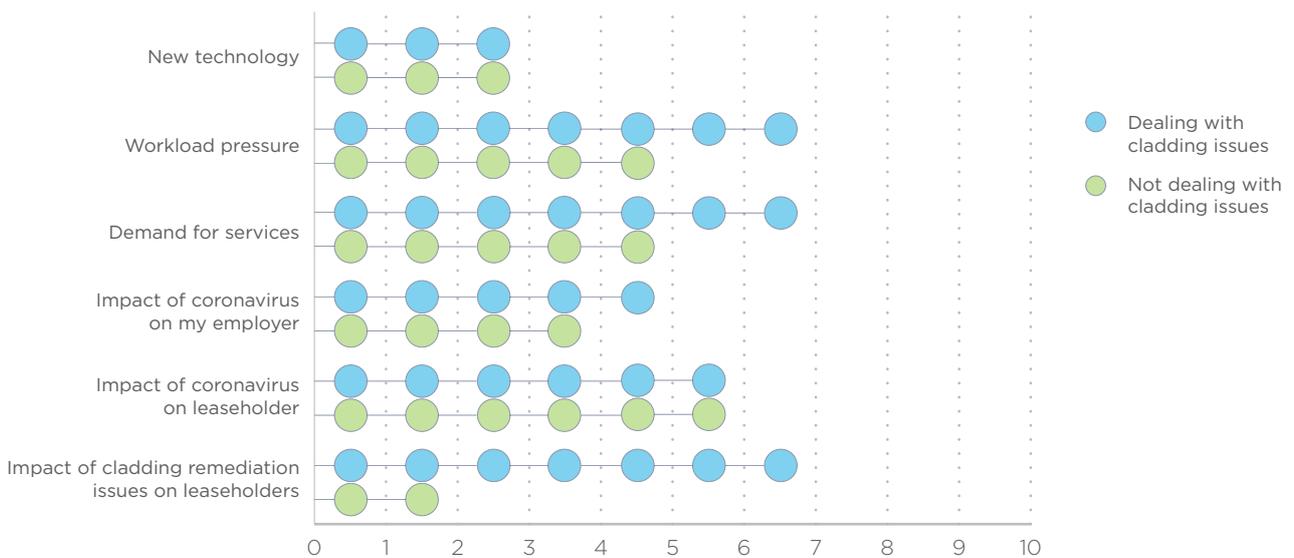
**Findings**

Staff involved with cladding issues also showed signs of increased stress.

82.2% of those dealing with cladding issues reported an increase in stress levels, compared to 68.5% for non-cladding staff. Significant increases in stress were noted by 50% of cladding staff, which is 76% more than that experienced by non-cladding staff.

Staff dealing with cladding issues recorded greater levels of work pressures.

### CLADDING CRISIS IMPACT ON STAFF: RATE THE FOLLOWING CAUSES OF WORK PRESSURES



**Findings**

For staff dealing with cladding, workload pressures were 40% higher (7 vs 5) and the demand for service was 40% higher (7 vs 5).

Next we'll identify the levels of support staff dealing with cladding expect and receive.

## 5. THE IMPACT OF THE CLADDING CRISIS ON WELLBEING (cont)

### IMPACT OF CLADDING CRISIS: HOW DO YOU RATE THE SUPPORT YOU ARE RECEIVING FROM THE FOLLOWING GROUPS?



#### Findings

Respondents involved in cladding remediation had higher expectations of support from employers, freeholders and their professional/trade body, but in each case felt the support they actually received was lower than expected.

#### The Impact of cladding on wellbeing

Work related pressures appear to impact negatively on the wellbeing of staff who deal with cladding.

When asked about how 'worthwhile' their lives were, staff involved in cladding averaged a score that was 7.5% lower than non-cladding staff, and one that was 16% lower than the national average. When it came to 'happiness' both scores were below the national score of 6.4, but those involved in cladding averaged a score of 5.37 as opposed to 5.83 for non-cladding staff. The score for staff involved in cladding was 16% below the national average.

When asked if they planned to be in the sector in three years' time, staff involved in cladding were almost 90% more likely to believe they will have left compared to those not involved in cladding (25% vs 13%).

Our survey suggests that staff members dealing with cladding are more likely to face increased levels of abuse and work pressure. With the crisis set to be with the industry for years to come, it is vital that the sector understands how it can alleviate pressure on affected property management staff before they become overwhelmed.

## OPPORTUNITIES

### THE FOUR E'S: EXPECTATIONS, EDUCATION, EMPATHY & ENGAGEMENT

ARMA and the IRPM have created a framework which we intend the industry to use to help improve the wellbeing of property management staff in the residential leasehold sector.

## EXPECTATIONS

The expectations of property management staff from leaseholders and freeholders/landlords can be unrealistic. Property management staff dealing with cladding issues often have to navigate complicated guidance, or are working without any at all. The industry needs to raise awareness that property management staff should not be expected to achieve beyond what is reasonable. Equally, it is unlikely they will have all the answers as they often work in the uncharted waters of new regulations.

## EDUCATION

Education is one way the sector can move forward and boost wellbeing among property managers. Our survey suggests that the main pressures on property management staff stem from their relationships with leaseholders and, to a lesser extent, freeholders/landlords and employers.

Employers should focus on practical training which can help staff manage difficult situations and external parties. It's important they offer this alongside support and advice which can help and improve wellbeing.

Equally, the industry has a responsibility to help educate both leaseholders and freeholders/landlords. Employers should consider approaching these groups themselves in order to align expectations while showing solidarity with their staff. As industry trade and professional bodies, ARMA and IRPM have formed a Public Affairs Steering Group which is working, in part, to help further educate leaseholders on the roles of residential managing agents.

Separately, navigating the framework of cladding remediation can be challenging. Where possible, employers should consider a collaborative approach, pooling knowledge to help their staff from industry bodies such as the Federation of Private Residents Associations and the Lease Advisory Service, as well as other industry professionals.

## EMPATHY

It's clear that high levels of abuse towards property management staff have impacted the mental health and wellbeing of many. Both ARMA and IRPM see the abuse of staff as unacceptable. Together, we have created an **'Unreasonable Behaviour Policy'** as we believe that no worker in the sector should have to tolerate abuse. The policy outlines suggested unreasonable forms of behaviour which managing agents should be aware of. It also provides several strategies which may be adopted in order to protect staff from unreasonable behaviour.

Managing agents who wish to support the policy are encouraged to circulate the document with staff, display a version on their website and include a link to the policy within email signatures.

Please note, this is a framework which managing agents can tailor to their organisations in order to safeguard their staff appropriately.

## ENGAGEMENT

Communication is key. The industry needs to have an honest conversation, both with its workers, and those which it serves. Broken cultures have led to strained relationships between staff, employers, leaseholders and freeholders/landlords. More collaborative ways of working, founded on engagement and realistic expectations, can help improve the wellbeing of all those involved.

Our survey sheds light on the need for staff pressures to be fully understood. Employers should speak with their employees and understand their mindset, giving them a platform to voice their worries. This will not only help boost wellbeing but create a more motivated workforce that is fully committed to the sector.

Where tensions appear stretched the most regarding the cladding crisis, open conversations with leaseholders and freeholders/landlords should be sought. A continued dialogue between all parties may help avoid conflict by increasing understanding.

Advice which the government can offer the sector to help it navigate new regulations can also prove extremely useful, especially around the incoming building safety regime which the sector is working towards. For this to happen, the sector should aim to engage the government as much as possible, giving a voice to the views of its workers.

## 2021 AND BEYOND

The pandemic has added significant pressure on an already-strained property management workforce. Many professionals are feeling overwhelmed and, in some cases, disillusioned with their occupations. Employers can make the most meaningful difference to staff by focussing on wellbeing along with practical training. Beyond this, continued support will give them the tools and drive they need to commit themselves to their job.

Education and engagement with leaseholders and freeholders/landlords may help ease pressures, while highlighting the need for empathy can create a collaborative and productive dialogue between key parties. Finally, in a constantly changing world, the expectations of what staff are able to deliver need to be realistic.

While we may be drawing closer to the end of the pandemic, the cladding crisis and all its implications are likely to be here for the next decade. The sector needs to act to ready its workforce for the future, paying close attention to individual wellness and mental resilience.

We look forward to issuing our next survey in 2022.

## CONCLUSION

ARMA and IRPM are aware of the issues highlighted by this survey and are working to develop strategies which can help improve the sector's wellbeing and resilience. Currently, both IRPM and ARMA provide resilience training courses along with CPD portal wellbeing initiatives which can support both individuals and organisations. These survey findings will help shape our future thinking, enabling us to develop further resources that will deliver a positive impact on the wellbeing of individuals working within residential leasehold property management.



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