



## *Never Giving Up on Anyone*

What are we learning about how  
Small Supports organisations are  
recruiting and retaining great staff?

Helen Bown



National Development Team for **Inclusion**  
[office@ndti.org.uk](mailto:office@ndti.org.uk)

© 2023 National Development for Inclusion  
[www.ndti.org.uk](http://www.ndti.org.uk)

## Contents

<b>About This Work</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>What Are Small Supports Organisations?</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>A Central Overarching Message</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 1: Introduction – The National Picture Of Recruitment And Retention Within Adult Social Care In England And Scotland</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Section 2: Themes And Messages From Conversations With Small Supports Staff</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>I. General Characteristics And Shared Organisational Traits</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>ii. Discovery Of And Journey Into Working For A Small Supports Organisation</b> <b>12</b>	
<b>iii. Day To Day Experiences.</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>iv. Support, Training, Development And Opportunities For Progression</b> ....	<b>15</b>
<b>v. What People Love And Value The Most About Their Roles</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>vi. Challenges And How People Manage Them</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Section 3: Conclusions And Lessons About What Works</b> .....	<b>19</b>



## About this work

This report shares the findings and lessons from a focused piece of scoping research carried out to discover what small supports organisations are doing and experiencing in finding and keeping great staff. The aim of the study was to better understand what works in recruitment and retention in organisations that are designed to support people with complex lives and support arrangements. The research also explored how this is happening in the context of UK-wide challenges around recruiting and retaining staff in social care more generally.

## What are Small Supports Organisations?



Small Supports organisations support people with complicated lives, often with traumatic life histories, experiences of institutionalisation and complex support needs. They also often support people to move out of or avoid the risk of being placed in a secure or forensic long-stay institution. Click [here](#) to find out more information about the Small Supports programme at NDTi.

Small supports organisations have the following shared characteristics which help to define and illustrate not only what they do, but importantly how they do it. These characteristics are as follows:

- The person and their loved ones are at the centre of everything
- **A team of people is recruited to support the person**
- The person has a home of their own
- There is a focus on and investment in positive and supportive relationships
- A person-centred approach is taken towards safeguarding and risk
- Great outcomes are achieved with people and their families
- There is a commitment to investing in the local area.

This scoping research was designed to answer the following questions about the characteristic highlighted, relating to the **team of people recruited to support the person**. These questions were identified through conversations with directors of three established small support organisations, partners and leads of the Small Supports Programme at NDTi.

## Research Questions

- (i) How do Small Supports organisations engage, recruit and develop their staff, and enable them to do what they do in supporting people to have a good life?
- (ii) How do staff working within Small Supports organisations look and behave differently, especially compared to more traditional support providers?
- (iii) Relationships are a key part of small supports: what does this look and feel like in practice? How does this happen? Who makes it happen? How are new staff briefed and supported to do this?
- (iv) What are the defining features of the culture and identity of small supports organisations that can be seen through the way that staff behave and feel about their work? What is important about the wider culture that develops and is reflected in how people work, behave and interact as a result of these cultural influences?
- (v) What patterns or trends can be seen in important quantifiable aspects of how staff are recruited and retained? For example:
  - Recruitment levels (e.g. available posts)
  - Vacancy rates
  - Turnover rates
  - Sickness levels
  - Size of organisation
  - Length of employment
  - Salaries and other rewards.
- (vi) What do staff feel about their roles, the organisation they work for and who they work for (the person they support)? What is important to them about how they work and how they are supported to do this? What works and what doesn't work?
- (vii) When people leave, why do they leave? What makes people stick around?
- (viii) What kind of development and progression opportunities are there within small supports organisations? How are people supported, supervised and how is feedback given/received?

The work was carried out between March and July 2023, with the help of three established Small Supports organisations who generously shared their workforce data and arranged for a range of staff with different roles to participate in confidential, anonymised interviews or group discussions. The work was conducted using an appreciate inquiry approach to discover key patterns and trends from available data and, importantly, the experience of working in small supports organisations from detailed conversations with staff holding different kinds of roles. The work included:

A focused desk-based review to understand the national picture regarding recruitment and retention patterns in England and in Scotland

A focused desk-based review



Capturing and analysing the relevant organisational data from three established small supports organisations, including: total posts available, the average length of time people work for these organisations; sickness levels/rates; turnover and vacancy rates

Capturing and analysing the relevant data



1:1 and small group discussions with a cross-section of 15 staff from three established small supports organisations

1:1 and small group discussions



## A central overarching message

**“It’s not like anywhere else”**

In addition to the defining characteristics of small support organisations outlined earlier, this research highlights another defining feature. This is **the primacy of the person over the organisation** – where their life, their experience and their aspirations are more important than any organisational policy, procedure, process or system. This could be seen as the epitome of person-centred thinking, practice, and systems in action. However, the way in which this primacy was

consistently raised in each conversation revealed that this belief and approach permeates every action, decision and interaction in such a way that it deserves to be pulled out as a characteristic in its own right.

This commitment is reflected in actions, decisions and behaviours from all staff at all levels and in all roles, and is most strikingly observed in the focus they all share on creating a successful match between the person needing support with both individual staff recruited with each person in mind, and the whole team around that person. This is fundamentally different to other recruitment experiences, where the focus can often be on meeting a job description or person specification, having the right qualifications and securing DBS checks.



What follows from this is that **relationships matter**; and building relationships lies at the heart of how staff are engaged and/or found, recruited, inducted, supported and nurtured, and how they experience their roles within small supports organisations.

This “**uncompromising and relentless focus on the person**” fundamentally shapes how small supports organisations employ and enable people to work for the person who needs support as well as how those people go on to live their lives. It takes time and informs how organisational systems and structures evolve, but most importantly this approach builds strong and enduring relationships that lie at the heart of person-centred practices and cultures.

One example of how this focus shapes small supports organisations is the way in which they design and approach induction periods for new staff and ongoing training and support for all staff.

This approach and ethos is also reflected in the language and terminology used. For example, what do we mean when we talk about “staff”? or when we talk about “leaders” and “leadership”, who is this? It’s everyone, every member of staff is a leader. Anyone who is employed.

The remainder of this report shares the emerging themes and key messages relating to the research questions, organised as follows:

**Section 1** provides an overview of the national context of recruitment and retention issues within adult social care generally; and the picture within small supports organisations based on quantifiable data shared from the three participating organisations.

**Section 2** shares the findings and lessons identified from an analysis of the detailed conversations with 15 staff from these 3 organisations.

**Section 3** gives a summary of the cross-cutting themes drawn from looking at all of this information to provide a flavour of what’s important in finding and keeping great staff in small supports organisations.

## Section 1: Introduction – the national picture of recruitment and retention within adult social care in England and Scotland



Making sense of the bigger picture relating to staff recruitment and retention in adult social care generally and “learning disability and autism services” specifically, was as an important starting point for understanding the workforce picture within small supports organisations.

‘Staffing issues’, recruitment and retention difficulties in particular, are high profile and much discussed within the adult social care world. This is not surprising given that the social care sector is a significant employer across the UK, with large numbers of people employed in a variety of roles in different social care organisations providing (and commissioning) widely differing forms of care and support.

- A total of 1.6 million people in England (Skills for Care Workforce data, 2021-22) and 134,000 people in Scotland (The Scottish Government’s review of the adult social care workforce in Scotland, 2020) are employed to work in adult social care.
- In England alone, learning disability and autism services employ over half a million people.
- There are massive vacancy rates in all parts of the social care workforce (e.g. an average of 9.9% in England in 2021-22 and figures quoted for Scotland ranging from 5-43%).
- It is reported to take a long time to recruit people into these vacant posts, with significant issues experienced when organisations rush this process.
- One example of these issues is the persistently high turnover rate of staff, which is at an all-time high in England where the national average within adult social care is 36.1%. Research shows that this figure is lower when people are trained and feel supported. So, we know that this level is not a given or something to be expected, yet these rates have remained persistently high over recent years.

Other factors affecting turnover rates include the role and level of seniority within organisations, often reflected in what people are paid, the level and nature of qualifications, geography including both localities within UK nations and across the UK as a whole. Although pay and other benefits that make up people’s terms and conditions make a difference, the overwhelming factor that impacts on turnover rates is still whether people feel supported and trained to carry out their roles as required and expected. These figures and trends are set out in the English White Paper, *People At The Heart of Care*, which also describes Government’s commitment to develop a universal framework for knowledge, skills, support and a ‘career structure for the workforce’ in adult social care.

Within this overall stark picture, also outlined in Figure 1 below, it is interesting to note that 'Learning Disability and Autism Services' fare slightly better than the national picture in both England and Scotland; for example a vacancy rate of 8.4% compared to the English average of 9.9%, and turnover rate of 26% compared to 34%. And in addition to this more positive picture, the data shared by the three small supports organisations on the whole also show a more promising picture in relation to vacancy rates, turnover rates and sickness levels.

Figure 1 summarises the key patterns and trends relating to recruitment and retention figures for England and Scotland, and for the three participating small supports organisations (SS1, SS2 and SS3 in the table below).

Organisational / national picture	Total posts available	Total in post	Vacant posts	Vacancy rate	Average time in post	Sickness levels	Turnover
National (England)	1.79m total; 671,000 Learning disability & autism	1.64m; 583,000	152,000 88,000	9.9% 8.4%	6.2 years 3-4 years	10.6 days 9.3%	34% 26%
National (Scotland)	208,360 (Nuffield Trust, 2021)	Approx 131,136	36-50% of services have vacancies	5.1% (all services, 2020); elsewhere says 43%			Stability index of 75.5%
SS #1	264	229	35	13%	4 years, 1 month	4%	24%
SS#2	120	118	2	1.66%	4 years	8%	20%
SS#3	156	141	15	9.6%	3.5 years	3.6%	25%

Figure 1: Quantifiable elements of recruitment and retention in adult social care

One important word of caution about the figures outlined in this table is that the data itself masks a key issue with how figures on key patterns and trends are collected or recorded and reported in different parts of the UK. For example, different reports for England report different rates for the same workforce issue (for example widely differing vacancy and turnover rates provided), and different ways of calculating this data are used by different agencies. For example sickness rates might be recorded as percentage of the workforce off sick in a



given period or average number of days absent. The data in Scotland is reported in a very different way, for example rather than turnover of staff measured as a percentage of people who left the workforce in a given period, a stability index is used to give a feel for how stable the workforce is at any given time.

The concluding message from this very brief analysis is that workforce data does not provide the whole picture relating to recruitment and retention, and is best used as a starting point to explore and understand any apparent variations or noticeable differences between different agencies, organisations, roles and/or national trends.

## Section 2: Themes and messages from conversations with Small Supports staff

### Topics covered in discovery interviews



Discussions with staff took the form of discovery interviews, where a semi-structured topic guide was used to guide rather than constrain conversations. The aim was to be open to what participants wanted to share and highlight what they felt to be of most importance. The topic guide covered:

- People's discovery of and journey into working for a small supports organisation, including how people found out about the job/organisation; their experience of applying for that job; and the selection process including interviews
- Matching and induction experiences
- Day to day experiences
- Support, training, development, progression
- What people love and value the most about their role and working for a small supports organisation
- What people find challenging and how challenges are addressed.

A number of important, general characteristics about the ways in which small supports organisations recruit and develop staff emerged through these conversations. These characteristics covered: how many people are supported by the organisation in the localities where the participating staff work; how many staff are employed; the length of time people had been with the organisation; reasons for any absences; and why people stay or leave their roles.

We start with these general characteristics before sharing the common themes and messages under each of the other headings outlined above.

#### i. General characteristics and shared organisational traits

##### Diversity of roles and length of employment

The 15 conversations involved a wide range of roles and “seniority” within and across the 3 small supports organisations including 3 directors / organisational leads and 12 colleagues who described themselves as: service leaders, team leaders, support workers, senior support workers, personal development workers, support advisors, service development coordinator, project leads. This different way of talking and describing roles was interesting and was often accompanied by the feedback that “this isn’t like working anywhere else”. The different role titles and descriptions of roles reflects the importance of using language and

terminology that is respectful, intentional and mindful about who people are working for and with – each person needing support in their lives rather than the organisation employing them.

Another striking observation from this part of the conversations was the length of time people shared that they had worked for the small supports organisation. Across the 15 participants this was an average of 7.5 years, ranging from 1.5 years to over 16 years. This is different from the data provided by these same organisations shared in Figure 1. Two conclusions which can be drawn from this information are that: the quantifiable data about staff does not give the whole picture of what it is like to work for a small supports organisation; and that people stick around. An average of 7.5 years is a healthier figure than the national average in social care (6.2 years) and within learning disability and autism services (3-4 years) as shown in Figure 1.

#### **When asked about the reasons for this, people shared that:**

- They were able to take different paths through the organisation and develop roles and interests that reflected their skills and interests (rather than linear progression).
- That pay and benefits were good compared to local alternatives in other care and support providers.
- That more than anything else they valued the creative, flexible and *useful* elements of their role in supporting someone to live their life on their terms, as part of a team with shared values and mutual support.
- For those who had not been so long in post they also referred to feeling a sense of belonging and being made to feel welcome (e.g., being collected from a station when arriving for interview, having practical help to relocate or move house to take up a role, and in one example receiving a welcome hamper soon after starting in post).

Across the people who took part in these conversations, most had a background in care and support but not everyone did. This was not seen as being necessary or more relevant than having a genuine interest in working for someone to enable them to have a good life where there were clear points of connection and shared interests, alongside the shared values with the ethos and approach of the organisation.

#### **What does “small” mean?**

The term “small supports” is important across a number of dimensions, including the focus on getting support right for each individual person (rather than a specified number of people for a particular number of hours per week). In addition, people talked about the importance of teams and organisational localities being small, which they feel facilitates strong personal connections and relationships, and sustains a sense of everyone knowing everyone else. Whilst recognising that numbers (of people supported or of staff) in and of themselves

are contextual indicators, rather than a design feature of each small supports organisation, it is interesting to reflect on the practical or explicit ways in which “small” is experienced by staff. For example, the following breakdown gives a feel for the relative size of the places where those involved in these conversations were working:

- 19 people supported and 79 staff employed;
- 19 people supported and 67 staff employed;
- 17 people supported and 45-50 staff employed;
- 70 people supported & 235 staff employed (this was across a number of locations).

## ii. Discovery of and journey into working for a small supports organisation

This section summarises the common experiences shared by people about how they came to find out about, apply, join and become inducted as a new member of staff in a small supports organisation.

### Finding out/ finding people

Small supports organisations typically and deliberately use **a mix of routes** to get the word out that they are looking for someone to join their team, always based around the individual person needing support (see below). This mix includes adverts, word of mouth, community noticeboards, their own and partners’ websites and social media. No-one mentioned using or being approached through a recruitment agency. For people finding their small supports role, they described also using personal contacts and the importance for them of deliberately seeking out a different kind of social care role and organisation. They also talked about “stumbling across” the opportunity.

**Different kinds of adverts:** this was a key feature that everyone talked about, setting the tone for and being explicit about the values of the organisation and the people who work there. Small supports organisations advertise for staff on a highly individualised basis, where the person who needs support is at the centre and front of stage. The advert is about this person – their goals and aspirations, their interests and priorities, what they are looking for in their own support. These adverts are usually written with the person and/or their family to ensure that these important qualities and priorities shine through. They might be anonymised but not always, depending on the person’s own preferences. These adverts are then shared, promoted and circulated in ways that also make sense to that person and where it is agreed the best match might be found (see above).

Following on from this, the entire **application and selection experience is value-based**. There is usually a two or three stage process, where:

- a) Someone completes an application which focuses on how you fit the profile outlined in the advert, often with scenarios designed to explore how someone would respond in different situations.
- b) If successful at this stage, a first interview with relevant colleagues within the organisation takes place – usually scenario based and focused on establishing if there is a match between the person applying and the organisation's values.
- c) If successful at this stage, a second interview takes place with a specific focus on establishing if there is a match with the person who needs support – that the advert was about. This may or may not involve the person at this stage, depending on individual circumstances and preferences.

People consistently described this process as being rigorous, open, values-based and insightful. Those with leadership roles explained that this approach also helped people applying and the organisation determine whether this was likely to be a successful match or not at an early stage.

### Starting the journey

Once in post, people shared their early experiences of being employed in / by a small supports organisation, with the following common features highlighted in every conversation:

**A flexible and focused induction era:** instead of a predefined, prescriptive induction period, people talked about the need for and experience of an induction programme based on building a relationship with the person and other colleagues in the team alongside essential training and support. As well as essential or mandatory training, any other support needed is identified and provided during this time, which can vary from between 3 and 6 months. Shadow shifts during this time were identified as being crucial and highly valued, reflecting the focus of the organisation on ensuring that no-one is left alone to “muddle through”; they are nurtured and enabled to provide the best support possible. People also described how line managers and colleagues would check in on a regular basis, every shift, and especially if something tricky or unplanned happened. Training is followed up to ensure it is being applied and understood. This attention to detail reflects a culture where systems and processes reinforce the “unrelenting commitment to the person”.

**Matching continues to be central** throughout and is considered “*an art not a science*” – where creating the team for / around the person is achieved through a complex balancing act to find a successful match between each person needing support and people recruited to support them as part of the team around them. This includes thinking about whether the match is working or not working from different perspectives and on a daily basis, thinking about what needs to change if things are not going so well and building a positive relationship over time across ‘funded hours’, shifts and weeks.

**Test and learn approach:** one of the common themes that emerged from all conversations was an open-minded approach to problem solving, focused on ensuring that arrangements, opportunities and interactions work for the person. One example of this approach was the patience and determination to keep trying until there is a successful match for the person; and if the match or something else going on isn't working, then change and adapt until it does. This approach is both reflective practice and a test and learn approach in action, and is also where the title of this paper comes from: *"we never give up on anyone, we keep going until it works. That's the same for staff as it is for the person"*.

**It takes time!** Building trusting relationships and working in a consistently individualised way throughout an organisation takes time and commitment from everyone. This reflects both the time it takes to build any relationship based on trust, and the fact that for people supported by small supports organisations there is a need to develop this in the context of trauma, previous negative experiences of care and support, and sometimes no previous experience of a positive supportive relationship. From a staffing perspective, this shapes how everything happens and is 'measured' – from induction for new staff to thinking about how training develops and takes place and how shifts are managed and allocated between team members. Those in leadership or oversight roles shared how important it is to stand up for this approach, for example with those commissioning, negotiating or monitoring support arrangements (aka 'contracts') in order to look at outcomes and experiences over time, rather than snapshots in time taken out of context without understanding the full picture of someone's life.

### iii. Day to day experiences.

This section highlights some of the typical day to day experiences of working within a small supports organisation, with the caveat that there is no such thing as a typical day! However, it is helpful to draw attention to some of the ways in which the cultural lining of these organisations plays out on a day-to-day basis from the perspective of staff involved in these conversations.

- **Every action, decision and interaction is centred on and around the person:** how they are, what's happening, interests, what works, opportunities, how to "be" out in the world (etc).
- **Connection, connection, connection:** an emphasis on maintaining healthy, supportive connections no matter what is happening or going on – with a focus on what's strong not what's wrong, and always reflecting on what's working and not working from different perspectives.
- **Self-managing teams:** each team recruited around a person is self-managing, autonomous and mutually supportive. Small supports staff find

this both a flexible and person-centred approach but importantly is one which empowers team members to sustain the unrelenting focus on the person they support. They discuss and agree shifts and rotas together, and make changes that accommodate personal needs (e.g., childcare) between them.

- **“We all know everyone”.** As mentioned earlier, staff consistently mentioned how important it is that all members of staff at all levels of the organisation know each person being supported and also each member of staff (something which is facilitated by being small). This aspect also highlights the easy access to and availability of managers and colleagues, something that is not only valued by staff but makes them feel valued in return.
- **Reflective practice is designed into daily life.** The test and learn, problem solving approach outlined earlier is an example of how reflective practice is built into the DNA of small support organisations. Staff talked openly about how, when things go wrong or are really difficult, this core approach is essential. In addition to having a consistent and person-centred approach that looks at what’s working and not working for each person, there are less frequent but still regular opportunities to come together as a team and be supported to explore specific issues and concerns in a mutually supportive way. One example of this approach is the use of Care Nests which is being introduced in one small support organisation (though variations of this were apparent in all three of the participating small supports). Care Nests are independently facilitated team discussions where:

*“we sit together as a team in a circle, with a host or guardian, to be in a space and be honest with each other. Nothing is judged, its all confidential. Its about bonding. It creates a place to be yourself and not be judged”*

#### iv. Support, training, development and opportunities for progression

Each of these elements – ongoing support, training, development and opportunities for progression – are all factors that contribute towards keeping great staff. These critical elements are masked and risk being missed if people only refer to “retention” as a goal or problem to be solved. The following experiences were shared by staff as being one of the reasons they stay doing what they do, within small supports organisations. They also reflect those areas identified by people with a leadership or oversight role as issues they prioritise to ensure staff feel supported and enjoy what they do.

- Being rigorous about mandatory training, not only during induction but on an ongoing basis, with attention to detail and follow up with each colleague to ensure it sticks.
- Ensuring a mix of in-person and online training, knowing the former is valued and the latter is more practical (and sometime necessary as during the Covid-19 pandemic).
- Investing in home-grown, bespoke training and development as well as wider opportunities. People emphasised that ‘home-grown’ is best suited to small supports organisations ensuring that those delivering training as well as the content reflect the same strong values and person centred ethos.
- An emphasis on *mutual* support at all levels and all times, rather than a sense of being done to or supervised. *“We’re in this together and we make it work as a collective”*.
- Opportunities to develop in non-linear ways based on what people are interested in and have a passion for. *“We ask, what can you offer, what do you need? Can we make that happen?”*

Good progression routes as well as enabling people to stay in the role they love

The next two sections summarise the most common elements that people shared about their role and working for a small supports organisation that they love and also what they found to be most challenging.

#### v. What people love and value the most about their roles

It was striking that this part of the conversations with staff was the most consistent and also the one where people had so much to say. In addition to genuinely liking and feeling at ease with the organisation employing them (*“it’s a good company to work for”*; *“they’re a good employer”*; *“I’m supported well”*), the following themes emerged:

Seeing people’s growth – it’s fantastic!

- The focus on each person, to be understood, well supported and also liked – including how people are matched to reflect this

**We have to get each other, I get him and he gets me. We laugh at the same things**



**They don't give up on you – on [name of person supported] or me**

- This support giving people hope, much better life chances and new opportunities

**That the person being supported is happy, confident and safe – especially considering the backgrounds and previous kinds of support people have experienced – being institutionalised. It's essential to change this. Takes a long time but eventually they get there, we get there.**

**Amazing to see people living in their own homes and managing like everyone else, after having been in institutions for 20 years. Everyone wants the same things**

- The way staff and the organisation as a whole works in this '*relentless and uncompromising focus on each person*'

**The way we work, we pursue and persist to have more good days and less bad days**

**The strong values we have – its all about the people we work for first and foremost**

**We go the extra mile**

- A focus on supporting staff to do all this well, and to keep developing and learning including from when things don't go so well.

**A no-blame culture is essential – sometimes things don't work for very good reasons, and we need to learn from that**

**Getting the induction right – having open conversations from the start**

**There's lots of thorough training, it's ongoing, all the time**

**We invest in each person and want to keep people, support them**

## vi. Challenges and how people manage them

It was interesting that although people shared that this is hard and sometimes difficult work, and were open about the challenges they experience, they did not dwell or focus on them. For each challenge shared, there would inevitably be a solution or mitigating factor that was also shared. The key challenges that people did draw attention to were as follows:

- The same contextual challenges experienced by all care and support organisations everywhere

**We have the same challenges as everyone else (cost of living pressures, the fall out of Brexit and Covid) when recruitment became more difficult, which we weren't expecting - we just manage them differently**

**The impact of Covid – that knocked people backwards. We have a mountain to climb**

- When red tape and essential processes become drawn out, delayed or feel insurmountable

**Urgh, process delays overdue DBS checks, it's so un-necessary, why does it take so long?!**

- The nature of the work and knowing what's involved. Examples included when matching is difficult or unpredictable, and the 24/7 nature of the support needed

**Getting the match right can be hard and takes time**

**Shift work can be lonely, but support always at other end of phone, people check-in to make sure all ok with the person and with you**

**Sleep-in shifts are tough – I find the impact of sleepless nights really tough (other people like sleeping in and said the team they were in worked together to give them more overnight shifts)**

**It's a tough job, you have to really want to do it and believe in the mission**

## Section 3: Conclusions and lessons about what works



This final section draws attention to four concluding messages about the nature of the “workforce” within small supports organisations, that help to explain the initial finding that people tend to stick around in these workplaces, seen in the data provided by three small supports organisations.

### 1. Values and relationships run through everything

A clear focus on getting things right for and supporting each person to live their lives is shared by everyone throughout the organisation: individuals, teams and whole organisations united by this same desire. People who work for small supports organisations connect with this drive and appreciate being part of an organisation that has this focus at its heart.

“It’s about the person, get the match right and everything else falls into place.”

This report shares numerous examples and illustrations of what this looks like in practice so these won’t be repeated here. The key thing to draw attention in this concluding section is that the essence of these values is the humane, open and inclusive ethos of each small supports organisation.

### 2. Small Supports organisations are learning organisations

They are continually reflecting, testing and learning, enabled by their open and inclusive cultures. When things are going well, it is relatively straightforward to work in this way, if this is what drives you. One important defining feature of the unrelenting focus shared by small supports organisations is that difficulties and challenges are managed by reflecting on these values, on who and what matters. Staff, teams and wider support systems draw together when the going gets tough, to keep their focus on the person and what matters to them.

### 3. Teamwork and mutual support at all levels and in all places

One of the benefits of being small is that everyone knows everyone else and what’s important to each person. This starts with individual matching, is reflected in each team recruited around each person and ripples outwards throughout the organisation. At the same time, everyone was quick to point out that while “size matters”, it is not the most important aspect of being a small supports

organisation. The skills and qualities of staff, and organisational systems reinforcing the culture and values outlined above, are as important.

A key question remains as to whether the shared, unrelenting focus on each person and what good looks like to them would be so consistently shared and strongly upheld in organisations where the sheer number of people involved could get in the way of these relationships and connections? It is clear that although the beating heart of Small Supports does not lie in numbers, there is a value in understanding *how* the numbers influence the delivery of their mission *and* keep great staff who are part of making this happen.

#### 4. The importance of trust and understanding trauma

In small supports organisations, mutually trusting, healthy connections are as important for individual staff and teams as a whole, as they are for the person you're working for. **"We all trust each other"** someone said, and **that "this is central to everything working"**. *Someone else pointed out that "acceptance from the person is key, do I feel safe with you, do I trust you?"*

Although no-one said "trauma informed practice" during these conversations, they did talk about a common desire to support people to prevent past traumas people have experienced from re-occurring.

A key characteristic of trauma informed organisations is an unrelenting focus on connections and trusting relationships that runs alongside a deep understanding and awareness of past trauma and how to support someone heal from past traumas in order to move forward with their lives. **Small supports organisations do this, and their approach is valued by the staff who work for them.**