

Frontline Worker Survey 2022

Frontline challenges and solutions to addressing homelessness

A report on the barriers frontline workers are facing in supporting people experiencing homelessness – and how these can be overcome



**Frontline
Network**

This is the third report in a series sharing findings from our Annual Frontline Worker Survey

Published March 2023

Report at a glance

At St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity we believe that listening to lived and frontline experiences of homelessness is crucial. We gather insights from frontline staff across the UK who support people experiencing homelessness through our annual Frontline Worker Survey.

Our latest survey received responses from 1,182 staff members across the UK in November and December 2022. This is the most comprehensive overview of experiences on the frontline of the

homelessness sector in the UK to date. Through this research, we seek to amplify the knowledge and experiences of frontline workers and help inform policy and practice to end homelessness.

This report focuses on the barriers that frontline workers encounter – and how they can be overcome. You can read other findings from the survey, alongside Appendices with further details about the survey methodology and frontline workers who took part, on our website.

Key takeaways

- 1. To address homelessness, we need to ensure the right resources are available. This means accessible, suitable accommodation as well as appropriate wider support where needed, particularly around healthcare.**

"I have been doing this job for 16 years and I would say the last 5 years I noticed a change in trying to find suitable accommodation. More recently it is near impossible to find any suitable accommodation for people. Private rented is too expensive or they don't take [housing benefit]."

Frontline worker, Vale and Cardiff

- 2. We need to remove the barriers which stop people being able to access accommodation and support, to ensure services are inclusive of all people.**

"Appropriate support is difficult to find, services are always changing or disappearing. Information never seems to be up to date and, when it is, the waiting lists are long, or people never get back to me."

Frontline worker, South West England

- 3. We need to improve policy and practice now to address and, crucially, prevent homelessness wherever possible.**

"[We need] Systems (Justice, Education, Council, Housing etc) being more human focused and less budget and cutting costs orientated. If they looked [at] the bigger picture and the long-term preventative benefits of investment rather than always funding / putting resources into 'fighting fires'."

Frontline worker, Tayside, Central and Fife.



"There is generally a lack of social and affordable housing for people, and this causes difficulty in rehousing in difficult situations or finding families somewhere suitable, e.g., I worked with a family where mum and three children, one age 15, one age 11 and one age 6 had to move out of the family home due to domestic abuse. They were placed in one room in a shared accommodation, with no cooking facilities, there was no housing available to accommodate the family."

Frontline worker, North West England

Addressing homelessness with the right resources

To address homelessness effectively, we need to make sure the right resources are available to the people who need them. Access to suitable and affordable accommodation is fundamental but severely lacking. Beyond housing, frontline workers reported frequent challenges accessing wider support for individuals.

As demand for homelessness services rises, frontline workers are finding it increasingly difficult to find appropriate accommodation for people facing homelessness.

78% of frontline workers saw the demand for their service increase in the last 12 months.

42% of frontline workers said access to appropriate accommodation had decreased in the last 12 months.



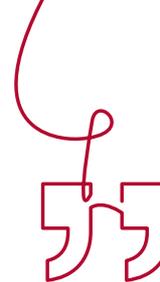
The table below shows a range of accommodation types, all of which most frontline workers stated they found 'very difficult' or 'difficult' to obtain for people they supported. In particular, specialist accommodation and private rented accommodation were highlighted as extremely difficult to access.

Accommodation type	% of frontline workers stating 'very difficult' or 'difficult' to obtain	Comparison to 2021 data where available
Specialist accommodation	91%	92% (-1%)
Private rented accommodation	90%	87% (+3%)
Social housing	83%	85% (-2%)
Supported accommodation	77%	75% (+2%)
Emergency accommodation	75%	74% (+1%)
Temporary accommodation	74%	N/A
Furnished accommodation	73%	69% (+4%)

"Housing is in huge crisis – any form of affordable housing is incredibly limited and private accommodation within LHA limits, near impossible. Supported accommodation is always full. Social Housing is blocked up and not enough. Much of temporary accommodation is of very poor quality and the landlords charge [Local Authorities] exorbitant amounts."

Frontline worker, North West England

Where other support was sought, beyond housing, frontline workers also reported widespread difficulties. The challenges of accessing different types of support are shown in the table below. In particular, there were significant difficulties accessing mental health support, especially when someone was struggling with addiction or effects of trauma.

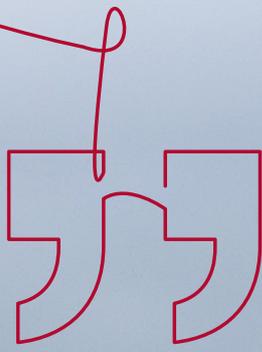


"We are doing the work of all the services because we don't have the support."

Frontline worker, West Midlands

Is it easy or difficult for you to access support for the people you work with in the following areas?

Support type	% of frontline workers stating 'very difficult' or 'difficult' to obtain	Comparison to 2021 data where available
Support for people struggling with their mental health and addiction or the effects of trauma	75%	71% (+4%)
Mental health	75%	79% (-4%)
Specialist healthcare support (designed for people experiencing homelessness)	61%	64% (-3%)
Immigration issues	56%	62% (-6%)
Specialist legal advice	56%	53% (+3%)
Secondary care (hospitals and specialists)	53%	54% (-1%)
Primary care (GP, pharmacy, dentist, optician services)	51%	56% (-5%)
Physical health	47%	46% (+1%)
Furniture	45%	39% (+6%)
White goods	42%	38% (+4%)
Problematic substance use	41%	N/A
Government support for energy bills	37%	N/A
Modern slavery and human trafficking	37%	35% (+2%)
People in contact with criminal justice system	36%	34% (+2%)
Benefits issues	33%	38% (-5%)
Food crisis issues	27%	22% (+5%)
Employment, Education and Training	27%	38% (-11%)
Domestic abuse	27%	31% (-4%)
Debt advice	23%	25% (-2%)



"There are very long waits for mental health support and even when people get it it tends to be 6 sessions of CBT which does not meet the needs of those with serious trauma."

Frontline worker, North West England

Barriers preventing people from accessing support

Frontline workers witnessed several different barriers which prevented people accessing accommodation and crucial support, including insufficient LHA rates and long waiting lists. Furthermore, staff described how people with particular characteristics could face specific and additional challenges.

When seeking accommodation for people they supported, frontline workers reported significant challenges – especially within the private rented sector where people were claiming LHA.

How easy or difficult do you find obtaining the following for the people you support?

	% of frontline workers stating 'very difficult' or 'difficult' to obtain	Comparison to 2021 data where available
Private Landlords willing to let to LHA claimants	89%	90% (-1%)
Accommodation within the LHA rate	83%	83% (+0%)
A deposit to secure accommodation	62%	59% (+3%)
Obtaining ID needed to secure accommodation	56%	63% (-7%)
Discretionary Housing Payment	54%	55% (-1%)

"There is a chronic lack of social housing and affordable private rental accommodation. The LHA rate is nowhere near the market rental values here. Lettings agents discriminate against prospective tenants who rely on welfare benefits to support their income, not always overtly, but often through insistence on multiple months' worth of rent in advance, cash deposits and guarantors."

Frontline worker, South East England

"Trying to access any accommodation, temporary, permanent, social or private rented – single or family is my major problem. The LHA are nowhere near the rents being asked by landlords. There is still a stigma / bar on renting to people on any kind of benefits. The waiting list in the area I work in is currently running at 12,000. This doesn't include people who have applied but their application hasn't been accepted yet, due to staff shortages. I have a [service user] who applied in Feb 2022 he is still waiting for his application to be made live. In the meantime, he's sofa surfing."

Frontline worker, Gwent



When accessing wider support services, frontline workers also identified a range of barriers outlined in the chart below. The most frequent barriers to access support services that frontline workers observed were:

88% of frontline workers reported that **long waiting lists** 'often' or 'always' presented barriers when accessing support services for people they worked with

"There are no NHS dentists who have space in their books in Mid Wales. One of my clients has just had to pay £300 for her [under 18] child to have dental treatment. She is on a waiting list for a dentist 3 hours away and has been told that she will probably have to wait 3 years before a space becomes available for her children."

Frontline worker, Mid and West Wales

55% of frontline workers reported that **difficulty providing documentation** 'often' or 'always' presented barriers when accessing support services for people they worked with

"Documentation is something the homed take for granted a requirement for housing and financial inclusion."

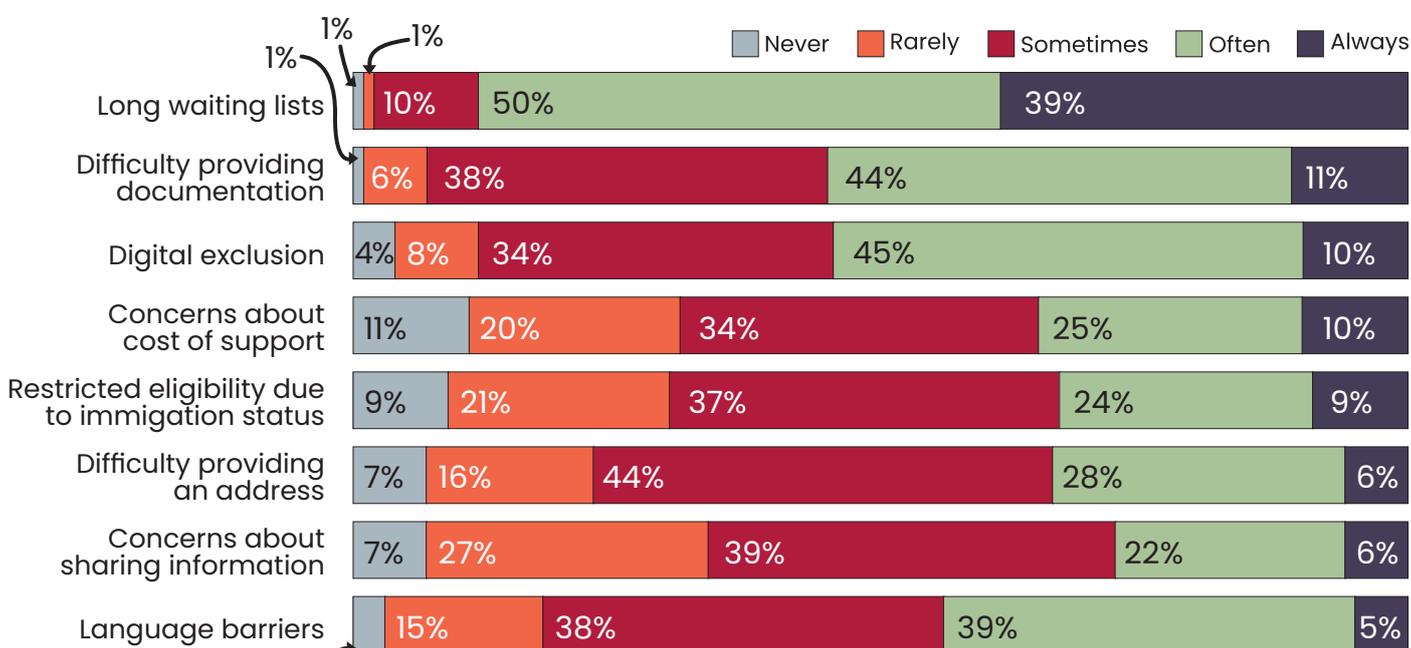
Frontline worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

55% of frontline workers reported that **digital exclusion** 'often' or 'always' presented barriers when accessing support services for people they worked with

"Digital exclusion scares me. Many councils will only accept a homelessness application online and with an email address. Benefits rely on people being able to access their 'journal'. Services rely on people managing to keep years' worth of proof of who they are and where they have worked of lived... and that is hard even when you have fixed accommodation."

Frontline worker, London

Have you observed that any of the following areas present barriers to accessing support services for the people you work with?



Please note, totals may not equal exactly 100% where figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number

In focus: People with particular characteristics* can face specific barriers to accommodation and support

*often characteristics intersect with each other

Frontline workers support people with a wide range of experiences – each story is unique. It is important that different experiences and specific barriers are recognised and addressed.

We heard from frontline workers that particular characteristics can affect the ease of accessing housing and support. This included reference to many of the nine protected characteristics from the 2010 Equality Act: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

“Honestly it’s difficult for everyone across the board experiencing homelessness and [then there is] the intersection of difficulties that often accompany this.”

Frontline worker, South West England

The three most common themes coming from frontline staff were:

1.

Services and housing sometimes failed to respond to people’s mental and/or physical health needs

2.

Services and housing were not always accessible to people with disabilities

3.

Services and housing were often harder to access for people with restricted eligibility due to their immigration status

“Some of the service users with mental health issues are deemed as not engaging but the support provided has not built a relationship to understand the person.”

Frontline worker, South West England

“Those with physical disabilities. Not enough wheelchair accessible/adapted properties – in particular for those under 55 yrs old but across the board there is a shortage.”

Frontline worker, West Midlands

“Those with mild learning disabilities or cognitive difficulties whose needs get missed by the system.”

Frontline worker, London

“Clients without regular immigration status. There is simply no support or accommodation available except for the occasional winter night shelter who don’t have restrictions (but some still do) on immigration status.”

Frontline worker, London

“I have found that EU national, migrants and people of colour face far more barriers to accessing accommodation and some benefits because the assumption is always that they are not eligible.”

Frontline worker, East Midlands

We need to act now to improve practice so people can access effective homelessness support

Frontline workers shared numerous examples of good practice from their services. Scaled up, these can help to overcome some of the barriers to people accessing accommodation and support.

Listen to people with lived experience of homelessness and be led by their insights

This included gathering feedback to help inform the design and delivery of frontline services and employing staff who have had experience of homelessness themselves. Ways of working such as being strength-based and trauma informed were also recommended.

“[Our service] recognizes all trauma and its effects and strives to continuously educate its workforce to work unitedly, in a way which reinforces our values and beliefs and to work in a PIE, trauma informed way. [It] doesn't just look to support individuals to find somewhere to live, we strive to support, educate and empower the people that we are helping, so that they can maintain successful tenancies and can move forward from the trauma which they have been impacted by, and they can go on to live happy, healthy, stable, fulfilled lives. We believe in and we practice our ethos and values. Every person matters.”

Frontline worker, Mid and West Wales

Provide early and quick support to prevent homelessness before it happens

Examples included offering money and debt advice to reduce the risk of eviction for rent arrears.

“Our local Council has very good policies when it comes to allowing people on the housing register before they are evicted from private accommodation, and making lump sum payments of DHP to clear rent arrears. This prevents a lot of people from losing their homes.”

Frontline worker, West Midlands



“Having great debt advisers who can assist clients in debt and help to negotiate with landlords who are trying to evict clients due to arrears.”

Frontline worker, London

“We have a welfare advice service that provides advice, guidance, information and advocacy to our tenants. We also apply for charitable grants on behalf of our tenants. These grants are used to provide white goods and furniture for new tenancies.”

Frontline worker, Belfast City

Make support services easier to access and inclusive of people experiencing homelessness

Examples included having flexible and welcoming drop in spaces and interpreters to support people with English language. Good partnership working was also suggested to enable quicker access to services, responding to specific needs and providing opportunities to holistically support people’s health and wellbeing, as well as their housing situation.

“Local hubs help. Having access to interpreters. Areas with free wifi or to allow parents to access online support.”

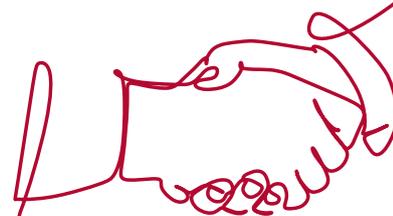
Frontline worker, London

“Developing good relationships with other services (e.g. hostels) meaning we can avoid overly bureaucratic processes that delay getting people accommodated and go straight to the source.”

Frontline worker, East of England

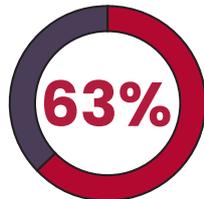
“We have health and wellbeing services that focus on providing therapeutic services such as art therapy and counselling to young people at risk or experiencing homelessness to help prevent homelessness and recurring homelessness. Therapy services help young people to reflect on their own safety, assessing risks, providing a safe and reliable space to talk and express themselves, develop on their own coping strategies and work towards growth, goals and their futures.”

Frontline worker, Edinburgh and Lothians

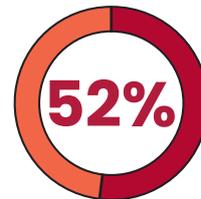


We need to act now to improve policies and prevent homelessness

Fundamentally, however, frontline workers spoke of missed opportunities to prevent homelessness before it became an issue. Changes to policy, for example around welfare benefits, were highlighted as important in enabling more people to find and keep a safe place to call home. Without these improvements it was suggested frontline services would have limited success.



The majority (63%) of frontline workers thought that **keeping the LHA rate frozen** at 2020/21 levels would increase homelessness 'significantly' or 'slightly' over the next year



52% of frontline workers thought that **maintaining the benefit cap** would increase homelessness 'significantly' or 'slightly' over the next year

"Private landlords are raising their rents, meanwhile the LHA remains the same. It's clear this will leave many struggling to meet the costs of their rent and they will build arrears."

Frontline worker, London

"Increasing benefits in line with inflation is helpful, but it will have little impact if the benefit cap and frozen LHA rates remain."

Frontline worker, London

In their comments, frontline workers also highlighted other issues they would like to see addressed, such as increasing access to affordable, suitable accommodation and the need for wide reaching, long-term, systemic change:

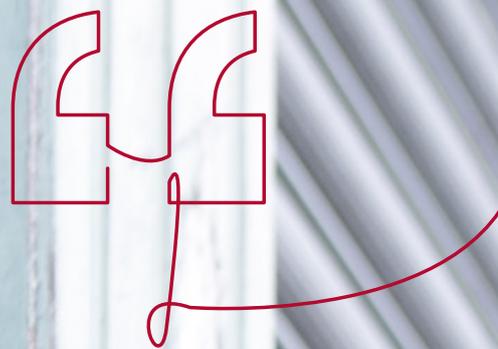
"We are trying to work in a system that is not designed to help or support people who are vulnerable. It is killing poor people and benefiting the rich. Until there is a mass overhaul of the private rented sector and proper sustainable investment in social housing, homelessness is just going to increase."

Frontline worker, North West England

"Individual policies are important, and obviously good to ask about - but every person in this sector knows these are part of the overall problem of austerity. We wouldn't be in the situation we're in now if public services hadn't been underfunded for years, and much of their work effectively outsourced to the third sector who are relied upon to fill statutory services' gaps."

Frontline worker, South East England





"The benefit cap is ridiculous. LHA does not cover private rental costs. Current benefit levels are not enough to live on. At present every young person I support is in arrears on their gas and electric, they are relying on food parcels."

Frontline worker, North East England

We are St Martin-in-the-Fields Charity, and we exist so that everyone has a place to call home and the support they need. We help people experiencing homelessness throughout the UK.

Through our Frontline Network we support a community of frontline workers. We offer funding and resources, and also amplify their voices to help inform policy and practice around homelessness.

The findings of this survey are relevant to decision makers across the UK. This includes Governments, Local Authorities, The Department for Work & Pensions, Funders, Landlords and other organisations working in the homelessness sector.



Help us take action:

1. We need to scale up good practice within services to help address homelessness, and see wider policy change to prevent homelessness wherever possible.
2. Get in touch with us on frontline@stmartinscharity.org.uk to discuss these findings and how they can be taken forward.
3. And please share this report with your networks – to help us amplify the voices of frontline workers further.

Thank you to all the frontline staff who shared their insights with us. If you haven't already, find out about the funding, community and resources we have available to support you in your role:

 frontlinenetwork.org.uk

 [SMITF_Frontline](https://twitter.com/SMITF_Frontline)

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Frontline Network

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