



HDN

YOUR NETWORK
TO DIVERSITY

Diversity and Inclusion: What do housing staff really think?

Demographics, views and experiences
2021 - 2025

Table of contents

1	Introduction: the inclusion illusion	03
2	Executive summary	04
3	Summary of key findings	05
4	Recommendations	06
5	Key findings in detail	08
6	Data tables	13
7	Methodology	18



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1 Introduction: the inclusion illusion

HDN has been working for over two decades now to promote equality, diversity and inclusion across the housing sector. We were founded in 2003 as a mentoring programme focused on race equality, established by housing sector leaders who recognised the need to champion inclusion, representation and fairness within the sector. Today, we work with housing associations, local authorities and partners to develop inclusive cultures, strengthen leadership and empower organisations to fully represent the communities they serve.

An important part of our work has been to understand how housing colleagues feel their organisations are doing when it comes to equality, diversity and inclusion. In this report, we've brought together – for the first time – the findings of all our surveys. Giving us an overview spanning the years 2021-2025, the report covers sentiments, demographics and experiences. It offers a valuable overview of the state of inclusion among housing employees today.

As you'd expect, there's good and bad in here. The sector can be proud of some of the advancements we've made. But – and it's a big but – there is obviously so much more we need to do. In particular, we're seeing cries from people with disabilities, from minoritised ethnic groups and transgender people, who are all less likely to agree that their organisation is committed to treating them with dignity and respect. People from minoritised ethnic groups, religious minorities, people with disabilities,

non-heterosexual and transgender people were all less likely to agree that their organisations were committed to improving EDI performance. And, something which I find very disturbing, only 57% of respondents felt there were no unfair barriers to people's career progression at their organisation, and notable numbers of people across all characteristics felt there were barriers.

Which prompts me to ask: are we creating an inclusion illusion? Talking the talk, but not demonstrating inclusion to those who most need to experience it?

The findings emphasise the importance of continued, transparent efforts to embed EDI in the organisations across our sector. This includes creating cultures which ensure that people from all demographics feel genuinely welcomed, supported and included.

In this current cold climate of scapegoating and targeting minority groups, there's a danger that EDI will be pushed further down the agenda, at a time when it's needed more than ever. We'll need to fight for the ground we've won and fight harder to extend inclusion. We know we can do it – we've done it before – and we're stronger if we do it together.



Mushtaq Khan

Chief Executive, HDN

2 Executive summary

HDN has been working for over two decades to promote equality, diversity and inclusion across the housing sector. Part of our work is to understand how housing colleagues feel their organisations are doing.

In this report, we've brought together findings of all our surveys for the first time, spanning the years 2021-2025. It offers a valuable overview of the state of inclusion among housing employees today.

The information is drawn from 1,174 respondents from 17 housing organisations. Our key finding is that while sentiment towards EDI performance is broadly positive among majority respondents, there are significant concerns among people from minoritised ethnic groups, people with disabilities and transgender people.

These concerns are particularly linked to dignity and respect, feeling welcome, career progression and confidence in EDI performance.

We are in danger of creating an inclusion illusion, where we go through the motions of equality, diversity and inclusion but the impact isn't felt by those who need it most.

We recommend organisations tackle this through taking time to understand the issues staff face and reflect on organisational culture, improving recruitment and progression and improving transparency around processes and decision-making.



3 Summary of key findings

Overview

While sentiment towards EDI performance is broadly positive, concerning disparities in perception persist. This is found particularly among respondents from minoritised ethnic groups, people with disabilities and transgender people.

The inclusion illusion

While many respondents acknowledged efforts to improve EDI at their organisations, confidence is varied. Groups with certain protected characteristics (particularly people with disabilities, people from minoritised ethnic groups and transgender people) often reported lower levels of confidence in recruitment inclusivity and fairness in career progression. This indicates that policy intentions may not always translate into equitable outcomes.

Dignity and respect

People with disabilities, those from minoritised ethnic groups and transgender people are less likely to agree that their organisation is committed to treating them with dignity and respect.

Feeling welcome

Transgender people are likely to feel less welcome in their organisations than the majority; people with disabilities and those from a minoritised ethnic group also feel less welcome.

Confidence in EDI performance

As a sector, we've got to work harder to convince people we're committed to improving EDI performance.

Organisations aren't getting the message across about inclusive recruitment practices. People aren't convinced that EDI barriers to progression in organisations are being removed.

Engagement

Respondents to our surveys were predominantly aged 46–65, with younger staff significantly underrepresented. While women were well represented, other traditionally marginalised groups - including people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, and non-heterosexual staff - were underrepresented and/or reported differing experiences.

This suggests a need for more targeted engagement and support. Levels of disclosure were also notably lower for certain characteristics (particularly ethnicity, religion/belief, and sexual orientation), indicating potential issues around stigma or fears of discrimination.

HDN is mindful that as participating organisations were all members of HDN, this introduces a significant self-selection bias, which means the results may present a more optimistic picture of EDI performance than is true across the wider housing sector - particularly among organisations that do not engage with external EDI support.

4 Recommendations

Using the findings in this research, organisations can target their efforts at the areas where they're needed the most. It's clear that certain groups are feeling left out, that awareness of EDI practices could be higher, and that confidence that change will happen needs a boost. Here are some recommendations of things that housing organisations can do to ensure that diversity and inclusivity are built in for the future.

1 Build inclusive cultures – demonstrating behaviours

- Provide line managers with training on inclusive leadership and creating and managing diverse teams.
- Encourage everyday inclusion through active and visible engagement with EDI issues such as celebration and events, training and employee groups.
- Review your internal and external communications materials to check they're inclusive.
- Ensure you have open feedback channels, including safe mechanisms for raising EDI-related concerns, and check the whistleblowing policy is suitable.
- Provide visible leadership supporting a variety of characteristics, with internal champions and public commitments.

2 Understand the issues

- Talk to colleagues to understand the issues around minoritised ethnic groups, people with disabilities and transgender people, and engage people in the plan to make the workplace more welcoming.
- Implement inclusion training for all managers and HR staff, covering disability, minoritised ethnic groups and transgender issues.
- When running surveys, talk to managers about how to encourage staff to feel safe enough to give honest responses, to improve accuracy of data and ensure their views are heard.
- Review your workplace accessibility and make adjustments proactively.
- Check the Social Model of Disability is reflected in your policies and communication.
- Take action in communities. Have clear policies on issues like flag displays, which are likely to have disproportionately negative impacts upon Black and minoritised ethnic groups, and ensure you demonstrate your values where tenants and staff feel unsafe.
- Check your policies provide robust support for trans inclusion, for example transitioning at work policies, gender-neutral facilities etc.

3 Improve recruitment and progression

- Talk to staff and audit internal promotion and progression processes to identify barriers to progression.
- Launch mentoring schemes for staff from underrepresented groups to improve progression, confidence and visibility, and to share the learning.
- Check your organisations is offering equitable access to professional development and leadership training opportunities - and perhaps offer targeted opportunities for underrepresented groups.
- Review recruitment processes to ensure they effectively reach and attract underrepresented groups.
- Train hiring managers and recruitment panels on inclusive recruitment, bias awareness and accessible job design.
- Track promotion data by characteristics to highlight disparities and monitor recruitment outcomes across protected characteristics.
- Communicate to your employees and stakeholders how you do inclusive recruitment in your organisation, with real examples.
- Offer apprenticeships, internships and graduate programmes to attract younger people.

4 Be transparent

- Embed EDI goals into organisational KPIs and performance measures.
- Publish annual EDI data and progress updates to encourage accountability.
- Involve staff networks in reviewing EDI strategy and in policy design.
- Run regular staff sentiment surveys and track improvements over time. Combine quantitative data with qualitative feedback (focus groups, interviews) to understand lived experiences. Use survey segmentation findings to understand which groups need support.

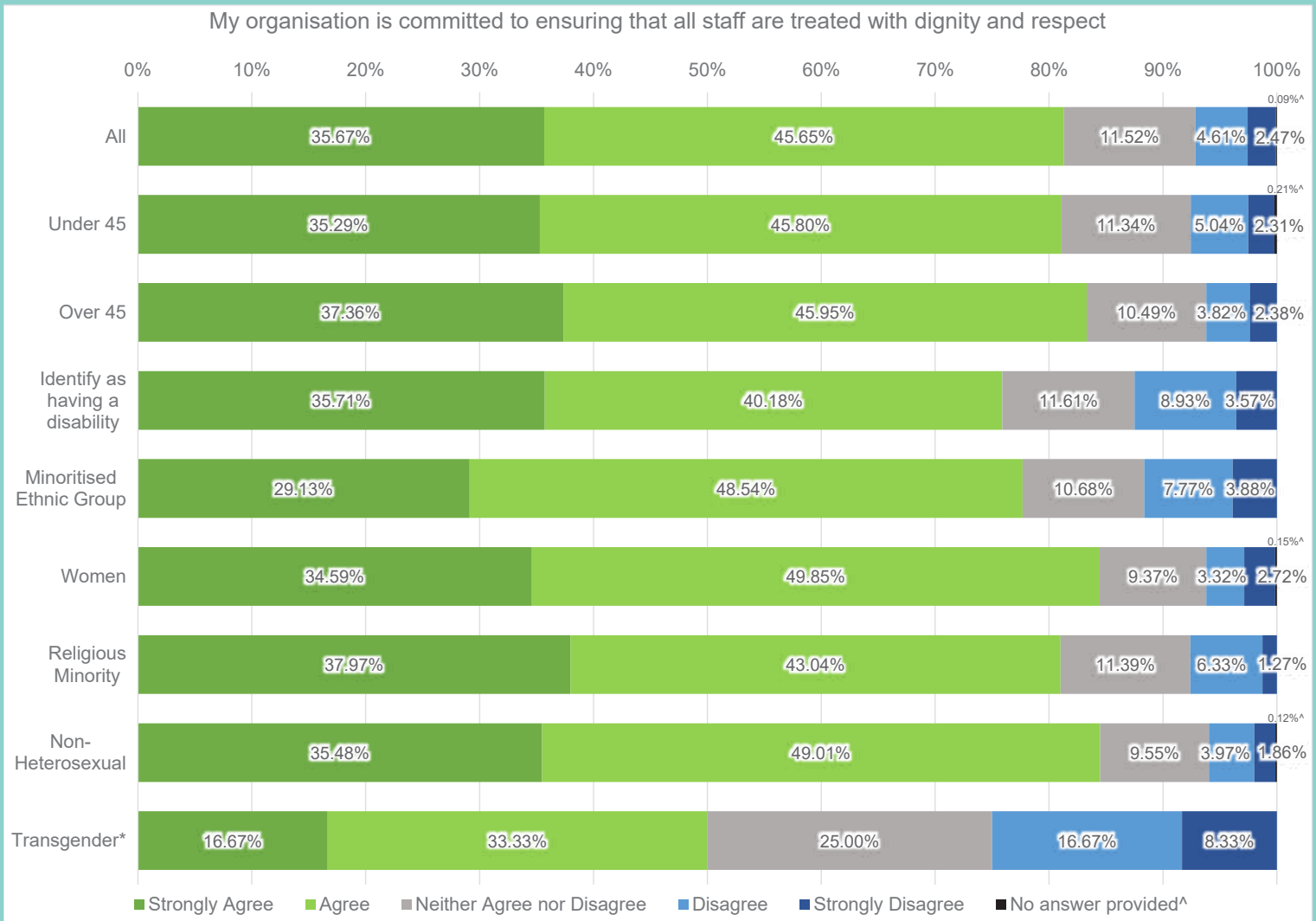


5 Key findings in detail

Dignity and respect

“My organisation is committed to ensuring that all staff are treated with dignity and respect”

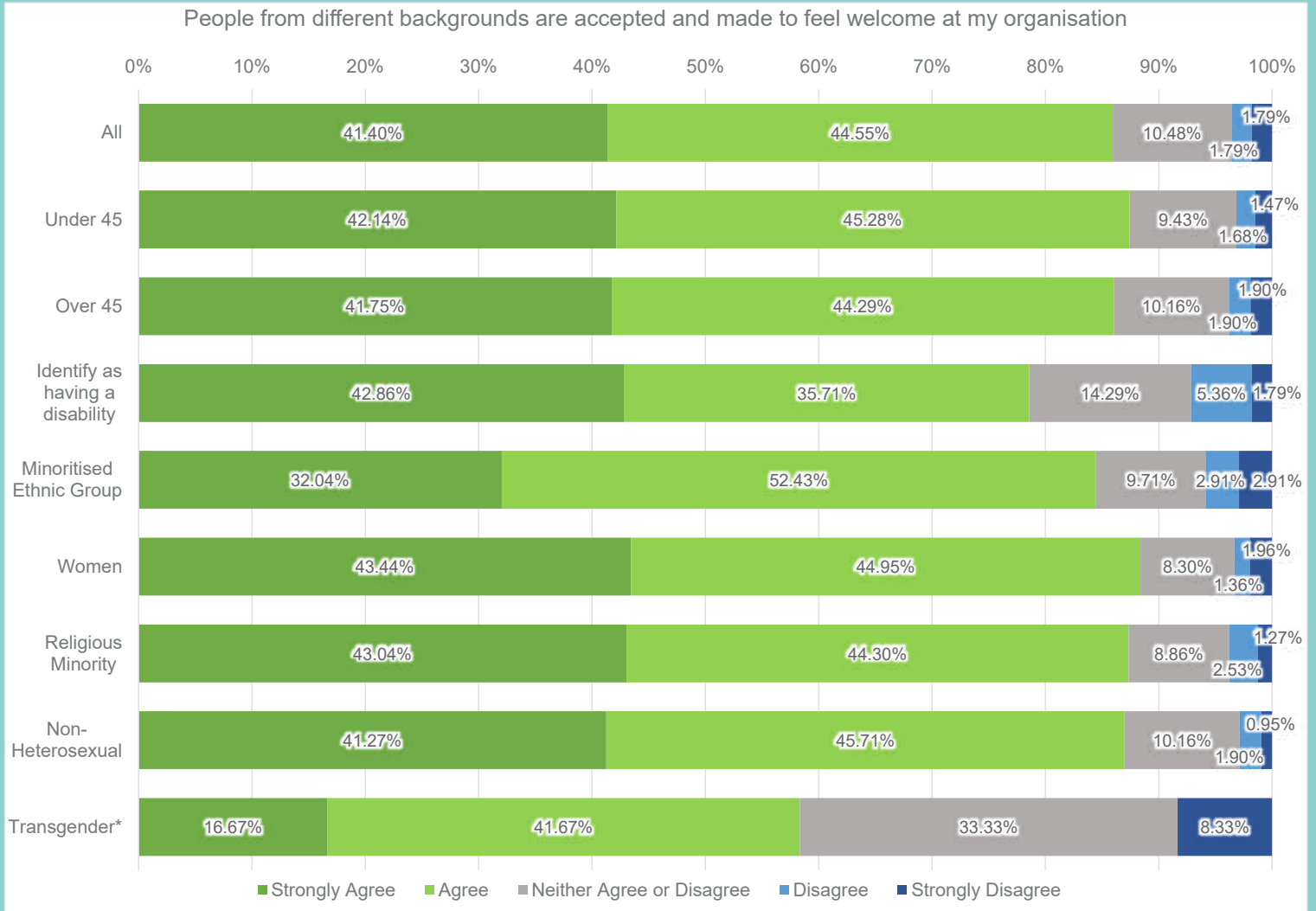
Over 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation was committed to treating them with dignity and respect. However, respondents with a disability or those belonging to a minoritised ethnic group were marginally more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (and marginally less likely to agree or strongly agree). Transgender respondents also showed considerably lower agreement levels though it should be noted that the very small sample size of this group (*around 1% of respondents) invariably amplifies differences between responses.



Feeling welcome

“ People from different backgrounds are accepted and made to feel welcome at my organisation ”

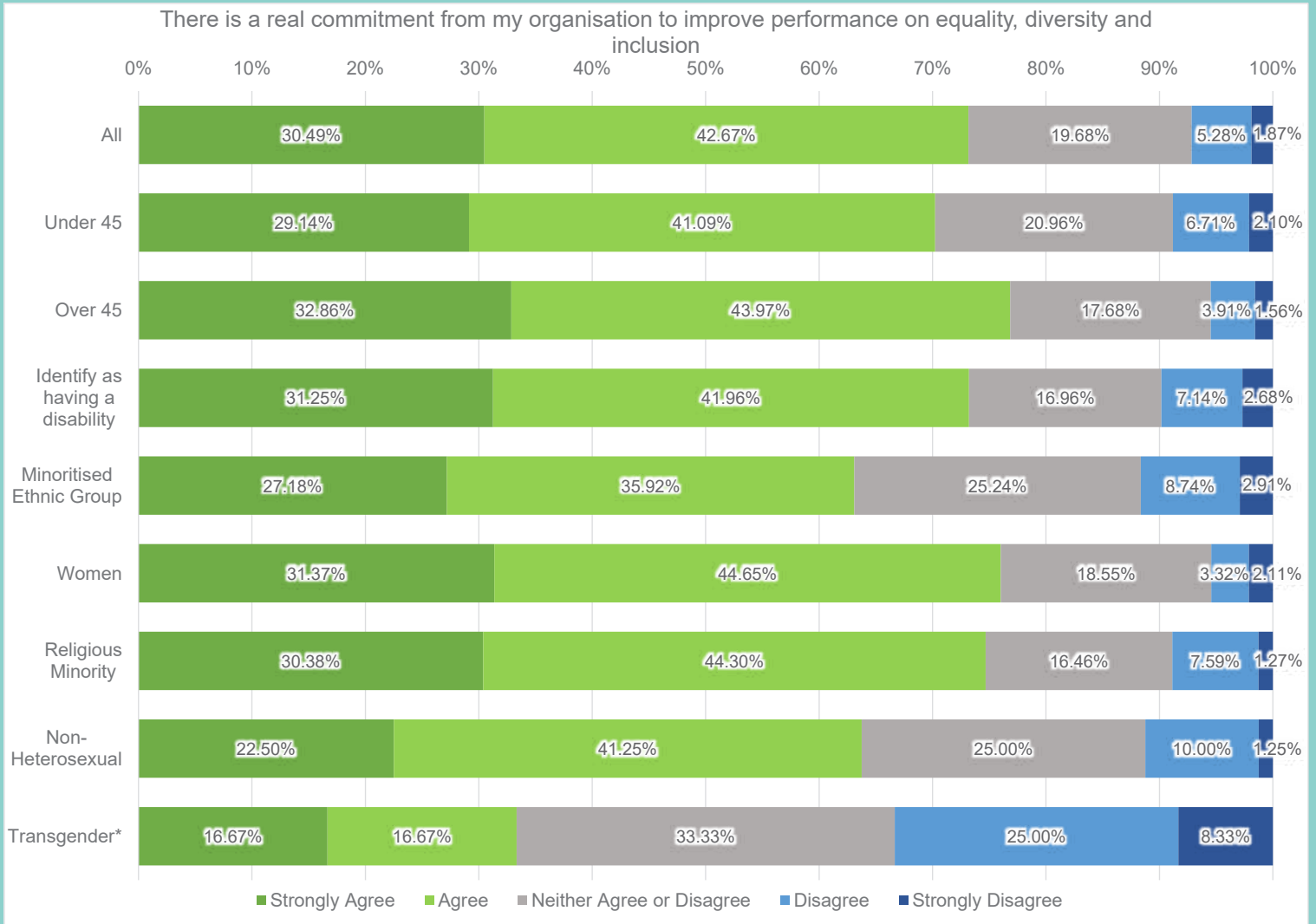
Most employees across the majority of characteristics felt that their organisations were accepting and made those from different backgrounds feel welcome. However, respondents from a minoritised ethnic background were marginally less likely to strongly agree with this sentiment, and transgender individuals considerably less so. Generally, negative sentiments were low, but compared to total figures the small number of transgender people responding to this question had an overall greater number of neutral (33.33%) or negative (8.33%) responses. Negative responses were also marginally higher for those with disabilities (7.15%) and from a minoritised ethnic group (5.82%).



Improving EDI performance

“ There is real commitment from my organisation to improve performance on equality, diversity and inclusion ”

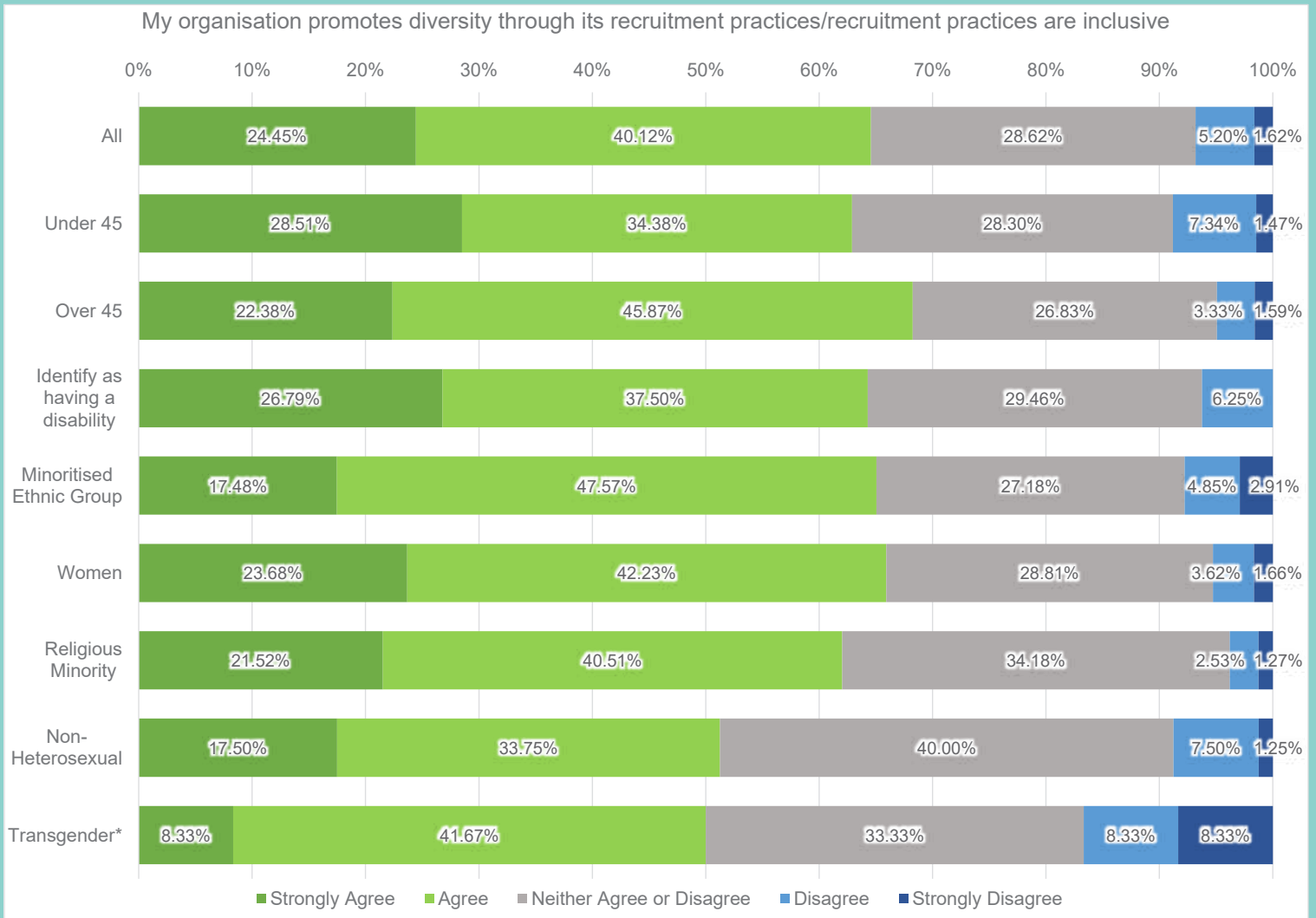
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Inclusive approaches to recruitment

“ My organisation promotes diversity through its recruitment practices/recruitment practices are inclusive ”

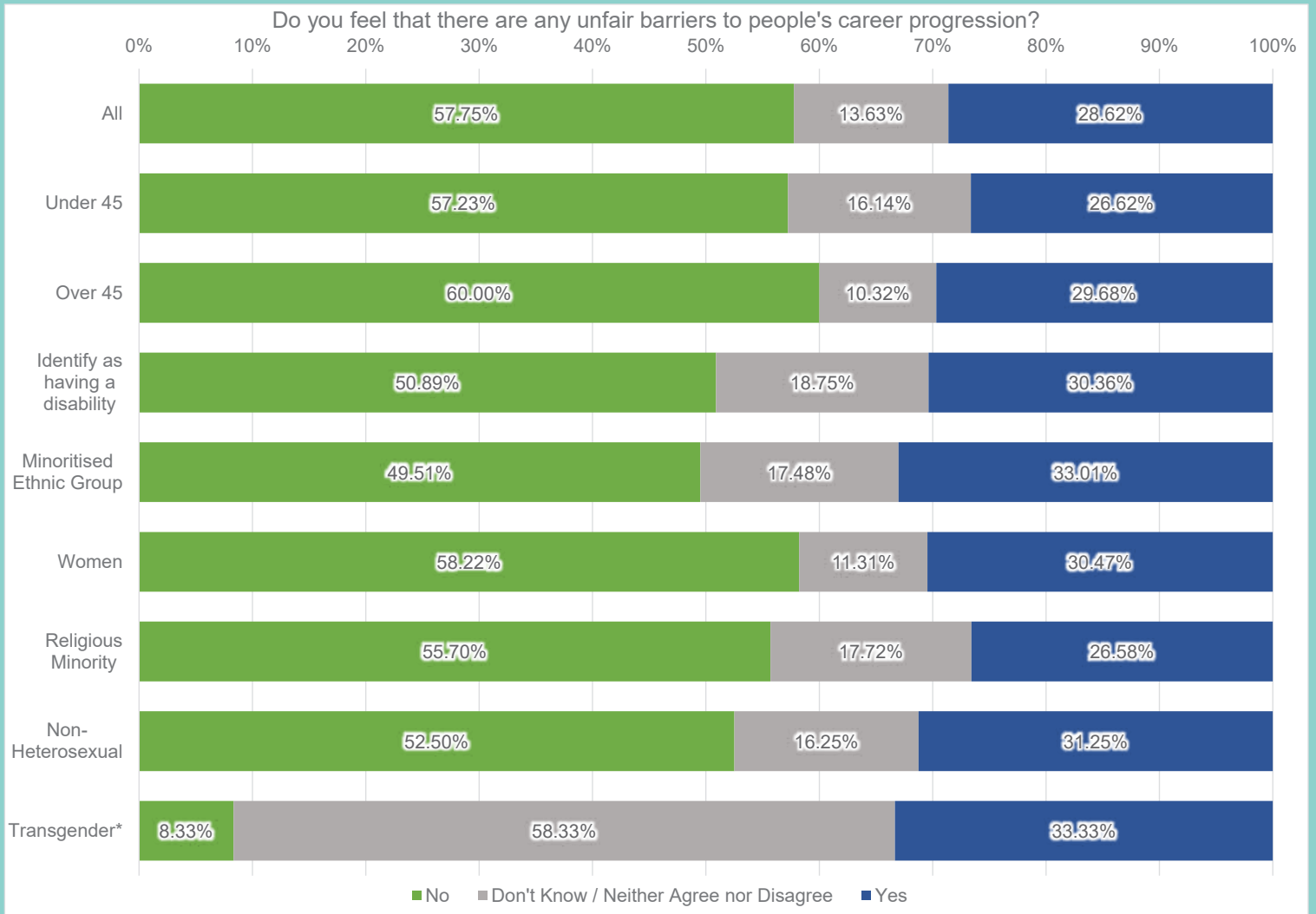
While the majority of respondents agreed that their organisation was inclusive in recruitment, significant numbers also had neutral opinions on this statement. Negative sentiments were generally higher among non-heterosexual and transgender individuals, those belonging to a minoritised ethnic group, and those under the age of 45. The higher numbers of “neither agree nor disagree” responses for this question may be due to respondents’ limitations in their knowledge of organisational recruitment practices, particularly among staff who are not directly involved in recruitment.



Barriers to career progression

“ Do you feel that there are any unfair barriers to people’s career progression (at your organisation)? ”

Although the majority (57%) of respondents felt there were not any unfair barriers to career progression, notable numbers of people across each characteristic disagreed with this statement, with the majority of transgender respondents feeling that there were barriers to progression at their organisations. Again, relatively high numbers of neutral/don’t know answers found here may be the result of individuals not fully knowing the policies, procedures or outcomes related progression within their organisations.



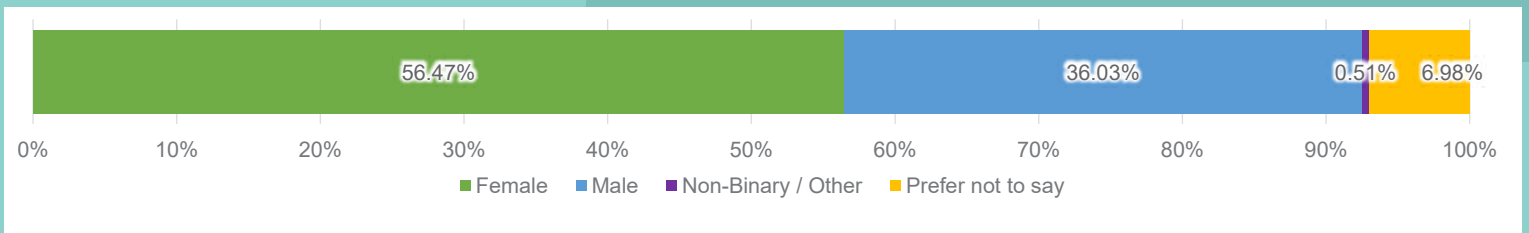
6 Data tables

These data tables provide an overview of the respondents' demographic makeup. They show us which groups across the housing sector workforce engaged with our survey and give a comparison with the wider UK population. They also provide a context to help us understand the statistical significance of the segmented groups.

Gender/Sex

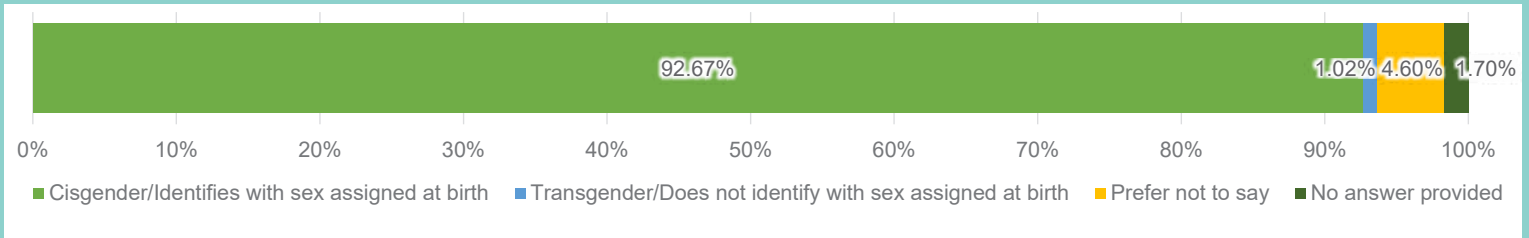
Over 56% of respondents identified as female, and 36% as male. Fewer than 1% of respondents identified as non-binary, or as preferring another gender identity.

“ What is your sex/gender identity ”



The vast majority of respondents said that they were cis-gender or that they identified with the gender they were assigned at birth, with only around 1% of respondents identifying as transgender.

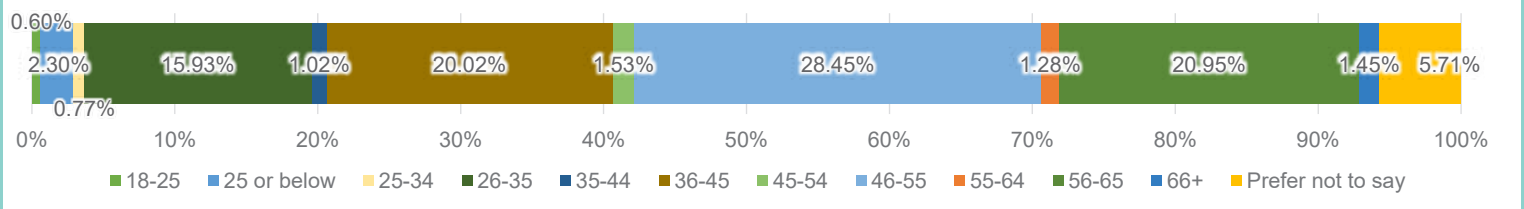
“ Do you identify with your sex assigned at birth/do you identify as transgender? ”



Age

Surveyed workforces are predominantly made up of individuals aged 46-65, who represent nearly half of all surveyed employees. Younger people (under 25s) on the other hand make up less than 3% of respondents.

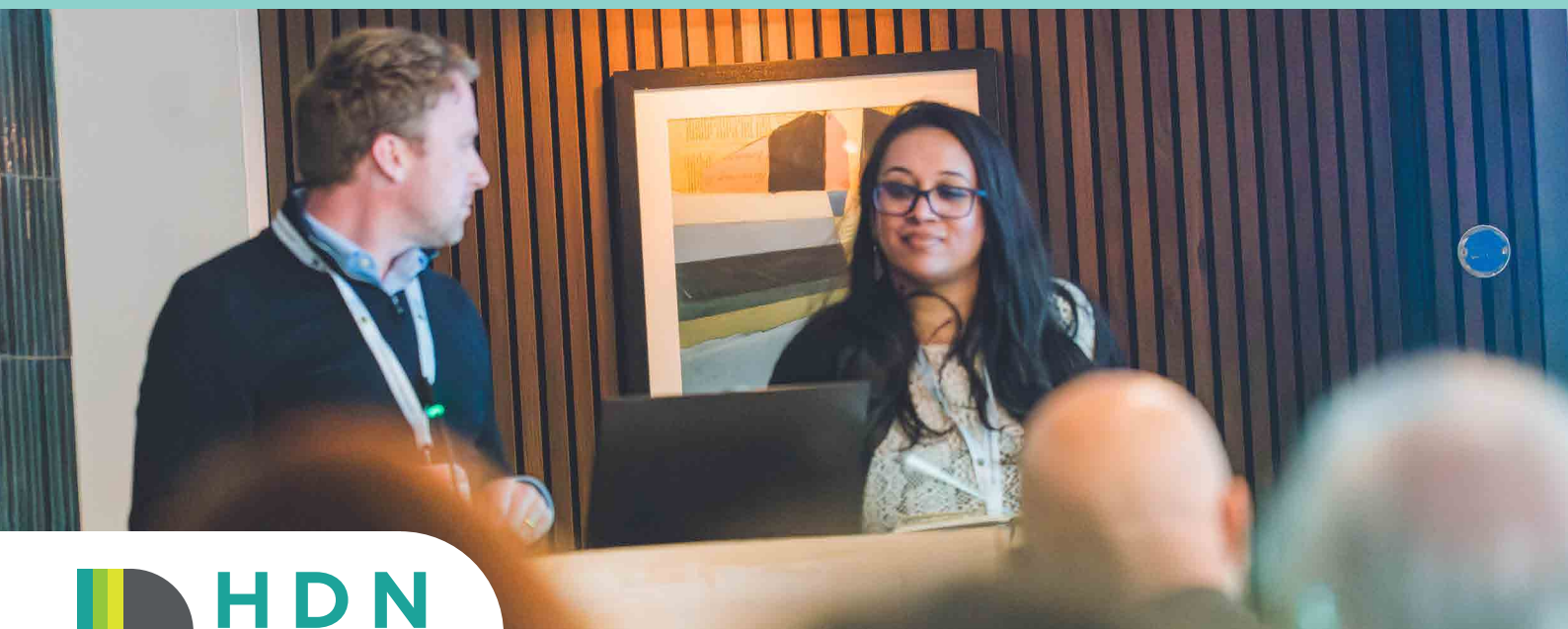
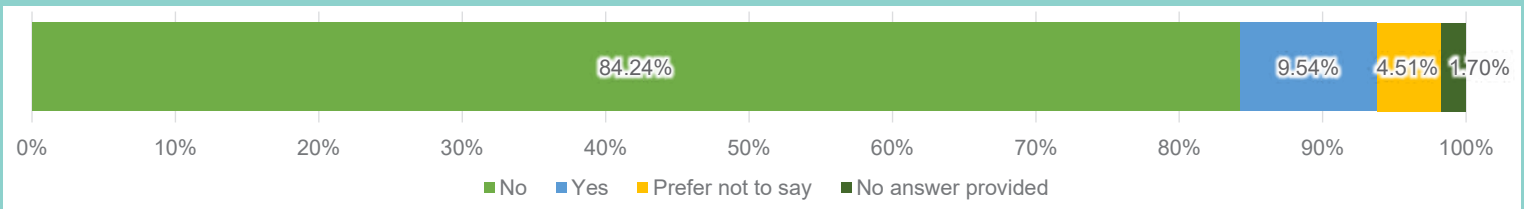
“ What is your age? ”



Disability

A significant minority of respondents indicated that they were disabled, with almost one respondent in 10 saying they have a disability of some kind. While this is an underrepresentation compared to levels of disability in the UK working-age population (which is around 23% according to the Office of National Statistics), it is also true that having a disability does make employment an impossibility for some individuals. In more recent versions of our survey, this question is accompanied by a separate question defining, but not explicitly mentioning, disability (“Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more which limits your day-to-day activity?”). Though there is not currently enough data to include in the report, this has highlighted that there may be more respondents who meet the criteria of having a disability than those who explicitly identify themselves as having a disability

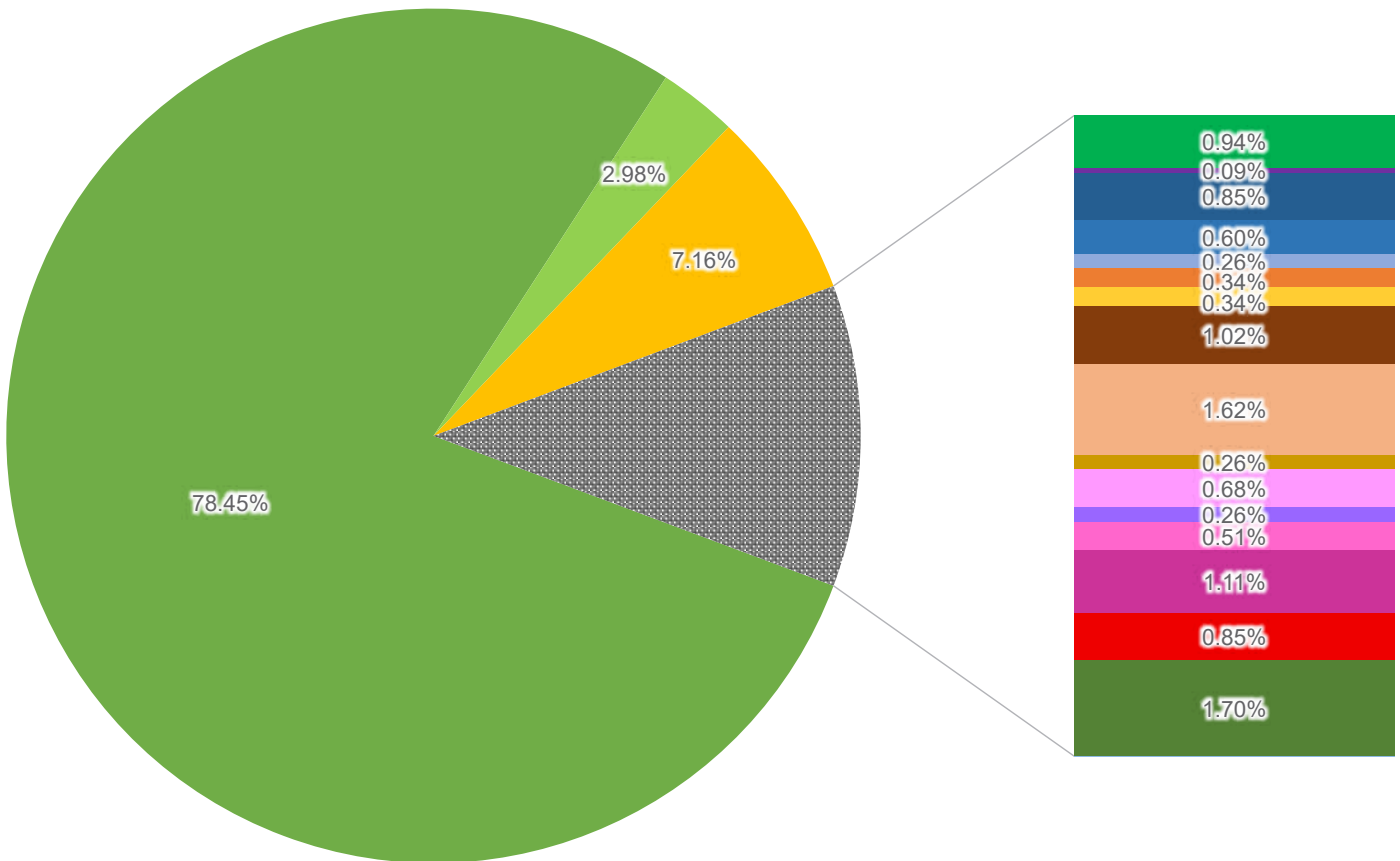
“ Do you consider yourself to have a disability? ”



Ethnicity

Around 82% of respondents identified as White, with the vast majority of these being “White - British”. All grouped non-white ethnicities (including mixed white backgrounds) made up around 8.8% of the total responses. Some notable grouped minorities within this include 2.9% identifying as being exclusively Black heritage (i.e. African, Caribbean, Other Black Heritage), and around 1.7% exclusively South Asian heritage (i.e. Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani).

“ How would you describe your ethnicity? ”



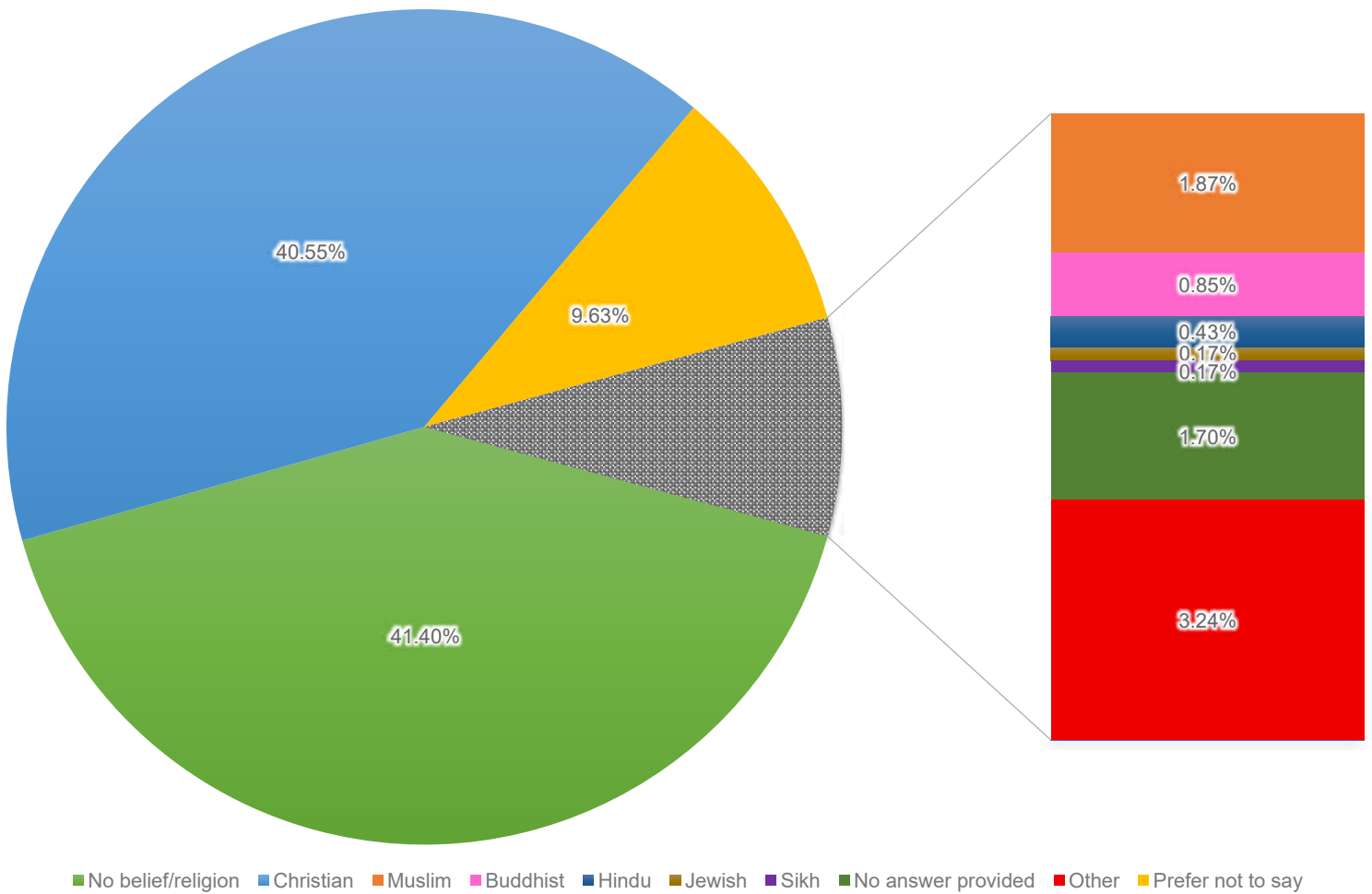
- White - British
- White - Irish
- Other White background
- Roma
- Asian/Asian British - Indian
- Asian/Asian British - Pakistani
- Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi
- Asian/Asian British - Chinese
- Other Asian background
- Black/Black British - African
- Black/Black British - Caribbean
- Other black background
- Mixed - white and Asian
- Mixed - white and black African
- Mixed - white and black Caribbean
- Any other mixed background
- Other ethnic background
- Prefer not to say
- No answer provided



Religion

A similar number of respondents either belonged to the UK's majority religion (i.e. a denomination of Christianity) or had no religion/belief. The next most common religious background identified was Islam, with 1.87% respondents identifying as Muslim. All religious minorities except Buddhism were somewhat underrepresented compared to the population (according to the 2021 Census, the population of England and Wales is 6.5% Muslim, 0.5% Buddhist, 0.5% Jewish, 1.7% Hindu, and 0.9% Sikh.)

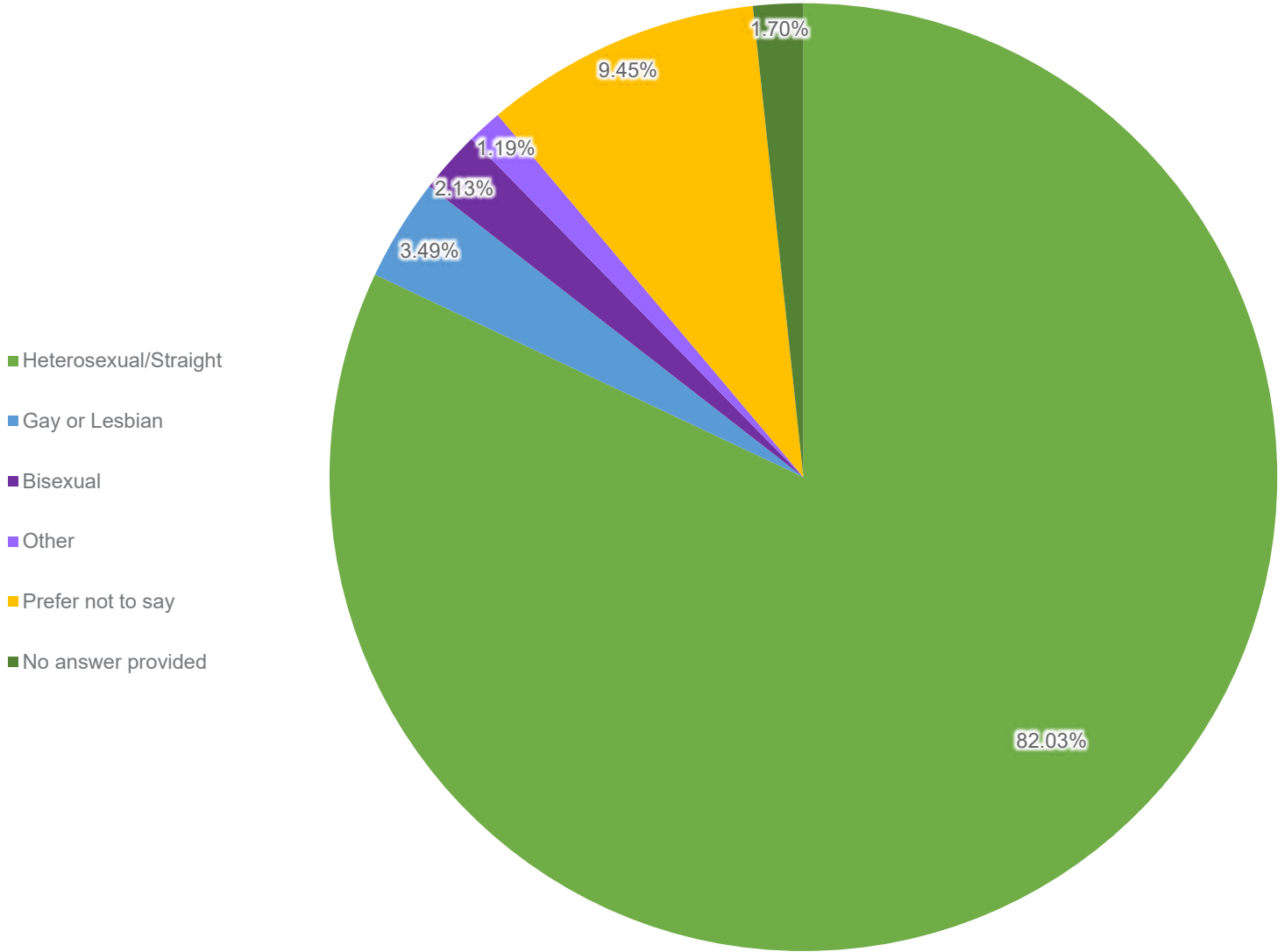
“ What is your religion or belief? ”



Sexual orientation

The vast majority of respondents identified as heterosexual. However, 6.8% of respondents identified as LGB+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other sexuality), an overrepresentation compared to the wider population (the 2021 Census puts the percentage of LGB+ people in England and Wales at 3.2%).

“ How would you describe your sexual orientation? ”



7 Methodology

HDN administers detailed surveys for our member organisations - on request, and as part of diagnostic work (such as our Diversity Network Accreditation and EDI Health Check assessments) - with the specific goal of understanding how workforces feel employers are performing when it comes to matters of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Individual characteristics are also collected as part of this survey, in order to identify potential disparities when it comes to the experiences

and viewpoints of employees from minoritised backgrounds. Surveys are distributed via email links, for staff members to answer anonymously.

This research report has aggregated the data from five years' worth of HDN member employee surveys, spanning from August 2021 to October 2025. Represented are a total of 1,174 responses from staff working across 17 housing organisations, of varying sizes (ranging from fewer than 30, to over 1,000 employees), across England.





To discuss any of the issues highlighted in this report and how HDN can help your organisation address them, please get in touch.

Contact

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