

# Working alongside tāngata whai ora and whānau with complex needs

Snapshot of key insights – April 2026



Support workers play an active part in people's recovery by listening and providing support and practical assistance before, during, and after receiving mental health or addiction treatment. Local data and feedback from support workers and employers indicate health and social challenges are becoming more common, which may be contributing to more complex needs and demand for services.

This includes increasing rates of psychological distress, physical health problems (especially obesity and diabetes), unmet need for services (people are experiencing more barriers to access), material hardship, and experiences of discrimination in the general population, as well as the rising cost of living.

To better understand how this impacts on support workers' learning and development needs, Te Pou conducted online focus groups in November 2025 with managers of mental health and addiction NGOs, team leaders of support workers, and learning and development leads. We heard from 11 stakeholders who provided insights into what complex needs means for their service, their biggest challenges, and the knowledge and skills required for responding to complex needs. The key take-home messages are outlined below, with supporting quotes.

Te Pou will use these insights to inform the development of a new learning resource for support workers. For more details, see here for the [full engagement summary](#)

## The increasing complexity of tāngata whai ora and whānau needs is putting pressure on support workers

Complexity is seen as the current norm in support work as the role and responsibilities of support workers' mahi has become wider and more complex over time.

“Our team of support workers are no longer just giving medications or taking people to appointments. They advocate to [Ministry of Social Development], they sit in the clinical reviews, they support people into employment, they apply for social housing and all that. So, the need for upscaling kaimahi and the expectations has grown significantly.”

- NGO manager, team leader, or learning and development lead

## Safety and wellbeing are becoming more important for support workers

Participants emphasised the need for support workers to engage in self-care and continuous learning and development, as well as knowing how to reflect and process their own experiences and who they can reach out to for support.

“We see very passionate, committed, loyal kaimahi. But there is also the risk of burnout. There's also the risk of practising out of scope because there's that complexity of need.”

“If we're talking about support workers' roles becoming more complex or the people they're working with becoming more complex. There's even more of a need for supervision.”

- NGO manager, team leader, or learning and development lead

## Learning and development need to keep up with the increasing complexity and pressures on support workers

Workforce development and training opportunities need to align with growing expectations being placed on support workers. We also heard that support workers have limited time for training, so it needs to be easy for them to navigate and find what learning opportunities are available.

“We are trying to do what we can with [training], but the level of complexity just outshines what we’ve been able to provide.”

“I think one of the challenges with upscaling or training is knowing what’s out there. Knowing how to access it, knowing you know, where do I go to get this? [...] if you’re a support worker, you’re busy on your roster or out in the community doing supporting people [...] So I think we need to think about how those things are socialised, how they’re promoted, because not everyone’s going to know.”

– NGO manager, team leader, or learning and development lead

## Whanaungatanga is essential for holistic and integrated support

We heard from participants that whanaungatanga is essential when supporting tāngata whai ora and whānau with complex health and social needs.

“Their primary driver should be relationship [...] giving them permission to just hold space and hang out with people and figure out what that is in a proactive way like we don’t want them just having cups of tea and coffee and nice conversations. But there’s an art of a yarn where you start to get to know a person and then you unravel that complexity [...]”

– NGO manager, team leader, or learning and development lead

## System and funding barriers make it more challenging to respond to complex needs

Participants say system and funding barriers are their biggest challenges, as it can make it more difficult to respond to tāngata whai ora and whānau with complex health and social needs.

“We are being expected as a service to be the everything to somebody and we can’t be the everything and we are still under contract. A contract system where we are in competition with everybody else for the contract. So that makes collaboration very difficult.”

– NGO manager, team leader, or learning and development lead

## Summary and next steps

The focus group feedback indicates there are different aspects of complexity to be considered. Support workers are managing increasing demand and complexity in their mahi, within complex health and social support systems that often create barriers to integrated and holistic care.

Stakeholders have observed more needs related to co-occurring mental health, addiction, physical health problems, trauma, neurodiversity, cognitive impairment, housing instability and material hardship.

To recognise and respond to these needs, support workers would benefit from building knowledge and skills that promote whanaungatanga, cultural competency and safety, collaboration and integrated support, self-reflective practice, and the use of practical tools and frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā, Hua Oranga, supported decision-making, and motivational interviewing.

Te Pou will use these insights to inform the development of new learning resources that aim to increase support workers’ knowledge and skills in supporting tāngata whai ora and whānau with complex needs.