

The Cleaning Industry
in Tāmaki Makaurau

INSIGHTS INTO HEALTH AND WELLBEING

April 2021



Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who took time to speak with us and generously share insights about health and wellbeing in the cleaning industry. It was heartening to meet with committed and passionate people who share a common desire to support health and wellbeing in the industry. The information you gifted us has helped us gain a better understanding about the industry and the systems which shape it. We look forward to continuing to work with you in the future as we consider how to respond to the challenges raised in this insights report.



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Auckland Regional Public Health Service
Ratonga Hauora-ā-Iwi ō Tāmaki Makaurau



Working with the people of Auckland, Waitemata and Counties Manukau

Summary and Key Insights

Our insights into the cleaning industry show that this is an essential service, critical to the health and wellbeing of the population of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland).

Cleaners keep workplaces healthy and safe for a diverse range of industry sectors. The cleaning workforce is large, with 11,702 cleaners, and is the 12th largest employing industry in Tāmaki Makaurau.

The impact of COVID-19 is significant. There has been a spotlight on the essential work that cleaners do for all of us to stay well. We see an opportunity to leverage from this increased interest and support for cleaning work. We are therefore excited to bring you these insights about health and wellbeing in the cleaning industry and look forward to further discussion about how to respond to the challenges raised in the report.

Key insights

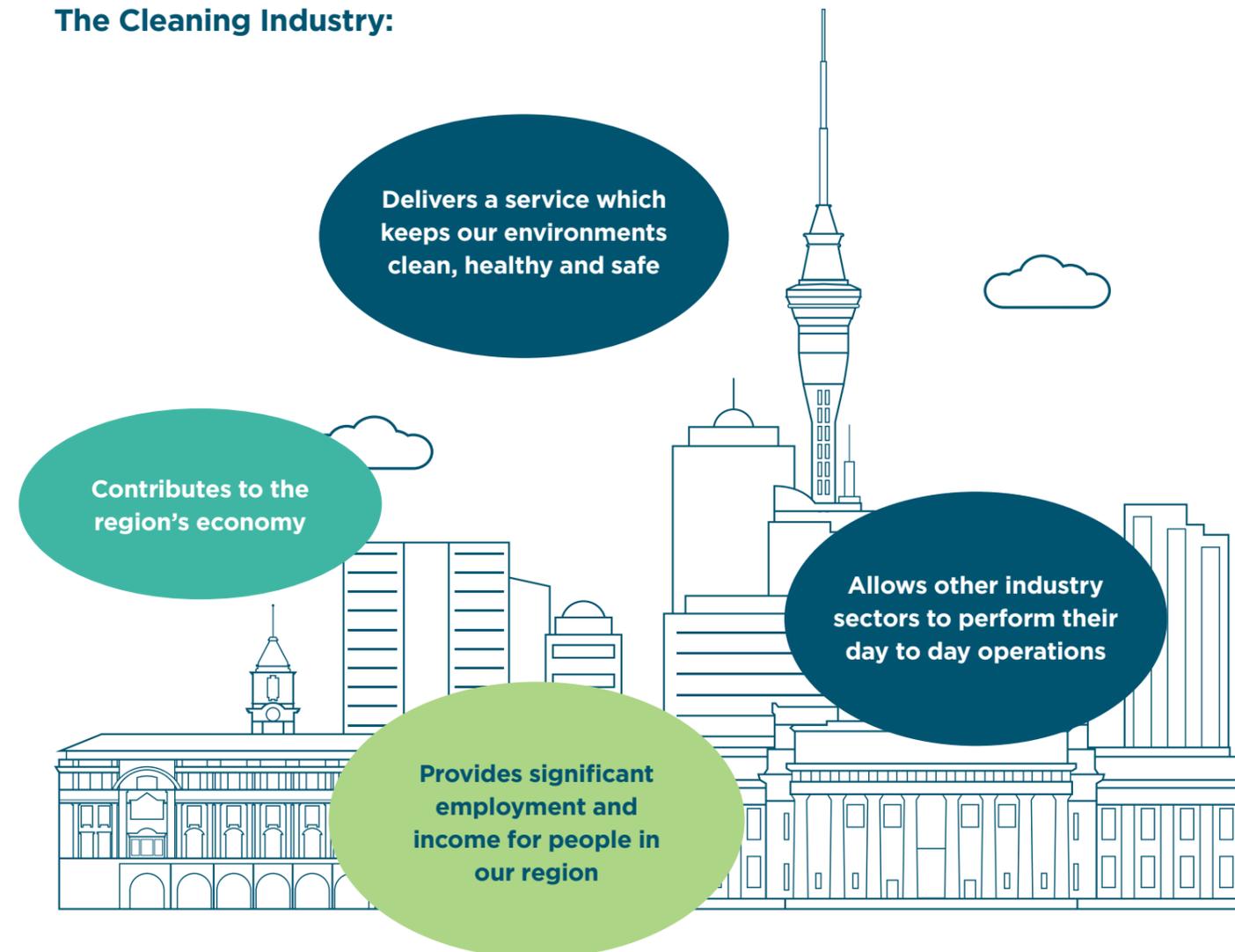
- 1 COVID-19 has magnified the importance of cleaning services and has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of those in the industry.
- 2 Stakeholders share a common view - paying a fair income and making cleaners feel valued would make the biggest difference to their health and wellbeing.
- 3 Cleaning is an essential service and occupation but continues to be undervalued.
- 4 Cost-focused contracts are a problem - "It's a race to the bottom".
- 5 Factors associated with high retention rates include job stability, pay rates, work location and team culture.
- 6 Inadequate on-the-job training and equipment present a risk to health and wellbeing.
- 7 Access to Careerforce qualifications and other career progression opportunities varies across the sector.
- 8 The design and management of cleaning work carries risk to the wellbeing, health and safety of cleaners.

Introduction

The building cleaning services industry (the cleaning industry) is a large sector in Tāmaki Makaurau which contributes to population health and wellbeing by providing essential cleaning services and employment.

The importance of this contribution has been magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, the cleaning industry and its workforce do not receive the recognition or reward commensurate to their worth. The cleaning industry workforce is amongst the lowest paid and most undervalued in our society and can have unstable employment conditions. Low income and poor quality work are known to be harmful to health and wellbeing. These are long standing issues in the cleaning industry.

The Cleaning Industry:



Why is public health interested in work?

Auckland Regional Public Health Service's (ARPHS) role is to improve population health. The ARPHS's Workplace Team want people to enjoy **quality work** that supports health and wellbeing. We seek to influence systems¹ that impact work and employment in Tāmaki Makaurau.

The Workplace Team recently undertook a project to **explore health and wellbeing in the cleaning industry**. This work was prompted by the COVID-19 spotlight placed on cleaning services.

The purpose of the project was to:

1. better understand health and wellbeing challenges in the cleaning industry
2. better understand the systems which shape the industry
3. develop relationships with cleaning industry stakeholders
4. share an insights report with stakeholders to prompt conversations about our findings
5. use the insights as a springboard to generate new ideas to respond to the challenges raised in the report.

Features of quality work which support health and wellbeing:

- Fair income
- Job stability and security
- Opportunities for training and progression
- Healthy, safe and inclusive work environment and culture
- Mechanisms to voice concerns
- Feeling supported and valued
- Good balance between job demands and resources
- Good work life balance.



Our approach

We talked with a range of stakeholders involved in the cleaning industry to gather insights. In total, we spoke with over 40 people between late July 2020 and early February 2021.

Stakeholders we talked with:



Scope and terminology

There are a number of terms used to define the cleaning industry, including building cleaning services, building service contractors, commercial cleaning industry and industrial cleaning services. The Australia New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) class uses building cleaning services.

Our insights gathering project focused on building cleaning services within the commercial and public sector. It did not include domestic cleaning services. We use the term cleaning industry in this report.

¹ Including policies, practices, relationships, resources, power and mindsets.

Profile of the cleaning industry in Tāmaki Makaurau



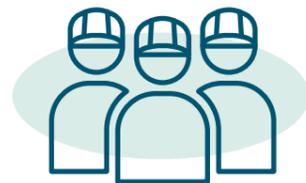
12th

LARGEST EMPLOYING INDUSTRY



2,589

BUSINESSES IN THE INDUSTRY



11,702

PEOPLE WORK IN THE INDUSTRY

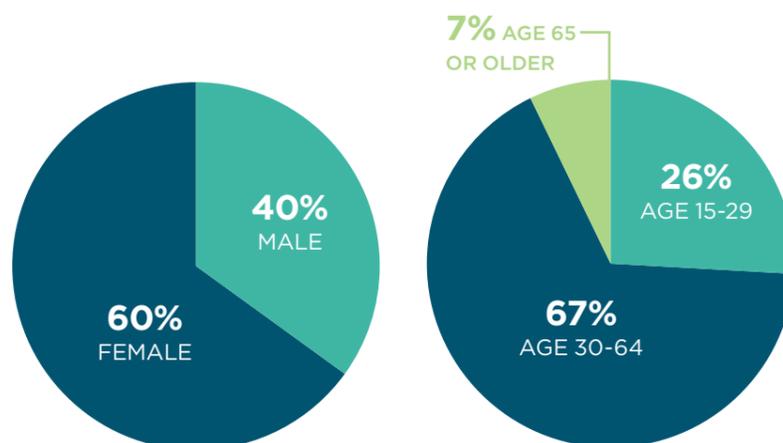
Workforce:

Data told us that the cleaning industry workforce² in our region is:

We heard that in our region the cleaning industry workforce:

- Is ethnically diverse
- Has an increasing number of younger, migrant workers
- Has a decreasing number of Pacific and Māori workers who tend to be older

The workforce may be impacted with fewer temporary migrant workers entering New Zealand because of COVID-19 border restrictions.



Age distribution of cleaners and laundry workers in the Auckland Region in 2018

² Available data is for combined 'cleaners and laundry workers'

Employment terms and conditions:



\$50,000 per year or less.
Average \$20-\$24 per hour.

The majority (93%) of cleaners and laundry workers earn a total personal income of **\$50,000 per year or less**. This figure has stayed consistent for more than a decade.

Pay rates for cleaners depends on their employer, whether they are covered by multi-employer collective agreements (MECAs), their experience, qualifications and the type of work they do. Cleaners usually earn between the minimum wage (\$20.00 per hour from 1 April 2021) and \$24.00 per hour.



We heard that:

- Some cleaners work multiple jobs and often 6 days a week
- MECAs exist for cleaners in District Health Boards (DHBs) and those working for companies who are members of Building Services Contractors New Zealand (BSCNZ)
- Cleaners contracted or subcontracted by living wage employers are paid the living wage (currently \$22.10 per hour)
- Union membership levels are low within the cleaning industry workforce
- Staff turnover within larger companies can be 65% or more per year (Simmers and Associates Limited, 2008). Factors associated with high turnover include:



Data challenge:

It is challenging to get a clear, accurate profile of the building cleaning services industry in our region due to the varied nature of the sector and the way industry and occupation data is collected and categorised. This issue was raised by a number of the stakeholders who we spoke with.

References:

Infometrics. (2020) Annual Economic Profile - Auckland. Available online: <https://ecoprofile.infometrics.co.nz/auckland/PDFProfile> (accessed 9 April 2021)

Stats NZ. (2018)

Simmers and Associates Limited (2008). Conditions Affecting Health and Safety in the Cleaning Sector and Discussions of Ways and Means to Address Causes and Solutions of the Identified Issues - A Discussion Paper.

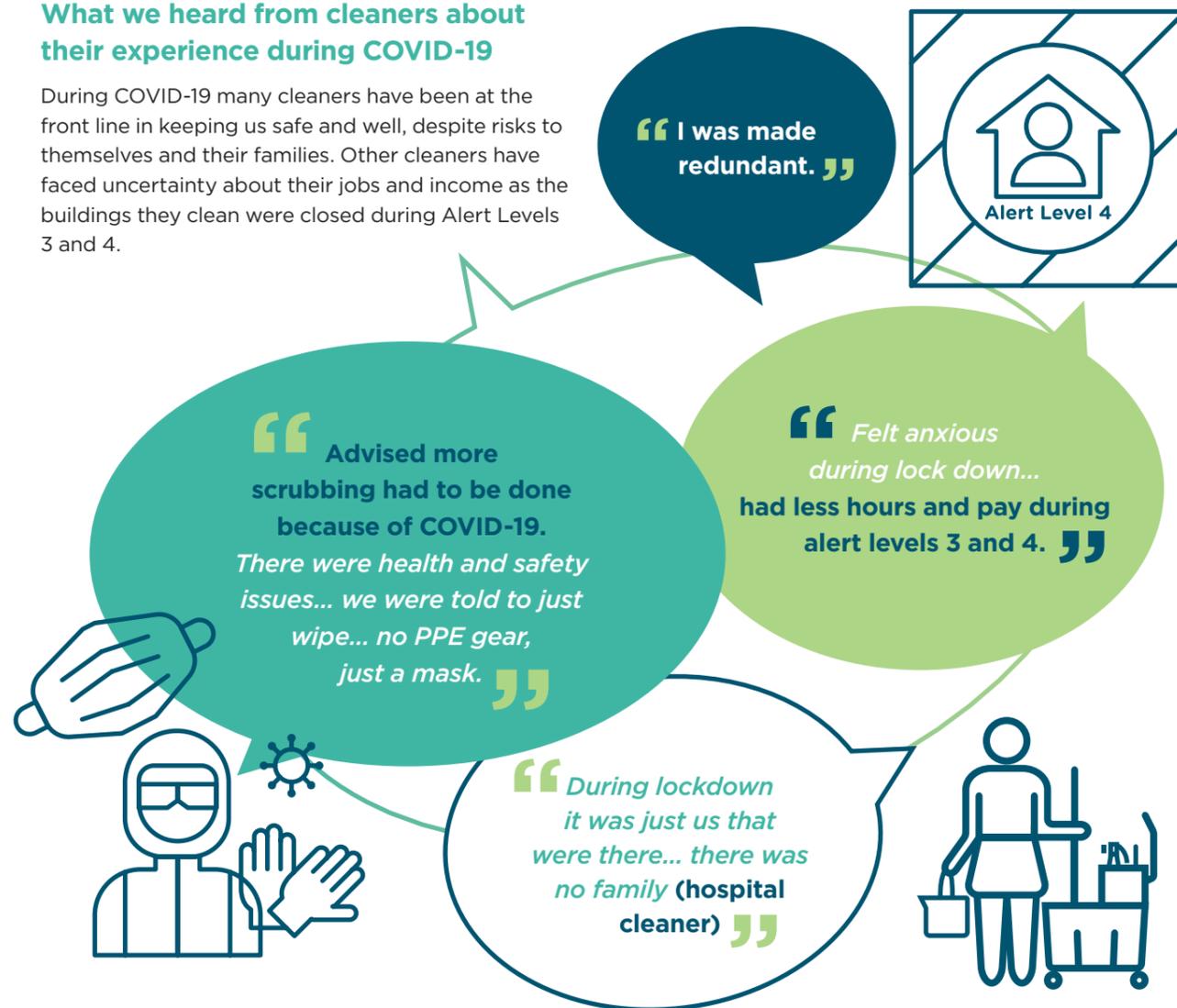
Insight 1

COVID-19 has magnified the importance of cleaning services and has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of those in the industry.

The cleaning industry has always played a huge role in safeguarding the population's health by keeping our environments hygienic and safe. COVID-19 has highlighted just how essential their service is to health and to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

What we heard from cleaners about their experience during COVID-19

During COVID-19 many cleaners have been at the front line in keeping us safe and well, despite risks to themselves and their families. Other cleaners have faced uncertainty about their jobs and income as the buildings they clean were closed during Alert Levels 3 and 4.



What we heard from other stakeholders:

Health and wellbeing of cleaners:

“Over last 12 months have seen an increase in anxiety especially early on during first lock down.”

We heard that initially there was significant anxiety, with cleaners being concerned for their safety and that of their families. Policies and procedures were changing on a daily basis during the first lockdown. It was a rapidly evolving situation.

Despite this, people told us that cleaners turned up to work every day (apart from cleaners who were older workers and those with health conditions). Cleaners responded professionally and calmly. We also heard that training for putting on and removing personal protective equipment (PPE) for infection control was already common in some workplaces. The second lockdown was perceived as easier, as there were established policies and procedures in place.

Some employers ensured there was access to employer-funded counselling for any personal or work issues. One manager told us there were counsellors available on-site in the most stressful period of the pandemic response.

One organisation in the public sector recognised that cleaners, as part of their lowest-paid workforce, would be shouldering heavy economic impacts during the pandemic. Support was put in place for cleaners to address immediate needs (e.g. MSD referrals, grocery and petrol vouchers, food parcels and free meals).

Increasing demand for cleaning services:

“There has been a big increase in the number of ‘red cleans’ which take about 40 minutes each... in September did 1500, historically do about 90.”

Some parts of the industry faced a surge in demand for cleaning services, such as more touch point cleaning and sanitising. We heard that some services were able to recruit additional cleaning staff in order to meet this demand. However the majority had to manage with their existing workforce, with cleaners varying their shift patterns to complete additional work. There were occasions when cleaners were recognised as ‘heroes’ within their organisation for the critical role they play during the pandemic.

Survival of businesses:

“Always seen as a commodity – if businesses want to save money then they cut cleaning.”

Other cleaning companies experienced a substantial drop in business during Alert Levels 3 and 4 as many buildings were closed. Company owners were concerned about uncertainty of contracts and survival of their business. There was considerable uncertainty and anxiety; owners told us they felt a commitment to their cleaning staff and worked hard to keep their business afloat. Companies made use of Government wage subsidies.

Some people expressed that the pandemic will have impacts on recruitment as there will be fewer temporary migrant workers due to border restrictions.



Insight 2

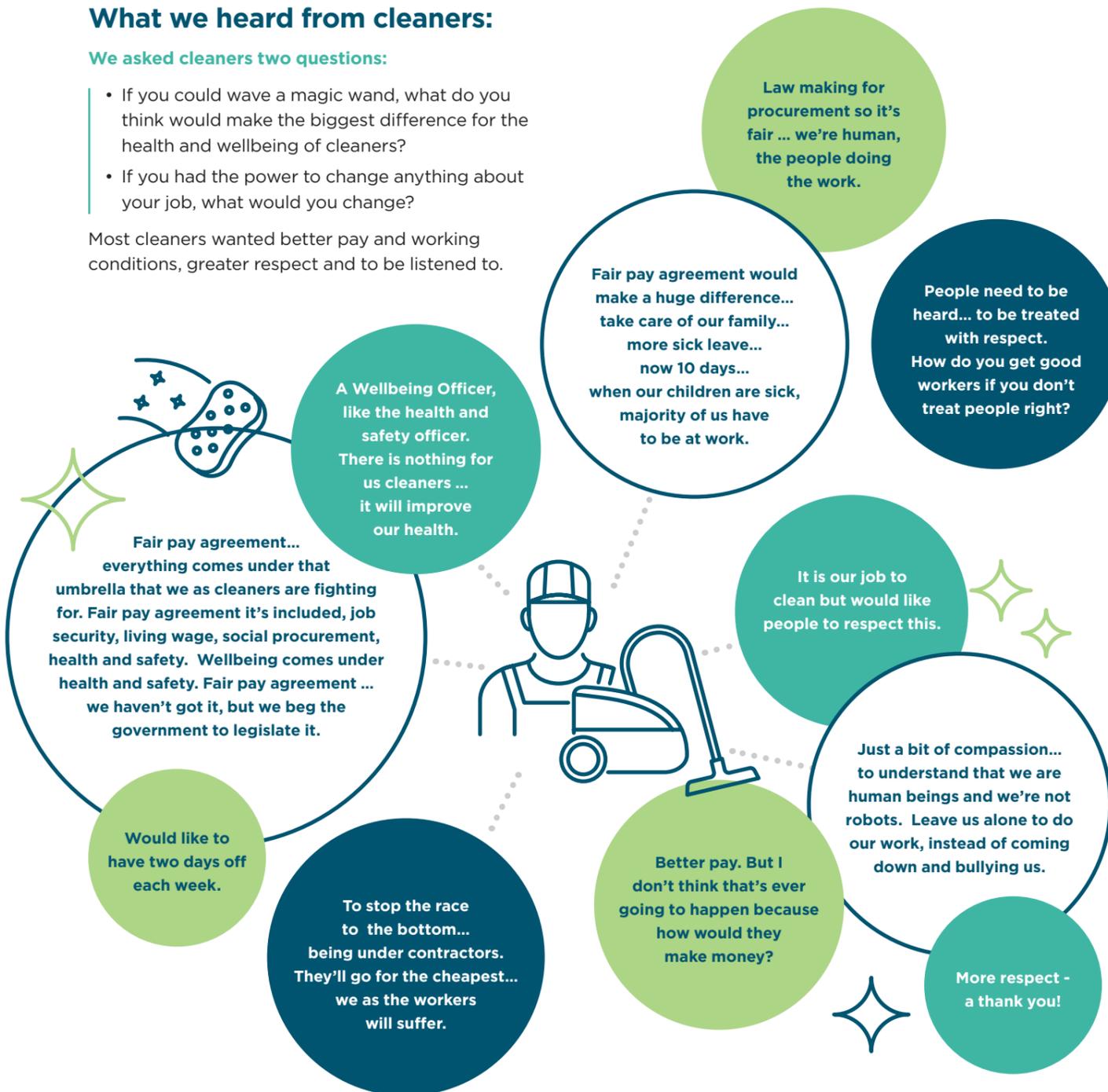
Stakeholders share a common view - paying a fair income and making cleaners feel valued would make the biggest difference to their health and wellbeing.

What we heard from cleaners:

We asked cleaners two questions:

- If you could wave a magic wand, what do you think would make the biggest difference for the health and wellbeing of cleaners?
- If you had the power to change anything about your job, what would you change?

Most cleaners wanted better pay and working conditions, greater respect and to be listened to.



What we heard from other stakeholders:

We asked other stakeholders the magic wand question:

- If you could wave a magic wand, what do you think would make the biggest difference for the health and wellbeing of cleaners?

The two themes we heard repeatedly were around fair income and feeling valued.



Insight 3

Cleaning is an essential service and occupation but continues to be undervalued.

What we heard:

Cleaners told us that feeling valued, acknowledged and thanked is important for their wellbeing.



We also heard about the efforts many stakeholders have made to increase awareness, respect, recognition and professionalism of the cleaning industry:

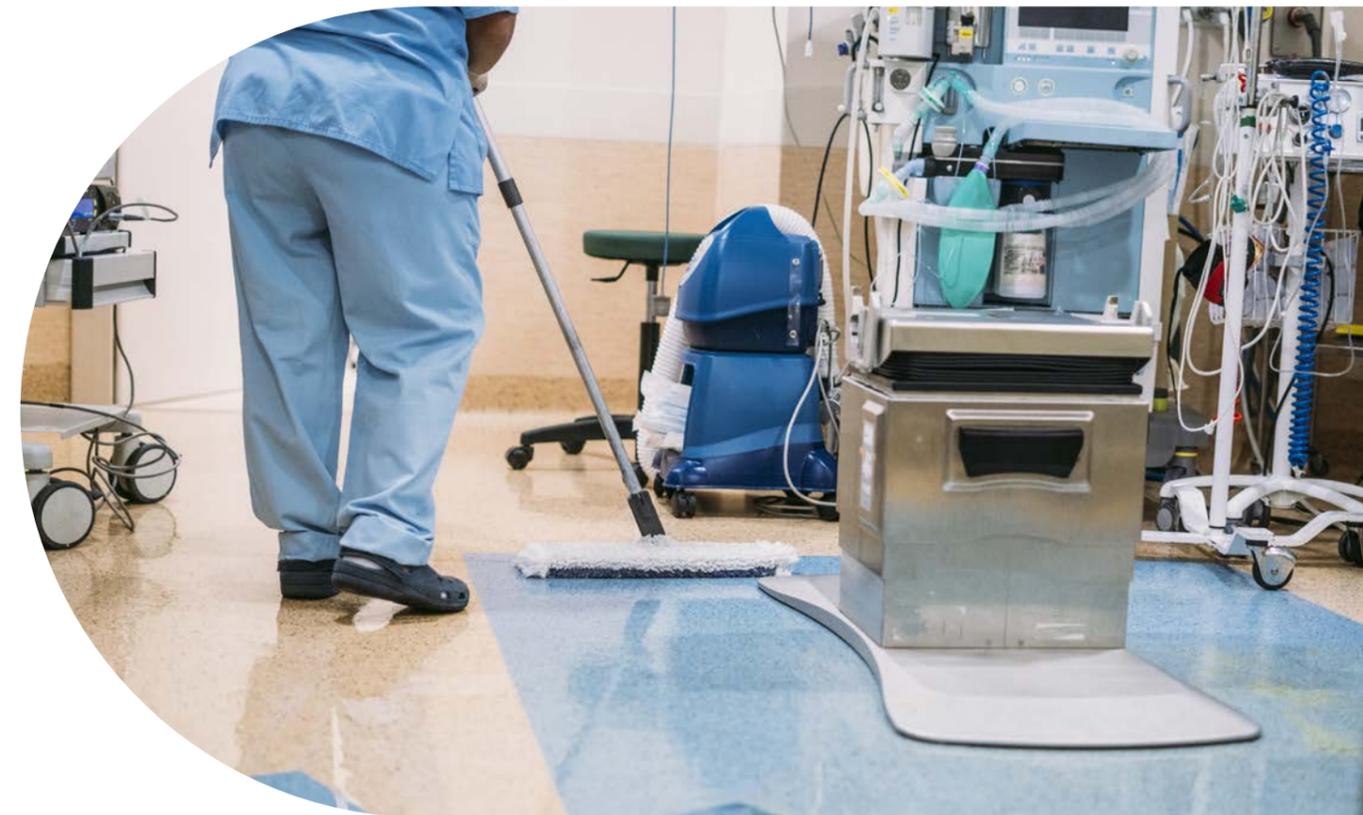
“Passionate about business and proud of achievements”

“Run industry awards, a celebration of industry”

Stakeholders said that “many cleaners are passionate, capable and competent people” who work hard and upskill to deliver an essential service and progress their careers in the cleaning industry. Stakeholders emphasised the vital importance of cleaning services during COVID-19 and described how cleaners put themselves and families at risk to keep our environments clean, healthy and safe.

“ When we hear about businesses or buildings being closed due to COVID-19, it is not the company CEOs who are going in to do the deep cleaning. ”

However, stakeholders also talked about cleaning being undervalued by customers and by society, with cleaning being viewed by some as the “last employment of desperation”, as a “stepping stone” or “dead end job”.



Cleaning as a service

Stakeholders shared insights about why cleaning was undervalued by customers including:

- lack of visibility of cleaners who often come into buildings after hours
- lack of understanding about the realities of the cleaning role - "There is a lack of understanding about cleaners' role, they are viewed as low skilled."
- attitude that anyone can do cleaning - "Because they (customers) do cleaning at home, they think they can do it themselves."

We heard the low value placed on cleaning services by customers results in them being seen as dispensable, an unwillingness to pay fair prices for services (see page 16) and cleaners feeling a lack of respect from customers which impacts their health and wellbeing.

Cleaning as an occupation

Cleaners talked about having pride in their job and a sense of satisfaction at keeping places clean and safe:



We heard from cleaners and stakeholders that there was a lack of value and respect for cleaning as an occupation. This negatively impacts cleaners' health and wellbeing and recruitment efforts to attract new people to the sector.

"Think cleaners are low standard."

"Get looked down on."

"It is our job to clean but would like people to respect this."

"People have labels about you being a cleaner, judge you, and don't want to listen to you."

Some cleaners themselves viewed cleaning as "a low job" and this view reflected on recruitment.

"Cleaning is cleaning - It's a low job."

"People come to interviews in track pants...not neat and tidy appearance. What does this say about how people view role?"

Positive developments

Thank Your Cleaner Day™

BSCNZ started Thank Your Cleaner Day™ as a way of recognising and valuing the work of cleaners. It is a designated day once a year to show cleaners how they are valued and appreciated for keeping our environments clean and safe. The Thank Your Cleaner Day™ initiative has been adopted by other countries. www.thankyourcleanerday.co.nz

DHB's efforts to profile cleaners as part of infection prevention and control team

Two of the three DHBs we met with talked about raising the profile and respect for cleaners. Their role was viewed as a vital part of infection prevention and control in the hospital.

"A good cleaner is very valuable. Not just a cleaner they work alongside infection control. Their role is really important. We make sure they know that"

Increased visibility of cleaners

We heard from a customer that their cleaning service provides brief personal profiles about the cleaners who work after hours. This was viewed as positive by the customer as it helped to increase visibility of their cleaners.



Insight 4

Cost-focused contracts are a problem - “It’s a race to the bottom”

What we heard:

We heard the cleaning industry is highly competitive with many companies competing for market share. The strong emphasis on cost when tendering for contracts is a problem, particularly in the commercial sector. Customers have a strong focus on dollar value and accept tenders with the lowest prices. Cleaning companies compete on price which drives the “race to the bottom” and results in unrealistic contract sizing and pricing.

“Pricing is the issue. Customers accept lowest tenders and compete on price.”

“There is limited value placed on training qualifications of cleaners during the tendering process.”

We heard that cleaners bear the brunt of unrealistic contract sizing and pricing. It results in low pay, the necessity to work long hours to make an adequate income, and unrealistic workloads (see page 24). All of these impact cleaners’ health and wellbeing.

“ There are a large number of cleaning enterprises who undercut when quoting. Don’t know how they can deliver a quality service at such a low price - they put cleaners under strict time pressures. There is not enough time to do a quality job. ”



The cost-focused contract model also opens door to exploitative work practices. For example, we heard about cleaners bringing in family members to help them complete cleaning jobs. Family members were not covered by an employment agreement and related protections. We understand work is being done by the industry to address these practices.

We heard frustration from stakeholders about the contracting model and a desire to raise industry standards.

“ If we were all doing the same thing we could raise the standard. If all companies pay the same rate that becomes the market rate and you don’t lose competitive pricing advantages in bids. ”



Positive developments

Government procurement rules

An increasing number of public sector organisations are aligning with Government procurement rules. These rules guide practice when procuring cleaning and other services. Suppliers must demonstrate and ensure they, and any of their sub-contractors, adhere to relevant employment standards and health and safety requirements. Increased contract transparency offers a means to ensure realistic contract sizing and pricing.

Raising the wage floor

A number of organisations and industry sectors are Living Wage Employers. We heard there is a lack of Living Wage cleaning companies. If cleaning companies were to become Living Wage employers, could this in turn become a competitive advantage?

Insight 5

Factors associated with high retention rates include job stability, pay rates, work location and team culture.

What we heard:

Particular parts of the industry experience high retention rates while for others, high turnover rates are a constant challenge. We heard that cleaners employed in the public sector tend to stay in the role longer than those in the commercial sector. People highlighted a range of reasons for high turnover: personal choice, injuries, age-related health conditions, temporary migrant work visa

requirements and career progression. We were told that some people are part-time cleaners while they are completing tertiary qualifications. One employer in the public sector told us that “lots stay a long time... over 30 years”, suggesting that being close to home, public transport, childcare and good parking are reasons that people stay.

From what we heard, factors that lead to high retention are:

- Stable work hours
- Enough hours of work with one employer
- Working on one site
- Stability with colleagues, part of a team
- Friendships with colleagues
- Good team/management culture
- Feeling appreciated
- Close to home
- Hours of work suit some people
- ‘Open door’ policy for discussing work or personal issues
- Flexible work arrangements
- Good pay rates
- Meeting people
- Physicality of the job, keeps one fit and active



Employers’ efforts to create supportive workplaces:

Family first

One manager explained an ‘open door’ policy where cleaners can come and raise work or personal issues at any time. At the same organisation, we heard that this was appreciated by cleaners. For example, they shared that their manager listened to their needs and then created a flexible work arrangement (changed work hours) that **helped them balance their family responsibilities**. The cleaner expressed the comfort and ease that she felt when asking the manager:

“ We listen to their needs... we do try to help them where we can.”



“ I just asked (manager’s name)... they said ‘your family first’.”



Feeling part of a team, supportive colleagues

Some cleaners discussed the gratitude they have for their colleagues, and the team work, support and camaraderie. For example, a cleaner told us that they have “too many friends here” and their friendships with colleagues make them want to stay at their job.

Sufficient work hours and pay rates

Often people told us that pay rates should be higher, however for some cleaners, the pay rates were discussed in a positive light. For example, a cleaner told us that “rates are good” and they had an “increase coming up in 2 months”. This cleaner was under a collective employment agreement in the public sector.

We also heard from some employers about efforts to provide sufficient work hours for their cleaning staff:

“Try to give enough hours to live but need to balance with time spent at home. Try to give cleaners enough hours to make it a career - more than 50% of staff on 30 plus hours.”

In contrast, others needed more than one job to make ends meet. Some cleaners work across multiple sites for one employer, while others do so for various employers. Cleaning contracts easily move from one employer to another. We heard an example of a cleaner working for four employers across four sites under four employment agreements.

Positive developments

MSD Work Broker Programme

Ministry of Social Development (MSD) and BSCNZ work in partnership to recruit people into the cleaning industry. The programme includes pre-employment support, a two-year career plan with Careerforce Level 2 qualification and minimum 30 hours per week.

Flexible work arrangements for cleaners

Listening to the needs of cleaners and enabling flexibility in the workplace. Retention rates may improve if there is a flexible approach.

Insight 6

Inadequate on-the-job training and equipment present a risk to health and wellbeing.

What we heard:

Training

Provision of on-the-job training is variable. We heard that some employers deliver in-house training programmes, while others provide a combination of in-house and external training. Some cleaners receive no training: “it’s just, here’s a cloth”, while others have the benefit of a buddy system along with detailed instruction booklets. One cleaner discussed the lack of on-the-job training despite working alongside their supervisor:

“[It was] hard at first. You had to move quickly to get your work done. When I first started at [workplace] it was horrific. I learnt ways of working smarter rather than harder. I wasn’t shown anything. No training.”

Another cleaner gave the example of how a lack of training can lead to injuries, pain and discomfort for people that are new to the role:

“When I go into work, I check the vacuum cleaner is comfortable ... check the straps. People aren’t taught how to look after vacuum. [When first started job] the straps were pulling on my shoulders and my back hurt. It really is dangerous and just not good. People should be shown that you pull the straps at the side. It took me 12 months of chipping away to understand ... to loop them, top and bottom straps.”

Equipment

We heard that training, including training about how to use equipment, may reduce the risk of injury. Cleaners told us that equipment needs to be “fit for purpose”.

We also heard that faulty equipment can present risk of serious injury. For example, we heard that a cleaner suffered burns to her back while wearing a faulty vacuum.



We are not given the right gear

Some cleaners expressed that the equipment is not “fit for purpose” or is not supplied at all.

“There is a shrinking cleaning budget...

What they supply you is not fit for purpose.”

“We are not given the right gear... get soaking wet walking between buildings.”

A cleaner was provided “little rags” to clean windows so they decided to create their own equipment:

“I don’t work harder. I have to think smarter.”



Positive developments

BSCNZ Code of Practice

All BSCNZ members commit to upholding a range of standards e.g. standards related to quality service, health and safety, employment conditions, environmental.

Variety of training to meet needs

We heard that some companies provide a monthly training toolbox for their workforce. Some companies pride themselves on the quantity and quality of the training they provide for their workforce “last year ran more than 260 training events with 1500 trainees.”



Insight 7

Access to Careerforce qualifications and other career progression opportunities varies across the sector.

What we heard:

New Zealand Certificate in Cleaning (Level 3)

Many employers encourage cleaners to complete the New Zealand Certificate in Cleaning (Level 3), delivered by Careerforce. Some cleaners pointed out that they receive a pay increase with this qualification. We heard that some people think cleaners may feel “intimidated” about the qualification. However, with support, including access to English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training if necessary, cleaners do complete qualifications.

Several people highlighted a range of barriers to provision and uptake of this qualification:



Other career progression opportunities

Providing access to in-house career development options was important to some employers. We heard about programmes that include: free digital devices, training and support, and supervision and leadership skills.

We also heard an example of in-house promotions; an employer told us about a casual cleaner who eventually became an operations manager. Another employer mentioned that 25 percent of their workforce move into other roles within the organisation.

Some organisations provide access to other qualifications. One employer told us that they can support cleaners to complete business qualifications, for example NZ Certificate in Business - First Line Management (Level 4), NZ Diploma in Business (Level 5). It is unclear how many cleaners have accessed these opportunities.

Some cleaners stated that their manager had never discussed career progression: “I’ve never been asked about it... it would be nice... it would uplift you.”

Some cleaners highlighted that other staff have career progression opportunities, including support to complete tertiary qualifications for a career change: “They’re told to not give up on their hopes.”

One cleaner was not interested in study, and stated: “I’m too old to study again.”

Another cleaner told us about their tertiary qualifications across a range of fields, including mental health and customer service.

Positive developments

Variety of training offered to support career progression.

We heard many positive examples of training to support career progression for example:

- Employer funded access to the Certificate in Cleaning (Level 3). For some cleaners this is linked with a pay increase
- Careerforce provide ESOL training for cleaners who do not meet literacy and numeracy assessment requirements
- MSD Work Broker Programme (see page 19) includes a two-year career plan with a Careerforce Level 2 qualification
- In-house career development programmes are offered by some employers. These actively encourage and support cleaners to develop confidence and skills to gain promotions to supervisory or leadership positions, or to other roles within the organisation
- Some employers provide access to business qualifications e.g. NZ Certificate in Business - First Line Management (Level 4) and NZ Diploma in Business (Level 5).



Insight 8

The design and management of cleaning work carries risk to the wellbeing, health and safety of cleaners.

What we heard

The design and management of a cleaner's role leads to the potential for psychological and physical harm. The precarious nature of some cleaning work is also associated with psychosocial risks. We heard that reporting health and safety risks to management can be particularly difficult for cleaners who have English as a second language or feel insecure about losing their jobs.

Demands versus resources

We heard that a cleaning job has high demands and low resources, therefore carries a high level of physical and psychosocial risk.

Employers told us they would like to have:

"more cleaners"

"innovation - tools that make things easier"

"increased timeframes (for cleaning)"

We were told that a demanding workload may contribute to injuries, back and shoulder pain, and musculoskeletal injuries. Sometimes there is additional cleaning to do on top of routine cleaning tasks for example, isolation clean at hospitals, end of term clean at schools, spot cleaning. A cleaner told us that there is "not enough hours to do a good job". One cleaner explained the impact on her physical health:

“ Your body is aching from the rush although you're giving it all you can. We shouldn't be pushed like that, even when short, there's no one to fill, cutting hours back but expecting the same from you. ”

Support from colleagues was appreciated and acknowledged by some of the cleaners we spoke with, for example having the extra support to complete a heavy workload: "They take their time to help you". One employer mentioned that an investigation into job design and timeframes was undertaken; it showed that more cleaners were required however fiscal constraints impeded any progress.



Example of a cleaner's workload

A cleaner and their colleague clean 39 classrooms, one office and four toilet blocks. There are sometimes extra tasks such as cleaning the gym. Classroom and office cleaning tasks include:



Contracts versus client's on-the-job requests

We heard some clients will request more than what is covered in the contract. This puts cleaners in a difficult position. One cleaner explained how a contract stated that the cleaner must vacuum three times per week, but the client asked them to vacuum every day:

“ They expect us to do everything but it's not in the contract... they forget about the contract that they have agreed and force us to do something that's not in the contract... overpowering... you don't have a say... [it's] us facing the client... they add little tasks... it's hard to say no. It's hard... it's all about pleasing [the client]... it depends on the supervisor whether he or she will stand up. ”

This cleaner works a second job and finds that, in contrast, her other client “really appreciates and acknowledges” the work.

Another cleaner told us how contracts change with hours of work reduced but the expected workload remains the same: “They change over the contracts... cutting costs ... but workload is the same... they have the power.”

Discussing issues with employers

Some cleaners expressed they can speak directly with their managers - this is much easier when managers are also on-site. A few cleaners spoke about supervisors and managers being based off-site, but coming to visit their workplace regularly so there is opportunity to discuss issues.

One cleaner told us she chooses not to complain: “I just do my job and I go home, I keep my mouth shut. I don't complain. I mind my own business.”

Other cleaners expressed that they did not feel respected. For example, a cleaner told us that managers should “talk to us as adults... not talked down on... not demanding”, while another cleaner mentioned their supervisor “hears you but nothing's done”. A cleaner told us they had not received any complaints from the client, however their manager “used to bully me all the time”:

“They can't get me because I make sure I do everything to the book... [I've had] no complaints. I've been in the wars with them. They've been trying to get rid of me for ages. I had a meeting with them... people don't get any training. He said, well it's like cleaning a house, but it's not.”

We also heard that repeatedly raising concerns can lead to cleaners being labelled “as a troublemaker”, as this cleaner explained:

“They [managers] don't listen, they just fob you off. You get classed as a troublemaker... and that you can't work with people. It's a vicious cycle... they're just not flexible.”

External support for cleaners

We were told there were “good collective agreements”. However, we heard cleaners do struggle to make their voice heard in the workplace:

“ Cleaners have very little voice - on the ground the cleaner's voice is missing. ”

Some cleaners do not know their employment rights. One person told us some cleaners, especially recent migrants, can “struggle because they have no idea about their rights”. Some people were concerned cleaners may be at risk of exploitation, particularly recent migrants who may not speak English, and may not know New Zealand's employment law.

“Cleaning is cleaning... it's a low job... 99% of people can't speak English because that's why they get used and get ripped off.”

When problems cannot be resolved between cleaners and their employers, sometimes cleaners contact their union. One person told us sometimes people have “a visceral reaction” when the topic of a union is brought into any discussion, while others told us they have no problems with unions.

We heard from a cleaner who contacted the union for support to resolve an issue at their workplace. The union wrote to the contractor and business owner:

“They were stunned... of some of the ways we had been treated... but the owner is now making excuses... saying we've investigated but I don't know how because they haven't talked to us.”

Cleaners told us that:

- Sometimes people were offered union membership but chose to decline, preferring to go to their on-site manager if they had a problem at work
- The union provides training about employment laws and their rights
- Fear of job loss impacts one's health and wellbeing.

One cleaner told us they did not want to lose their job, but stated it is important for cleaners to know their rights and entitlements under employment law:

“If you're strong enough... you tell the union... [we need] more training... the law... knowing what you're entitled to, who is the right person to talk to. It makes your life miserable... because of how we're treated. Leaving you in a dark place but you know your rights... I know that I need to pay my bills... I have suffered so much... Thinking I can't lose the job... because I need to feed my family.”

Positive developments

Supportive and compassionate management

We heard great examples of supportive and compassionate management including:

- making it easier for older workforce to continue employment by shifting a cleaner to a less physically demanding environment or reducing hours
- managers understanding the pressure on their “predominantly female” workforce to care for sick children and overcoming operational challenges to cover shifts at short notice
- employers going the extra mile to ensure cleaners understand employment rights.



Next Steps

This insights report shares what we have learnt from the initial 'discovery' phase of our project.

We will host an 'open home' event in May 2021 to share and reflect on the insights with you and other stakeholders.

We hope this 'open home' event will be the start of a longer journey together as we move to the 'design' phase of this project. This will focus on using the insights as springboards for generating new ideas to respond to the challenges raised in the report.

Summary of questions to consider for next phase of project

How might the industry work together to:

Leverage the increased profile and spotlight on cleaning services during COVID 19 pandemic?

Increase recognition and acknowledgement of cleaners' good performance?



Promote a society where cleaners are held in high regard?

Re-imagine the cost-focused contracting model and move away from pricing as the key focus of tenders?

Raise the wage floor by supporting customers to prioritise living wage accredited cleaning companies?

Build on common ground to unite efforts to improve health and wellbeing of cleaners?



Promote belonging and inclusion of cleaners into customer organisations' teams?

Calculate and highlight the 'value' of cleaning services to society, to show their true worth?

Create a policy environment which supports an alternative contracting model?



Provide more factors that lead to high retention both within organisations and across the industry?

Build customers' understanding of the consequences of their procurement actions - support customers to consider factors such as quality and wellbeing in cleaning contracts?



Foster a sense of belonging and inclusion, so cleaners feel able to 'bring their whole self' to work and have open discussions with employers?

Foster inclusive workplace culture and professional development so that all cleaners, if they choose to, can pursue promotion opportunities including into middle and senior management within companies and the industry?

Consider innovative approaches to improve employee engagement, participation and representation to support health and wellbeing in the industry?

Increase job satisfaction of cleaners?

Set up mechanisms to include cleaners' voices within quality improvement measures?



Ensure every cleaner has an annual professional development plan?

Develop a training system that is widely applicable across the industry?



Ensure all cleaners have access to professional development if they choose to pursue career advancement?

Identify the psychosocial hazards resulting from the design and management of cleaning work?



Develop worker-centred interventions to address wellbeing, health and safety risks?



Auckland Regional Public Health Service

Ratonga Hauora-ā-lwi ō Tāmaki Makaurau



Working with the people of Auckland, Waitemata and Counties Manukau